Whispers from the Rye

by somniumquiesco

Summary

Just when Wolfram was making progress with the wimp a new king from a far away land threatens to change everything in Shin Makoku. Yuuri faces hard choices while Wolfram finds himself pulled deeper into magic's plans for the other world. How far will Yuuri go to save his kingdom from a plague, and how far will Wolfram go to save Yuuri? Plot, politics, and oh yes, porn.

Notes

This work has been lovingly edited by Melusine474 to whom I am eternally indebted, with help from flakedice, kudouusagi, melisenda_alix, soypants, and ianenohs.

This fanwork is set before directly following season 2 of the anime, so basically it is AU following that. Please enjoy. Comments and Concrit are always welcome.

As an additional note for those of you who first read this work on my livejournal, I have decided that since I am taking the time to repost here, I will do so with the abridged version I created for pdf download, so some parts of the beginning in particular may seem different or slightly updated from the "original". Thank you!

A number of talented and generous artists have created works to go along with this story. All artwork and accreditation can be found here.
Yuuri was back.

Word of his return reached Blood Pledge Castle before the young Maou had changed out of his wet clothing. The response was immediate, like the first rain after a drought. There was hope again. No longer would the peace so clumsily attained by the child-like king be in question. No longer would the pain felt by those who loved him most seep into the cold stone of the castle, making every turn along its corridors a memory that could never be relived. No longer could she be part of a family that had eluded her for over a century.

For Anissina, Yuuri’s return was bittersweet. It wasn’t that she didn’t love Yuuri, as all those who met him were wont to do, she just happened to love other people more. As was the failing of most beautiful women, the redhead was selfish, and if Yuuri’s absence meant that she could be closer to Gwendal and the broken family of a fiance and daughter the king had left behind, then so be it.

It was probably better this way. Since Yuuri had left she had been able to spend more time with Gwendal, which was always a painful and disappointing waste of energy. He was always ‘too busy’ to help her with her experiments, which of course meant she had to make him help, which led to him complaining and making even the most amazing examples of her genius seem inadequate. That was one of the reasons she had felt the need to shelter her ex-lover’s youngest brother. Whether the selfish loafer knew it or not they shared the same hurt. They both loved someone who would never love them back.

Decades ago Anissina had had her entire future planned out. She would marry Gwendal and help keep his family in some state of working order despite his floozy of a mother. Gwendal would stop working wrinkles deeper into his forehead every day and take time off to be with her. They would have a child soon enough that Wolfram would have someone close to his age to play with. Conrad wouldn’t have to play the dejected father figure and Gwendal wouldn’t have to be a father to his mother’s child. They would all have been so happy.

She would have been able to do all that and have plenty of time to work on the other loves of her life, her inventions. Unfortunately, Gwendal had not been so optimistic about his path. The path of a soldier, of a general; the path he took to a place away from her. Men. Their minds were so small that they could only focus on one thing. And in Gwendal’s case it was war. Preventing it, creating it, training for it; all his life revolved around the strategy, pain, and exhilaration of it. Foolish.

Since then she had done some growing up and realized that such dreams were childish and impossible. The only way to find happiness is to make it yourself. Depending on others, especially men, was a waste of time.

As time went on she focused more and more on her inventions, spending most of her days creating ways for the world to be a better place; a place where neither mazoku nor humans had to die for the sake of stupid male quarrels.

The most infuriating aspect of her plans for greatness was the lack of enthusiasm of those around her. The men around her. They ran, literally ran, from their inability to cope with the magnitude of her genius inventions. After all, her inventions had saved everyone on numerous occasions and she hardly got so much as a thank you. If it hadn’t been for her banana boat everyone would probably be dead. Killed by the berserker Soushi in Shinou’s body… in Yuuri’s body. It was all stupid. Just more ‘man’ quarrels. None of the people causing all these problems had been women and that was no coincidence.
Anissina did have to admit that Yuuri had made things more interesting for her bountiful creative mind when he was in Shin Makoku. The boy was always running off trying to get himself killed or dragging half of the highest court off on one goose chase or another. It had been great inspiration. Now things were a bit harder. Anissina had been working on a present for Wolfram since breakfast and she had only managed to fog up her laboratory with the smoke from her latest work in progress: ‘Let-it-all-out-so-you-can-move-on-to-something-better-kun’. It was her attempt to keep the selfish loafer from tearing up all over the castle. This way he could spray himself in the face each morning and his tear ducts would exhaust themselves and he wouldn’t have to make everyone else around him even more uncomfortable with his constant moping. As soon as she got the smoke to the right potency she would make the expulsion device, perhaps something resembling an onion. Wolfram would be so grateful.

And as soon as Wolfram cheered up she wouldn’t have to feel so bad about making fun of him. As a child he had been such fun to tease, but now it was just pathetic, like some sort of dying puppy. He spent days just moping about or painting, which was just an excuse to think about his missing fiance without feeling like he was spending all day thinking about him. No one mentioned this to his face, but the rumors about just how broken the young mazoku had become fluttered about the castle. It made him look weak, like a child who lost his favorite toy and was going to be an ass about it until someone brought it back.

Acting like an ass had always gotten Wolfram what he wanted when he was a child, however, so it was hardly a surprise that he still exhibited such faults into young adulthood. Anissina blamed his mother for that. He’s crying? Just give him a new toy. Wonderful parenting.

Cecilie’s attempts at parenting aside, the selfish loafer did seem to be making an effort to raise Greta. Though in truth at least half the castle was engaged in raising the energetic girl, Wolfram paid her particular attention. He had started giving her riding lessons soon after Yuuri’s disappearance, insisting she “wasn’t going to inherit any of her other father’s wimpy qualities”. And the two of them spent many afternoons riding around the grounds or making jewelry out of flowers. More recently he had caved to his daughter’s constant pleas and started training her with a sword, something Anissina’s novels had had absolutely nothing to do with no matter what the boy Wolf said.

At first the two had managed to comfort each other equally, but soon it was clear to Anissina that Wolfram was spending the majority of his time looking for his daughter while Greta was finding her way into the kitchens or up into her lab with increasing frequency. Anissina smiled at the memory of an instance that had taken place two months earlier.

It was still early in the afternoon when Greta wandered in, clutching the door frame with apprehension and looking up at her with large brown eyes. No words were necessary; Anissina simply smiled at the girl and put down a beaker she was holding and Greta was by her side.

“What should we read today, Anissina?” Greta grinned before springing up onto the workbench Anissina had been seated on. Greta's legs were too short to sit properly so she swung them in childish exuberance while Anissina answered.

“Hummm… well, we’ve already read all my stories, why don’t you help me make up a new one?”

Greta nodded enthusiastically, “Yes! How will Anissina save the day this time?”

Anissina smiled slightly before bringing a finger to her lips in contemplation. “Since it’s been a while why don’t we spice things up by adding another character?” She made a show of eyeing the
girl to her right. “How about a young brunette, whose skills with a sword are unmatched by any man?”

The little girl squealed in delight, kicking her legs even faster. “Sounds great! And they can go on adventures far far away and fight sorcerers and evil men and they’ll have so much fun that they’ll never have to go home.”

“Never go home? What about all their loyal subjects who’ll want to glorify them with yummy cakes and lengthy ballads?”

“No, they’ll never come home because—“

The door squeaked and two pairs of eyes focused on the figure in the hallway. Greta grabbed onto Anissina’s skirt with her nearest hand and shrunk down into her chair. The smile stayed on her face, but it lacked its normal exuberance.

Wolfram’s step faltered. “Oh…I didn't mean to interrupt.”

Anissina could feel the little fingers pulling the fabric of her skirt tighter. Greta spoke quickly, “Anissina is letting me help her write a story and it’s going to be so exciting, but you can’t hear it until it’s finished, okay Wolfram?”

Wolfram’s smile was as fake as his daughter's, “Right. Yes, of course. Be sure to run and tell me as soon as it’s finished.” His eyes shifted to the floor before he turned and left.

Both girls were silent until the echo of his footsteps could no longer be heard. Only then did Greta release her grip on Anissina's skirt.

“Greta—“ she started in a worried tone.

“—And they’ll never come back because they’ll be having so much fun that nothing else will matter. They’ll keep saving the kingdom, but they’ll never go home. Because no matter how safe the kingdom is… the people in the castle are always sad… and they won’t want to come back, because then they’d have to be sad too…” The girl’s head was bent, hair covering most of her face.

For a moment Anissina was furious with both of the girl’s fathers, Yuuri for leaving, and Wolfram being unable to cope with it. Why did young women always have to cry over the mistakes of men?

She reached out, placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder, “Greta—“

“It’s not fair!” There were tears in her eyes, welling up in the corners and refusing to fall. “Why don’t I get to be sad! Everyone’s telling me not to be upset, especially Wolfram, but it’s not fair that he gets to be sad all the time.”

“Now Greta, don’t interrupt.” Her voice was stern, yet comforting. “Wolfram acts like he’s younger than you, so don’t pay attention to him. He’s acting like a child, and I know you and your father lost the most when Yuuri left, but he didn’t leave because he wanted to make you unhappy, he left because it was what he thought he had to do. Men make stupid decisions all the time, but even if the decisions are stupid and they hurt your feelings, you can’t let them upset you for very long. I’m sure Yuuri thinks about you every day. How do you think Yuuri would feel if he knew how miserable you and Wolfram were making each other? Most of it is Wolfram's fault, for acting like a child and making you feel crowded, but you shouldn’t avoid him, it will only make it worse.”

“But Anissina, I can’t do anything. He’s just always so sad, and that makes me feel worse because…” Tears spilled from her glossy eyes and splashed onto her dress. She spoke near a
whisper, “…because I’m afraid I don’t love Yuuri enough, because… I miss him, I really really do, but I just want to think about other things sometimes. What if I’m a bad daughter? What if I don’t love him enough?!” Her body shook slightly as her small frame tried to absorb the sounds of her sobs.

Anissina pulled the little girl up into her lap, waiting for the tears to stop before she spoke. “You love your father plenty. You don’t have to worry about something silly like that. You’re doing the right thing, Yuuri wouldn’t want you to spend all your time being sad. Wolfram being upset all the time doesn’t mean he loves Yuuri any more than you do. It means he’s selfish. He’s upsetting you and everyone else around him because he won’t move on with his life.”

“You make him sound so bad. He doesn’t mean to upset anyone.”

“He might not mean it, but he just isn’t realizing how his actions affect those around him. But I guess that’s not completely his fault. He didn’t choose to be a man, and men are naturally inclined to be stupid—”

“But what can I do to make it better?” Greta interrupted.

“Stop avoiding him.” Greta moved to speak but Anissina shushed her. “I know he’s not much fun to play with lately, but you’re his favorite person so he needs you to make him happy right now.” She sighed and spoke partially to herself, “It really is a pity when children have to take care of their parents, but it happens all the time.”

Greta hugged her silently and slid off her lap onto the floor, “Thank you, Anissina.” Her voice was warm and hinted determination, “I’ll come see you again tomorrow, alright?”

“Of course,” Anissina smiled and watched the girl hurry out of the room.

After Greta left, Anissina went back to her work. It was a lovely day for inventing and the sun shone brightly into her lab. Time went by and the light receded, leaving the various bulbs scattered about the machines as the only source of light. They were bright enough to work by, but shadows danced in the corners of the room. The sounds of her inventions always helped her create, but she was so absorbed with worrying about Greta that she hardly got anything done. Her stomach growled and she had just decided to go down to the kitchens when there was a knock on her door.

Without waiting for an answer, Wolfram poked his head in, surveying the room. Anissina put her hands on her hips and waited for him to see her.

“You keep it so dark in here at night,” he said, words bubbling to the surface through obvious fatigue. Wolfram walked into the room and leaned against the wall across from her, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Again, his eyes had fallen to the floor.

Anissina sighed. Greta must have told Wolfram about their earlier conversation, and now she would have to explain things to the selfish loafer all night. Not only that but she would have to forgo the thought of dinner anytime soon. Her stomach rumbled in displeasure at the thought. Really! The nerve of him, coming in here to complain. The boy Wolf must really have nothing better to do at all. And to think he was going to admonish her for raising his daughter right. Men. Her eyebrow twitched in discontent.

Wolfram finally broke the silence, looking hopefully up at her from across the room. “Does she talk to you? You know… about…”

Anissina opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted.
“No. I know you can’t tell me any of it. That’s fine… It’s just… Good to know she’s talking to someone is all.” He looked away again, fingers visibly digging into his arms where he held them.

Her anger melted. Was it possible that Wolfram was merely acting like a concerned parent? She would have to give him more credit in the future. Still, her suspicion remained.

She spoke sharply, “Stop that!”

Green eyes flashed up at her in confusion.

“Stop looking like you’re about to cry all the time. You’re a man, you have enough failings already to add constant weeping.” Shaking her finger at him she added, “Greta’s worried about you and it’s hardly her place to do so. Yuuri’s gone and you need to start acting like an adult about it.”

Wolfram looked at her as if she had just said the most offensive thing he had ever heard. “You too, Anissina?” he seethed, “Everyone thinks I’ve just been moping around hoping that Yuuri is just going to pop out of the bath one day. Well fine. You just think that—“

“Ha!” she laughed. “Do you deny it?”

“Why should I bother? After all, I’m just a selfish loafer.” Although he hadn’t raised his voice the air around him crackled and the temperature in the room rose dramatically.

Anissina blushed slightly at the use of his own nickname, but she continued her verbal assault. How else could she test her hypothesis? “What? You disagree? You’ve been spending all day moping since he left and it’s pathetic. If being engaged for so long without marriage didn’t ruin your reputation how is acting like a broken shell of a man going to help it? If I were you—“

“WELL YOU ARE NOT ME!” He had finally lost all semblance of resolve and was gesturing madly, tearing his vocal cords with volume. “Everyone has such perceptive insights that I hardly know who I should listen to—“

“No one understands me, wah wah”, she mocked.

Wolfram moved towards her and Anissina worried for a moment that she had gone too far. He stopped right in front of her, green eyes piercing her own, his words were tight, each one forced into low tones by the clench in his jaw. “What do you suppose I do, Anissina? For myself? Greta? Should I find some woman to marry to give her a mother?

Should I leave her with someone more capable and drown myself in what small militaristic tasks that can be found during this oh-so-convenient time of peace?” He smiled bitterly and the scarcity of light left his face in eerie shadow. When the smile left, his passion had too, as if the content of his words had taken what little spirit he had left. If ever Wolfram von Belefield looked like a lost child it was now. “Not all of this is mindless self pity.” The voice that had fallen to a whisper struck up briefly in a final attempt to distract from the weakness shown by the honesty of its words. He was bitter, lashing out at what had made him dwell on sadness. “You should have some empathy in this situation, right Anissina?”

She frowned and deliberately ignored his allusion to her own romantic history. She was happy he had offended her though; it kept the proud smile from twitching up the corners of her mouth. “You should be better at presenting a face for others. You wear your emotions in the open and it hurts you.”

He glared at her. She glared right back.
Wolfram looked away first, crossing his arms, “Fine. But whatever everyone may think I am making an effort.”

“Try harder then.” she smirked at him.

As soon as the incredulous expression left his face he smiled back at her, “My my Anissina, I never thought you were so bitter.”

“My my, I never thought you were so reasonable.”

After one last look of appraisal he turned, corners of his mouth still tilted upwards, and walked toward the door. Before he left he looked back at her where she stood in front of her experiments, beaming triumphantly and spoke, “I’m glad she talks to you.” Then he left, appearing, in Anissina’s opinion, much more alive than he had when he’d entered.

Anissina’s smile widened as she remembered looking at the singe he had left on the wall. It still hadn’t been covered, but that was alright because she sort of liked it there--

The red-head’s memories were interrupted when the door swung open, hitting the wall with a loud crack.

“Did you hear?! Did you hear?!” Greta ran to her, capturing Anissina’s legs in a surprisingly strong hug for a girl her size. “It’s Yuuri. Yuuri is back! He’s back. I knew he would come back, he always comes back! Ohh Anissina did you hear?!”

Anissina looked down at the smiling face framed with curly brown hair. “Yes I heard. Your father has come back and you have every right to be excited, but remember what I taught you about men who leave?”

“They aren’t worth worry or tears.” was the child’s diligent reply. “But Yuuri didn’t leave for forever, Annisina, he came back. He came back.” Her smile was so large that the older woman was worried the little one’s face would cramp up.

“Yes, Greta. He came back.” She smiled down at the child. It was a peaceful smile, but a sad one. Now that her father was home Anissina probably wouldn’t get to spend as much time with the girl. It was such a pity; Greta was smart and had great potential. “Why don’t you go down to meet him by the gate, I’m sure he can’t wait to see you. It’s been nearly a year since he left. He’ll be surprised at how much you’ve grown.”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

“I’ll come in a minute. I just want to finish something quickly and clean up, because what happens when we leave a messy lab?”

“Someone will touch something they shouldn’t and the castle will blow up.”

“Exactly right. And how do you think Yuuri would feel coming home to a blown up castle?”

“All right.” The girl conceded and hurried back the way she came. “Clean up as soon as you can!” she beamed, before closing the door and running down the hallway. Her little steps were audible for a moment before Anissina was left to clean up in the comforting humms and whizzes of her lab.
Wolfram couldn't stop smiling. It was embarrassing but he couldn’t help it. Yuuri was back and not only were their knees occasionally touching during the bumpy carriage ride back to Blood Pledge Castle, but his fiance had let him kiss him. Well, almost kiss him.

It was the last thing Wolfram expected. He was trying to convince Gwendal and Ulrike that they didn’t need a new Maou, that everything was fine, and then Yuuri was there. A drop of water caught the sunlight as it trailed down his fiance's neck and disappeared beneath his collar.

It had all happened so fast. There was noise around him, others talking, voices he recognized but all of them forgotten whenever Yuuri spoke. Wolfram’s ears burned with the sound of that voice and Wolfram had to touch him, just to make sure he was really there.

Wolfram stepped into the water then knelt, resting his elbow on his knee for support as he reached out to cup Yuuri’s cheek. He was shaking slightly as he marveled at the brutal sensation of flesh against flesh after so long. Neither of them spoke. Just that touch hadn't been enough, but when Wolfram moved forward to embrace Yuuri he slipped on the stone floor of the fountain. For an instant he had been in Yuuri's arms before the cold water surrounded them. There was a moment, or maybe only half a moment, while they were both submerged that their lips touched. They had to have touched. Wolfram couldn't have just imagined it.

After that air had brought everything back into perspective and Wolfram was yelling at Yuuri and everything was as it used to be. Eventually his should-have-been-furious accusations of abandonment had turned into this stupid grin and his face had decided to stick this way. The same way all his thoughts had decided to stick on more. More Yuuri. More touching. Yuuri would never have let Wolfram kiss him without making a fuss if he hadn't changed his mind about everything. The long absence must have made Yuuri realize what a wimp he was being.

After spending the past year lying awake at night imagining what it could have been like had he only taken the chance Wolfram wasn't going to let another opportunity go by, especially now that there was a good chance he wouldn't end up completely humiliating himself. Wolfram could hardly wait to get Yuuri alone.

*****

*****

Gunter had been talking continuously since they had gotten into the carriage, so much so that even Gwendal was looking annoyed. Yuuri, for his part, was doing a commendable job of paying attention to all the latest courtly politics that had happened in his absence and only yawned when it was absolutely necessary. The countries that had been united under the rule of Shin Makoku had been very interested in solidifying that unity amongst themselves since Yuuri ’s departure, and that meant lots of weddings. So many nations were newly allied together that fresh pools of royal blood were welling up right and left and every king and queen wanted their heir matched off before the well ran dry. Wolfram fidgeted in his seat and pushed his leg firmly against Yuuri’s.

Yuuri didn’t recoil. Wolfram didn't think it was possible for life to get any better.

A moment later Gwendal coughed disapprovingly and Wolfram stopped smiling, but still glowed internally, his entire body alive and focused through the single contact of knee against knee.
By the time they arrived at Blood Pledge Castle Yuuri’s bum was decidedly sore. He had no idea how the others could be used to riding in carriages, to him they seemed worse than riding horse back. Of course, it hadn’t helped that Wolfram had kept invading his personal space, pressing his side painfully against the wall of the carriage. He’d endured the attention as much as he could, but the mild panic about what to do about his blond “fiancé” had kept his mind occupied for the last half of the trip. He felt a little guilty about ignoring Gunter, but he couldn’t see why he’d ever need to know the names of all the people who had gotten married in the past year.

An entire year.

Yuuri had been terrified it would have been longer, that by some cruel twist of fate if ever he did manage a way back he would find Greta grown up and everyone else old or worse. Days back home had dragged on as he worried about how many hours passed in Shin Makoku for every minute he spent on Earth.

Since Wolfram had seemed so intent on smothering him on the way to the castle, it came as a shock when they arrived and he practically leapt out the door. The blond broke into a sprint before barreling through the crowd of people assembled to welcome him home. Stepping out of the carriage Yuuri gave Conrad a confused look.

“He probably went to find Greta, Your Majesty. It is strange she's not here already.” Conrad dismounted and came to stand next to him, acting as a sort of shield to keep Gunter at a distance while he babbled an overly zealous speech of gratitude on the king’s behalf to the eager crowd.

Before Yuuri could finish scanning the crowd for a sign of his daughter, she stumbled out of the mass of people. Seeing him, she broke into a run, hardly slowing down before she attached herself to his waist, almost knocking him over.

He embraced her with equal enthusiasm, pulling away briefly so he could kneel down and hug her properly. It felt so good to feel those little arms around him again.

“Thank goodness, Yuuri!” The girl cried into her shoulder, eyelashes brushing tears against his neck. “I missed you so much! Everyone’s missed you so much!”

“I’ve missed you too Greta. I’m sorry I’ve been away.” He rubbed her back soothingly. “Why the tears? It’s a time to be happy!”

She sniffled slightly, and her face contorted into an exaggerated pout “What a wimpy thing to say after disappearing for a year!” The pout vanished quickly and she smirked playfully up at him.

Yuuri laughed nervously in an attempt to mask vague horror. How much time had his daughter been spending with Wolfram?

*****

*****

Anissina had just finished washing up, and was headed for the door when it crashed open, threatening to fall from its hinges.

“Greta!” Wolfram half shouted half panted. Sweat was breaking out in tiny beads along his forehead and his chest heaved in a desperate attempt for air.

“Did you really find it necessary to run all the way up here?”
Wolfram looked at her as if she had said something unnecessary and vaguely irritating. Men. They really did have no patience.

“I just sent her down to see Yuuri. You must have just missed—“

Wolfram turned and bolted back the way he came. She sighed and walked to the window. As she suspected, Greta had already found her father and was gesturing almost as enthusiastically as Gunter, who seemed to be addressing the crowd. Pulling up a chair, she decided to watch for a while before making her entrance.

*****

*****

“—and riding. Ohh Yuuri you have to watch Wolfram and me play with swords. It’s so much fun!”

“Swords?” So much had changed while he was away. Yuuri wondered if he’d ever be able to make up for all the time he’d lost.

Eventually Gunter’s speech ended and Yuuri followed Conrad and the others up the main stairway, Greta clinging to his hand all the while. The castle didn’t seem to have changed at all. It was still unnervingly huge and reminded him of a European period film. Still, after all this time something about it felt like home. He breathed deeply, enjoying the damp smell of earth and stone that was pleasantly masked with spice and flowers. Even after spending so much time inside the walls he still passed doors and passages he couldn’t remember ever being down. Most of them probably led to servant quarters or storage rooms, but he was still curious to see all of it. Maybe Conrad would agree to give him a full tour once Gwendal was through with him.

By the time they made it into Gwendal’s office Yuuri was short of breath. He’d forgotten how many stairs there were. Grateful for the rest, he sat down in front of the dark wooden table and pulled Greta into his lap. She snuggled back into him and started playing with his hands, comparing them to the size of her own by pressing her left palm against his right hand. He indulged her silently and looked around.

Gwendal stood in front of his desk, menacing as ever, while Gunter started arranging huge stacks of papers. Yuuri swallowed.

It was as he feared, a long lecture planned out to brief him, this time on military happenings. He frowned. He’d just gotten back; the last thing he wanted to do was spend his first day cooped up in Gwendal’s office. There was so much to do, and so much space to do it in. That was one of his favorite things about Shin Makoku. There seemed to be room to do almost anything, unlike Japan where everything seemed crowded and compact. Yuuri gave Conrad a pleading look but it was no use. His friend just shook his head and looked at Gwendal, who cleared his throat.

“After so long an absence I’m sure Your Majesty is aware that there have been many changes in alliance from the surrounding nations. Luckily, most of them have been in the favor of Shin Makoku...”

Yuuri stopped listening and shifted in his chair. When he started paying attention again a few minutes later, Gwendal had stopped talking and was glowering in his general direction. Pulling Greta closer for protection, he opened his mouth to apologize when he heard footsteps behind him. Thank goodness. He wasn’t the cause for Gwendal’s displeasure after all. He turned to see Wolfram enter the room while running a hand through his hair. His cheeks were pink and he looked short of breath.
“Wolfram!” Greta squealed in delight, twisting in Yuuri's lap to look at her other father. “It’s Yuuri!”

“Yes, it’s Yuuri.” Wolfram smiled and walked toward them. “I’m glad you found him. I haven’t had such luck finding people lately. You see, I’ve been looking everywhere for a cute little princess who wasn’t on time to meet her fathers by the carriage.”

Yuuri stiffened and looked at Greta who blushed and murmured an apology. He hated the way the other boy said his name with so much feeling. It made his gut twist with guilty feelings.

Wolfram made his way across the room and stood directly behind him. Yuuri felt the hair on his neck stand up as the other boy leaned over his shoulder to ruffle Greta’s hair. Wolfram smelled like he always did before bed, like soap or something. It was almost nice. The kind of smell a girl should have.

Yuuri moved his head away.

“Look!” Greta grabbed his hand and pushed it against hers, just the way it had been a few minutes earlier.

Wolfram chuckled right by his ear and leaned closer. The tips of his hair were damp, probably from when he had come into the fountain to berate him. “Hnn? What a difference! You’ve grown. Hasn’t she, Yuuri?”

Yuuri was startled. “Oh!...” He didn’t see that much of a difference. Greta was Greta. She was still smaller than him, still cute.

“Yuuri?” It was whispered so close that he could feel Wolfram’s breath on his ear.

“Yes!” he squeaked.

Greta squirmed in delight and grabbed his right hand by the wrist, pulling it to her chest to hug it. She did the same to Wolfram’s left hand, which had moved to rest on her shoulder. “It’s so great! I have both Papas!” She giggled.

“So great.” Wolfram mirrored softly near Yuuri’s shoulder. Yuuri laughed nervously, grateful for the back of the chair, which stopped just below his shoulder blades.

“Wolfram, can we go play with Yuuri now?”

“Sorry Greta, Gwendal has important things to tell Yuuri, so we’ll have to save that for tomorrow. That is, of course, unless we can persuade big brother.”

“Oh please, Gwendal. Won’t you let me spend some time with Yuuri? Papa Wolf and I have missed him so much.”

Gwendal’s eyebrow was twitching mercilessly and Gunter had turned a violent pink. From his right he could have sworn he heard Conrad stifle a laugh.

Despite the awkwardness of the situation, Yuuri wasn’t one to ignore salvation when it came to him, so he joined the pitiful display, widening his eyes and looking at the older man as pleadingly as he could.

“Go. Just go,” Gwendal sighed.
Yuuri was pulled from the room before Gwendal had a chance to change his mind.

*****

*****

Gwendal was still truly unnerved. There had been so much cute.

After His Majesty's departure the others had left Gwendal in peace to brood over the small pile of maps on his desk. Gwendal wished that at His Grace had decided to come to the palace rather than staying at Shinou's Temple. The Sage would have been able to convince His Majesty of the importance of his briefing and would never have been so influenced by cute. Gwendal leaned back, plush leather of his chair squeaking slightly with the movement, and let his eyes skim over a new field report that had just come in that morning by pigeon.

Most of the field reports were hideously boring of late. As much as he still pressed for tight discipline within the ranks and for troops to be stationed at key points within the region, there really wasn't much realistic threat.

Gwendal had thought it best to maintain the illusion amongst the common people that His Majesty was simply away on one of his usual trips, but the lie could only last for so long and Gwendal feared that the peace would not last if it became known that His Majesty had abandoned his crown. They were lucky that His Majesty had returned. Gwendal was glad of it, but he never was a man to take comfort in luck.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead with the heel of his palm, glancing at the latest report from the south. The only thing of note seemed to be the increasing frequency of deserters. Without the pressure of impending war it was easy for the young mazoku to decide to run off and settle down with an amicable farm girl or tavern boy. Most were of lower rank and it made little difference in the grand scheme of things, but a few had been officers. One was even a corporal who was once in Wolfram’s private guard. Marques, he remembered darkly, and decided it was for the best that the man had fled his post. Though the frequency of desertion was a concern of late, Gwendal saw little need for drastic action just yet and his thoughts soon made their way back to the smile on his little brother's face just minutes before.

Gwendal had to fight off a smile of his own as his thoughts wandered back to his youngest brother. Wolfram had been much too depressed lately and it was a joy to see him happy. Wolfram was much too young to act so despondent.

Despite his still obvious depression, Wolfram had been doing better about hiding his hurt in the more recent months. He’d also been willingly spending time with Anissina, which did not sit well with Gwendal for a multitude of reasons. Gwendal reminded himself, not for the first time, to talk to Anissina about Wolfram. The guilt of not noticing his possession a year ago still weighed heavily on his shoulders, and neither Conrad nor himself had managed to successfully broach the subject even after so much time. Perhaps she would be able to check up on him.

Gwendal had realized years too late that he had failed Wolfram as a brother. Wolfram had looked to him when he had lost faith in Conrad, but Gwendal had been too focused on his own ambition to deal with the situation properly. Also, too young perhaps to understand its significance. Wolfram had been a lonely child, and Gwendal could have done more to prevent it. Mother, despite her best efforts, was better at nurturing potential new loves than children and at the time Gwendal hadn't seen it as his job to raise his little half-brother. Looking back now he wished he had.

Things probably would have worked out better if Wolfram’s uncle wasn’t so fanatical about pure bloodlines. It was that old family prejudice, the only thing he’d actually inherited from that side of
the family, in addition to the pain shown by their mother when Conrad’s father passed away that
drove Wolfram from the brother who had actually wanted to play a more fatherly role. It had been
nice to watch Wolfram mend his relationship with Conrad since Yuuri had come to their world, but
Gwendal still missed the once seemingly ever-present shadow his youngest brother used to be.
Admittedly, Conrad was better at showing affection, so it was easy to see why Wolfram leaned
toward him.

Gwendal had never been good at coddling.

*****

*****

Several hours later, Wolfram found himself in a hallway trying desperately not to frolic.

He had stopped in an empty corridor on his way to the treasury to think, and had ended up leaning
against a wall, covering his mouth with his hands and trying not to laugh manically. Yuuri was
being amazingly receptive of his advances. It was almost too much, too good to be true. But it was!
He had gotten to hug him at least twice more since they left Gwendal’s office to entertain Greta
and there had been no resistance. No screaming, no fighting. Wolfram made a small noise of
delight just thinking about it and slid down the wall, letting his toes support most of his weight.
His cheeks were red with blush and his fingers criss-crossed over his mouth. Thinking of Yuuri, he
closed his eyes and let his lips press gently against the inside of his palm.

Feeling a bit silly, he removed his hands and crossed his arms in front of his chest, eyes focused on
the elaborate tile beneath his feet. One of the tiles was chipped, revealing a dark splotch of the
mortar. Strange all the things you never notice.

Wolfram had just finished putting Greta to bed. The poor girl had fallen asleep on the grass after
several hours of horseplay. She was so happy now that Yuuri was back. A part of him was jealous
that she adored Yuuri so much more than himself, but he couldn’t really blame her. Yuuri was,
well… Yuuri.

His wimp.

Yuuri had gone ahead to the banquet after seeing Greta safely to her room and now Wolfram was
on his way to do something potentially disastrous, but he wasn’t too concerned. Even if Yuuri was
pathetically unfamiliar with their customs, this one should be simple enough for him to wrap his
mind around.

*****

*****

Yuuri sighed and stirred his soup.

It was the third course of soup so far this evening and he wondered how long dinner was going to
last. The broth was too sweet for his liking so he just pushed it around. That was one of the biggest
problems with soup. No matter how much you push it around it never looks like there’s any less of
it.

The round table they were seated at was lavishly decorated with a floral centerpiece so high he
could hardly see Gwendal and Gunter over it. Conrad sat to his left and the seat to his right was
conspicuously empty.

After such a long day, sleep was looking better by the minute. First the excitement of returning to
Shin Makoku, then the carriage ride back, followed by lectures upon lectures. Not to mention the late afternoon spent watching Greta ride. That had actually been the most relaxing part of the day, or had been until Wolfram decided Yuuri no longer needed any personal space.

Yuuri had found himself surprised by his fiance's absence for the second time that day. It struck a chord of terror within him when he thought of the sorts of things Wolfram might be off planning for them.

He had made a terrible mistake.

Somehow, in not wanting to further disappoint Wolfram, Yuuri had stopped protesting his advances. In hindsight this was a stupid thing to do, because now he couldn’t seem to get any space for himself. It was awkward and depressing, but since he had started he had no idea where to draw the line. Now that he had stopped pushing Wolfram away when he made him uncomfortable, it hardly seemed fair to push him away later for the things that made him really really uncomfortable. And despite his own discomfort, he didn’t think he could stand it if he made Wolfram sad.

Ever since he realized how blind he had been about Wolfram’s possession by Soushi, the guilt had been relentless. What stung the most was his distinct awareness that if the situation had been reversed, his friend would have noticed immediately. Yuuri had failed Wolfram as a friend. Almost gotten him killed. In a way, Wolfram had even been dead for a while.

Besides the guilt about Wolfram, he’d also made a promise to Conrad. If a name could mean a promise.

Brother.

He had meant it then, but over time the urgency had abated and he wondered if he had the strength to really do it. To do what would make Wolfram happy. To pay back his debt even if it made him miserable for the rest of his life.

Now the more Yuuri thought about it, the more it seemed like the only reasonable thing for him to do. To put his own desires aside and do what was right for those around him. Yuuri was sure neither Gwendal nor Conrad would forgive him if he ruined their little brother’s happiness. No. Nothing other than this would do. Yuuri would bear it silently. For the kingdom.

After all, he was supposed to be a king now, right? And not just any king, but the king that had saved this world from destruction at the hands of the greatest figure in their history. Practically a god. Yuuri had killed a god and that required some sort of balance in karma.

Therefore, for the happiness of those around him, he would have to suffer.

Still, no matter how many times Yuuri told himself this, acting so selflessly was proving very difficult. Sometimes Yuuri just wanted to be a regular kid again. Someone normal who wasn't inexplicably engaged to a man.

A servant came to take away his soup and replace it with a salad, if you could call it that. It just looked like a piece of lettuce with some decorative fruit and a thick drizzling of sauce. Yuuri fidgeted in his seat and pouted at Conrad who chuckled at him.

“You’ll have to forgive the castle’s enthusiasm at your return, Majesty.”

“It’s not the enthusiasm that's a problem! How much food can we eat? I’m already getting full and we’ve only…”
Gwendal coughed.

“Ohh well, I guess it can’t be helped.” Yuuri slouched in defeat. “And stop calling me ‘Your Majesty’, Conrad.”

“My apologies.”

Yuuri rubbed his head in frustration. This dinner was so tedious and there was no escape in sight.

“Your Majesty!” Gunter gushed, happy to have thought of something to explain. “The dishes of the welcome-home feast have great symbolism as well as exquisite taste—“

Yuuri tried not to groan audibly in despair.

“—bread that is made with only the finest grain, and then kept in a bottle of red wine to symbolize the heart of the nation. The bosom of the very land that is able to give the people peace so that they can eat and live—“

Gunter was talking so quickly that Yuuri wondered if he ever breathed.

“—and not to mention the second soup that is hardly second in taste and spirit made with the three great friends of the waters. The crayfish symbolizes the rivers that carry trade, the lobster the ocean that carries the delicacies of the sea, and the slippery eel the most illusive in its beauty—“

Unfortunately, Gunter must have managed to breathe at some point because it kept going for what seemed like ages.

*****

*****

The kitchens were in an uproar. Hanz, the head chef, had practically shoved Wolfram into the stove while he was trying to catch a pheasant, which wasn’t quite as dead as previously thought, and had terrified one of the maids so much in the process that she fainted.

After searching through the dust of one of the treasure rooms for an undignified period of time, he had finally found all the spices he needed, along with the two traditional goblets, and made his way to the kitchens. He hadn’t expected to have to resort to colorful threats of physical violence to procure his current position in front of the oldest stove in the castle. True, he probably could have heated the small crock of the country’s finest wine with his own mazoku somewhere less traumatizing, but given the heightened state of his emotions he didn’t trust himself not to set the castle on fire.

It was just so exciting, this huge bubble of emotions trapped beneath his skin that was trying to burst out at all angles. He had spent so much time brooding about Yuuri and now everything was better than he’d ever really let himself imagine. Sure, in recent weeks he had convinced himself that he was actually starting to move on, but now that Yuuri was back all his repressed desires were overwhelming him at once.

Wolfram measured out all the spices and lined them up so he could add them to the wine in the proper order and stared at the pot, willing it to boil.

There wasn't much time. The little voice in the back of his mind that was telling him to slow down and think about what he was doing was getting louder by the minute. Wolfram glared at the wine and wished time would move faster so he could prove the voice wrong.
“You’re being stupid.”

The voice in his head was sounding more and more like Anissina everyday.

“You’re being stupid.”

He turned. “Do you ever mind your own business? Go build something.” Wolfram waved his hand dismissively at her to emphasize his point.

Anissina, who was leaning against a table covered with feathers, raised an eyebrow at him. “Go build something?” She brought her hand to her chin thoughtfully. “What an idea. Why don’t I make something to keep you from being so stupid? I think I’ll call it ‘What-are-you-thinking-he-hasn’t-changed-at-all’ a pause ‘-kun’.”

Wolfram scoffed and turned away. The wine had started to boil, so he added the first two ingredients, watching intently as they dissolved on contact with the hot surface. He frowned when he felt Anissina lean over him to peer at the contents of the small crock. “Are you still here?”

“No. I’m in my Lab.” She patted him on the shoulder, “Today just isn’t one of your smart days, is it?”

“Anissina---!” He snapped before closing his eyes to calm himself. “You haven’t seen him today. He has changed, and this is the right thing for me to be doing. Now could you please leave?”

“Oh course he has.” She pouted at him, speaking as if Wolfram was a toddler. “And Gwendal has wrinkles because he smiles so much.”

Wolfram scoffed. What an annoying woman. He added a few more ingredients to the pot and stirred it counterclockwise. ‘Anissina, dear, did you ever think that even if this was a stupid decision that half the castle probably already knows I’m planning on it and to back out now would be a sign of irreparable weakness of my own character?”

“Wolfram, darling, did you ever think that I just don’t want you to turn into a bitter old maid like me?”

He could feel her wink at him before he felt her arms wrap around him from behind in brief hug. “Anissina…”

She kissed the top of his head. “Fine, I won’t bother you any more today. Just don’t let that big heart of yours cloud your mind.” She bonked him on the head lightly, “I know it’s in there somewhere…”

Smirking, he added another ingredient. “Well, I’m glad you’ve come to your senses.”

Behind him, Anissina humphed.

Wolfram had to smile a bit at their exchange. Even though he thought Anissina was completely insane, Wolfram had to admit a certain fondness for the old maid. Besides being useful with Greta, lately she was the only one in the castle that didn’t look at him with a familiar mixture of pity and guilt. Anissina looked at him the same way she had before Soushi had killed him. ‘Selfish Loafer’ was miles better than ‘Lovesick Fool Who Got Possessed Under My Watch’ in his book. Conrad couldn’t even say his name without a nauseating tremor of emotion, and Gwendal was hardly any better, always watching him out of the corner of his eye and not even having the decency to allow Wolfram to drown himself in military campaigns. On top of it all, Mother had left on another love cruise two weeks after Yuuri left and still hadn’t returned.
The most irritating aspect of it was that Wolfram was pretty much over the whole ordeal. Losing Yuuri was much more painful than the nightmares, possession, blackouts and odd memories. Memories that made him glad that the Great Sage decided to stay behind in Shinou's Temple. The relationship between Shinou and the Great Sage had been... intimate, to say the least and Wolfram wasn’t excited about having to look him in the eyes with a straight face any time soon.

“Yuuri has changed.” Wolfram said aloud, gripping the wooden spoon he had been using to stir the spiced wine until his knuckles whitened. He wants me now.

Anissina sighed. “Yes, he’s changed. It’s been a year here, which means he could have spent two days on Earth fretting over ‘killing’ you, or two months learning how to move on. Something some people take an obnoxious time to do—“

“Enough!” He didn’t need Anissina vocalizing his doubts. His hands were beginning to shake as it was and the hole in his chest that had vanished when Yuuri arrived was threatening to open all over again. “As much as I accept your concern—”

“You have an awful habit of interrupting people.”

Wolfram nearly lit the spoon on fire. “OUT!”

The vile woman uttered something under her breath before she made her exit, weaving through the confusion of the kitchen.

He was a bit surprised she had left so easily, but was happy none the less. The wine mixture was nearly finished, so he took it off the stove and placed it on a nearby counter, brushing away some chopped vegetables to make room. A knife was lying near by and Wolfram picked it up and peered at it scrupulously before touching the blade. After a deep breath to calm his nerves he made a small incision on his index finger and squeezed two drops of blood into the crock. Mostly unfazed by the slight pain, he couldn’t help but put the wounded finger into his mouth as he stared down into the wine and ignored the sinking feeling that he was making a mistake.

There was no going back now though, especially since Anissina had told him he was being stupid. If he didn’t do it she would think she’d won and it would be impossible to be anywhere near her for at least a month. Of course, he wasn’t planning on spending time with anyone besides Yuuri and Greta for at least twice that long. The old maid aside, he had seen other maids in here, which meant that all the help that wasn’t too busy cooking knew what he was up to. He wouldn’t be surprised if there was a betting pool started.

Wolfram closed his eyes and remembered the kiss beneath the water and the hugs from that morning and managed to convince himself that success was inevitable. The eagerness welled up inside him all over again and he abandoned his mixture to wash out the two goblets he had procured from the treasury. They hadn’t been used in centuries and once the dust was removed he was surprised to discover they were clear. The translucent surface made them look more delicate and Wolfram realized he should probably practice carrying goblets less irreplaceable before his debut. At about the same time, he realized that he probably smelled like the kitchens and gods knew what else from all the dusty things he had just crawled around in, and that he would probably have to bathe for a third time today. He had taken a ‘bath’ this morning in the fountain and then again after he had gotten sweaty running around the castle looking for Greta.

With Yuuri any detail could make the difference.

*****

*****
“The thirty eighth course. Ahh—” There were tears in Gunter’s eyes, sparkling with the joy of his own words. “The Spanferkel. The very life of innocence that is the life of our king. The suckling pig yanked from its mother’s arms to show the willingness of the people to give away everything for the well being of their sovereign.”

Yuuri felt like he was going to be sick. The servants had come and gone fourteen more times, placing strange things in front of him that he only managed a bite from out of politeness. Yuuri felt like it would never end. That he would die of dinner.

He looked at Conrad, who was smiling slightly at him. Yuuri made a desperate face and Conrad only chuckled. It was ridiculous. Everyone was against him. Where the hell was Wolfram?! He would have made some sort of distraction to end all this by now.

Yuuri had actually been considering killing himself with the spork, or at least creating a constructive flesh wound, when it finally ended.

“And finally the forty-second, the final dish that is the culmination of culminations: cherry tarts sprinkled with almonds. The tart flavor is representative of the bitter sensation of leaving the meal while the sweet cherry aftertaste bears testimony of the joy for hours.”

Gunter had made an impressive break for the finish, saying the last few dishes in a single breath. His labored breathing squeaked with enthusiasm as he regained his composure.

“Now that His Majesty is fully aware of the implications of the meal…” Gwendal growled, impatience evident in every wrinkle of his forehead, “might we move along to matters of more national importance?”

Yuuri perked up. Anything was better than listening to Gunter’s needlessly elaborate description of food.

Unfortunately it wasn’t all that much more interesting, mostly just a list of all the nations that had somehow become a part of Shin Makoku. A lot of this seemed strange as some of the new ‘territory’ didn’t even border the central nation.

It was somewhat entertaining to hear that one nation was impossibly difficult to talk to, refusing even to send an ambassador. Gwendal hadn’t seemed too worried about it since the country was rather small, or at least it sounded small. Shou Shimeron. If he remembered correctly it was somewhere between Caloria and Dai Shimeron. Yuuri wondered what it was like. Maybe he could convince everyone that they needed to take a closer look. Right now Yuuri would do anything for another adventure.

Dinner was more than halfway over when Wolfram finally made an entrance. For a moment he seemed unsure, lingering by the door until Yuuri grinned at him. Finally someone else to talk to! Wolfram reddened for a moment before coming further into the private dining room. It was then that Yuuri noticed that Wolfram looked like a waiter; or at least he was carrying a tray with two glasses perched upon it with seemingly practiced grace.

Before he could ask about it, Gwendal coughed in displeasure, which distracted his attention. Gunter was completely red, covering his face with his cloth napkin and Conrad looked hopefully amused. When Yuuri turned back he was surprised to see Wolfram standing directly in front of him.

Looking up, Yuuri realized with a sense of dread that Wolfram was wearing his peacefully hopeful face. Terrifying, in that it was almost always followed with disappointment, rage and a bit of a
singe to his own person. Yuuri swallowed loudly and Wolfram smiled reassuringly down at him.

“Yuuri…” Wolfram practically purred, placing the goblet in his hand. The glass stem felt flimsy in his grasp and it felt like he was going to break it just by touching it. Yuuri had a distinct inkling that that would be a very bad thing to do.

Yuuri glanced down at the crimson liquid that swirled in his glass. It was warm and smelled like spice and something that made him feel flush. He supposed it was a type of wine and was momentarily happy. Gwendal and the others had never let him drink alcohol at dinner before, maybe they realized he was growing up. After all, he was sixteen now. “Great! I can see at least one person thinks I’ve grown up enough to enjoy some of the benefits of being a king.”

Gunter sputtered loudly.

“Yuuri…” Wolfram said again, barely above a whisper, looking at Yuuri like he was the only one there. Wolfram tilted his glass in Yuuri’s direction.

Yuuri mirrored the gesture and congratulated himself. This was just a toast. It was easy, just Wolfram’s overly dramatic way of welcoming him home. For once he wasn’t going to mess up. He beamed and moved to take a sip, when Wolfram suddenly dumped the contents of his glass over his head. Little crimson rivulets streamed down Wolfram’s face and his previously white cravat now looked blooded.

Yuuri panicked.

“Wolfram! What on earth?” He stood up and tried to find a napkin. His glass was still in his hands so in his rush he tried to hand it to Conrad. Surprisingly, Conrad sprung away from the glass as if it were on fire. Annoyed, Yuuri set the glass on the table and used the napkin that had been in his lap to dab at Wolfram’s cheeks. Oddly, Wolfram just stood there, making no move clean himself off.

“Are you crazy? What are you doing, you’ve got this stuff all over you now.”

Wolfram’s eyes closed and his jaw tensed and Yuuri started to have the creeping feeling that he’d done something wrong. “Wolfram…”

After a few terrifying seconds, during which Yuuri prepared himself to run for his life, Wolfram opened his eyes and smiled at him. Or his mouth did, his eyes, however, seemed sad. It was just the sort of look Yuuri had worked so hard all day to avoid. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s fine. I’ll see you tonight. I have to go get cleaned up.” Turning on his heel Wolfram all but ran out the door, slamming it shut in his wake.

Yuuri stared at the spot where Wolfram used to be. “Conrad?”

Conrad stood and put a hand on his shoulder from behind. “It’s alright, just another custom. Wolfram should know you didn’t know what it meant.”

The comforting words only made him feel worse. “But what did I do?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s his own fault for trying something so rash.” Gwendal muttered, taking a large sip from his glass.

Yuuri could hardly believe it. He made a mistake because he didn’t know a custom, and now no one would even tell him what the custom was. “But…”, he whined, then got an idea. “Gunter, how am I supposed to make a good king if I don’t know all the customs of my kingdom?”
“Ohhh Your Majesty this is all my fault! I should have instructed you sooner, I am a poor servant to the throne, I should be defenestrated at once, I have failed you—“

“Gunter, calm down. It’s not your fault!” What a commotion. Yuuri was starting to get a headache. “Just… tell me what just happened.”

Gunter perked up immediately, “You are too kind your majesty, only the greatest of—“

“Gunter!”

“The tradition Sir Belefield implemented was created by the third Maou’s bride-to-be and has only been used two other times before this evening. The lady, after being proposed to by His Majesty the third Maou, found herself still unwed after waiting patiently for several months. Now, His Majesty was concerned since the lady was still very young and wanted to wait until she was older to be wed. In her attempt to show him that she was mature enough to be his bride she started this custom, which is now the only dignified way for a Maou’s… intended… to suggest the wedding take place as soon as possible.

“The wine, which is blended with several spices, is the purest quality, symbolizing the purity of the persons… affection. The spices are specific to the person, so without knowing which ones Sir Belefield added I regretfully cannot tell you the specific implications. Also, the more impatient party would add some of their blood to the mixture to allude to part of the traditional mazoku wedding ceremony.”

Yuuri blanched and looked at the goblet, glad he hadn't drunk any of Wolfram’s blood.

“The pouring of the wine onto themselves symbolizes the impatience of the individual to show their affection to the person they are betrothed to. If the person who has been given the wine pours it onto himself also, then the couple elopes, both having shown their desire to be wed as soon as possible. If the recipient drinks the wine, he shows that while he still cares for the person who has given it, he wishes to be wed later.”

Why were all the customs in Shin Makoku so complicated? Not to mention needlessly convoluted. “Okay, so I didn’t drink it, does that mean I’ve broken the engagement?” He tried to keep the hope from leaking into his voice. Yes, he didn’t want to disappoint Wolfram, but maybe this was a way to sneak out of the engagement without upsetting Wolfram too much. After all, he hadn’t known what he was doing when he’d gotten engaged to him in the first place, wasn’t it fitting that he become un-engaged without knowing what he was doing?

“Not drinking the wine is a symbol of indecision, but your majesty didn’t only not drink the wine.”

Yuuri sighed and collapsed into his chair. “What else could I have possibly done?”

Gunter colored slightly and glanced at Conrad.

Following his gaze Yuuri looked at Conrad who seemed apologetic.

“Handing the wine to another person symbolizes—” Gunter’s voice squeaked, “that the reason for the delay in the wedding is an affair with—” Gunter trailed off, or hyperventilated, it was so hard to tell the difference.

“With Conrad! That’s ridiculous!”

“Thankfully” Gwendal broke in, “Sir Weller knew better than to take the glass.”
“Which means…”

“Which means, that the implication of an affair was denied.” Gwendal growled.

Yuuri could feel the waves of relief wash over him. “So what exactly does the custom say I did?”

Gunter seemed to have regained his ability to speak, “According to the custom created by the wife of the third Maou Your Majesty is indecisive about marrying Sir Belefield and has a… wandering eye…But of course everyone here knows that your majesty was unaware of the custom and Sir Belefield's actions were completely inappropriate.”

Well, he didn’t seem to have implied anything that Wolfram didn’t already suspect of him. He groaned, “Why is everything so complicated already!” and buried his face in his arms.

“All right, Your Majesty, I’m sure everything will be back to normal by morning,” Conrad tried to reassure him, but it was no use.

All he wanted now was to go back to his room to sleep, but he knew that Wolfram would probably be there waiting for him. Instead of being able to roll into the big bed and fall asleep, he would have to argue with Wolfram and then spend the night being kicked around. As much as he had hated his welcome home feast, now Yuuri couldn’t help but wish there were more than forty-two courses.
Wishful Haze Chapter 2

Greta was wide awake.

The light from the moon played in long streaks across the ornate contours of her bedroom ceiling. Sounds were still except for the beating of her own heart, which echoed sharply in her ears. Yuuri had come home. He hadn't abandoned her like her real parents, or even as Hube had, off in a new town with Nicola and Eru.

When Yuuri was gone everything had been empty.

At first, days went by the same way they did when Yuuri left on his other trips to visit his family, but the feeling was not the same. The cakes she made in the bustling kitchen with the help of the maids didn't taste as sweet. Papa Wolf's smile was hollow, never the same as it had been when he would bring her back trinkets from his travels with Yuuri, or dolls from town all dressed in flowery lace and ribbons that he said weren't nearly as pretty as her.

The day that Yuuri left, Wolfram had brought her salted pretzels from town and a whole bag of maple candies. She hadn't eaten them. Except for the one candy he put on her tongue when the tears came hard and her nose was running down into her mouth.

Papa Wolf had come home last that day. She had hoped that Yuuri would be with him and that her two Papas had finally started to get along. But she could tell by the way Gwendal’s forehead was all wavy and the way that after he talked to Anissina…

“Men.”

There were a lot of ways that Anissina said that word. But this was one of the worst. She remembered thinking as she was sitting on the steps of the castle. During the battle she had been up in the lab with Anissina, but now that the fighting had stopped she was allowed down onto the front steps to wait for everyone to come home.

The air was thick with dust and soot from the battle and a whole number of other smells that made her nose hairs curl up. So she sat on the steps and breathed through her mouth waiting for her Papas. Gwendal and Gunter were the first to return and now they were talking to Anissina just out of earshot, near one of the larger piles of rubble.

She remembered feeling so torn. Wanting to run up and ask what Anissina was so upset about and why half of her favorite people hadn’t come back yet, but being too afraid of the answer to move.

Hube was next over the horizon. He smiled weakly at her and she smiled and waved but stopped when Nicola, Eru squirming in her arms, embraced him. Hube closed his eyes and whispered something and then Nicola had looked at her with the same face Anissina had made.

She had looked away at that point and noticed that Conrad and Yozak were leading some horses around the back to the royal stables. Yozak seemed angry and was holding onto Conrad’s arm while Conrad just looked like he was lost in thought. As they turned the corner out of sight, she saw that Papa Wolf’s horse was one of the ones being taken and she stood up to run to the inner gate, or what was left of it. She climbed up some rubble and remembered how hard her heart had been beating with excitement and worry and everything all at once. Just looking down over the town, over the empty road up to the castle. In a few places the town was still smoking, but all of the trails of grey were thinning and had probably been put out by now. A hot wind blew on her legs
and rustled her skirt as she waited.

Standing there, in the back of her mind, she hated that no one ever told her anything. That they probably thought she was too young. All sorts of possibilities ran through her head. They could have been killed fighting Shinou. No. Then everyone would have been much more upset. What if they had eloped? After all, all the evil had been destroyed. If it hadn’t then the bad soldiers wouldn’t have vanished. And if there was nothing left to hurt the country, then Yuuri wouldn’t be so busy and they would have time for the wedding. If they had eloped, she would have to yell at Wolfram because he had promised she would have a place of honor in the ceremony at least twice.

Then she saw a single figure start walking up the hill. When she leaned forward and squinted hard enough she could tell it was Wolfram. But where was Yuuri? She scampered down the pile of rubble and started down the hill but Hube’s voice stopped her. She turned to look at him.

“Where’s Yuuri?”

He just shook his head.

Then she started running. She ran straight down the hill as fast as her legs could go, so fast that it was like falling with her feet stopping her occasionally on the way down. Tears welled up but she blinked them back. Nothing was true until Wolfram said so.

Her Papa must have seen her and started running, because she was standing in front of him so quickly that she wondered if she had remembered to breathe running down the hill. Wolfram was breathing hard, like he had been running too. His hair was full of dirt and his eyes sat red over puffy cheeks. When he tried to smile and hand her the candies, she noticed that his knuckles were all cut up.

“Where’s Yuuri?”

Wolfram opened his mouth but no words came out. He had to cough to find his voice. “On Earth.”

Just on Earth? Why was everyone making such a fuss? Yuuri went to visit Earth all the time, and he hadn’t gone back in a while so it made sense. She smiled. “For how long this time?”

When Wolfram knelt down in front of her she knew something had to be wrong.

“Greta, come here…”

“No!”

“Greta…”

“NO! Not until you tell me what’s going on. It has to be bad right? Everyone’s been looking at me the way you are now and I HATE it! Why does everyone keep treating me like I’m too little to understand? What’s going on?!”

“Come here.” And then he reached forward and pulled her into his arms.

“Let go!” Sometime she must have started to cry because her face was all wet where it was pressed into her Papa’s shoulder. He was holding her so tight that it was painful where his fingertips dug into her back and side, but she didn’t really mind. It distracted her from all the painful things going on inside. So did the hot breath that puffed against her head and neck.

“Greta… Yuuri… can’t.” He squeezed her even tighter before pushing her back and holding her
shoulders so she had to look at him. “He can’t come visit us anymore.” His eyes ran all over her face, looking for something.

“What?”

“When he made the bad things go away… he defeated Shinou… or what had made Shinou bad… Shinou is what made him be able to come spend time with us… and now that Shinou’s gone…”

“What?” She sort of understood… but it was all she could say.

“There was one last portal to Earth… You have to remember, Greta, that Yuuri spent most of his life there. He has a mother and father and whole other… life there.”

“But… What about us?”

He tried to smile at her but only his mouth moved. “We have each other… and you have Hubert and big brother and—“

“Why couldn’t Yuuri just stay here? Why couldn’t you stop him?” She tried to pull out of his grip. “It was a portal right? Why didn’t he just stay away?”

Wolfram caught her again, pulling her close as she tried to push him back, beating against his chest with her tiny fists and screaming about how he should have been able to save Yuuri from the portal. “Greta…”

“Why doesn’t he love us more!?”

Wolfram made a weird sound in his throat, like he was choking on air. “Greta… stop it! Calm down!” He held her so tight that her fists were pinned between them and she couldn’t move. She let her weight off her feet to try to slip down, but he just held her in the air until she tried to push away with her feet and he managed to move one of his arms down lower to pin her legs. “I know this is a big shock, but just listen to me. Yes, Yuuri could have stayed away from the portal. But I… I told him to leave. So don’t be upset with Yuuri. That wimp loves you and all the people of Shin Makoku. He would have stood in front of that portal for years, trying to decide if he should go back to his Earth or not. But he didn’t have that time. And, Greta, if he didn’t leave… how would it feel to know that I… that we… that everyone here… had trapped him? That we loved him so much that he couldn’t be truly happy. We have to know… We have to love him enough to let him be where his life takes him without feeling guilty about leaving us behind. We have to do what’s best for our wimp.”

She hated how everything he said made sense. But she didn’t want it to be true. Greta had started to cry in earnest then. Big sloppy tears that slid down her face and into her mouth and dripped from her chin when it didn’t soak into the blue fabric in front of her face. Her nose was running and it made it hard to breathe so she choked air in through loud sobs that hurt her chest and scratched her throat. When she licked her lips they tasted like salt from her nose and tears.

“I know… I know.” Since she had stopped fighting him he could hold her more gently now. “Shhhh…” That’s when the maple candy had come, like an over-sweet intruder to her sorrow pushed in by a well-meaning thumb and a shower of kisses into her hair. Then he picked her up and she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, and let him carry her back up the hill.

Now that her mouth was full of sugar she couldn’t breathe, so she blew her nose on his shoulder in a small moment of spite. He didn’t seem to mind though. “Do you like them?”
“Who?”
“Yuuri’s Mama and Papa. His other family.”

He squeezed her again and shifted her up on his body. “Yes. Very much.”

“How…”
“But you know who I like more?”

She shook her head.

“The bravest little girl in all of Shin Makoku.”

“I’m not a little girl!”

Wolfram tried to sound surprised. “You’re not?”

“Nope.” She squirmed in his arms.

“Well… that may be true… I think you’ve gotten heavier.”

How silly of her Papa. Anissina said men who even commented on a lady’s weight weren’t men at all. “Well I think you’ve lost your manhood.”

He stopped. “What?”

“You called a lady heavy so according to Anissina you’re no longer a man.”

“I’m not? Then what am I then?”

She thought for a moment. “You must be a wolf.”

“A wolf?”

“Yup. Just a big Papa Wolf.”

Then her Papa Wolf chuckled and it was the best sound in the world.

Greta had slept with her Papa that night, in the big room in the heart of the castle where he and Yuuri used to sleep. But it wasn’t the same as when Yuuri was with them. Another big warm body on her other side, protecting her from everything in the world. That night one side of her was cold, and she kept her eyes closed and her breathing even when Papa Wolf brushed her bangs from her eyes and kissed her forehead and shook with silent tears.

But what felt like ages later the sun wasn’t up and she wasn’t asleep and she could tell that Wolfram wasn’t either, because when he was asleep he made little snores. So she rolled over and tugged on the grey sleep shirt he was wearing. “Can’t sleep.”

“Me neither. Come here.” And he opened up his arms so she could put her head on his chest and wedge her body between his torso and the arm he brought up to surround her. They stayed like that for a while and she listened to his big heart thump.

“Tell me a story.”

He sighed. “Greta, you know I’m not good at stories. That’s what Anissina is for.”
“But I want to hear a Wolf story.”

Wolfram was quiet for a while except for thinking noises. “I don’t really know many stories for children. I wasn’t lucky to hear a lot when I was little like you are.”

“Please, just tell me one that you remember.” She made big eyes at him through the dark.

“The only one I can think isn’t very fun for little girls…”

Her interest was piqued. “I’m not a little girl! Please, please tell me!”

“But…”

“Pleeeeeease!”

Wolfram made the face that meant she had won. “Fine… but how to begin… I’m really no good at stories…”

Greta smiled and waited for him to start.

“When the world was young, everything was very different than it is today. Mazoku didn’t live in huge cities like Shin Makoku like they do now. Instead there were lots of villages of mazoku over the whole continent. Each village was different, but one village was well known and feared for having the strongest warriors and the greatest bonds with the elemental gods.

“In that village there was a tradition that may seem cruel today, but back then it ensured that only the strongest mazoku children survived to become warriors. That way the village didn’t have to use up its resources taking care of the weak. To accomplish this, when a child in the village reached the age of twenty-five, which in human years would be only a little older than you, the child had to live in the woods alone for a year. The child could steal food from the village as long as he or she wasn’t caught, but most of the time they were supposed to hunt their own food.

“One fall day it was time for a young boy to start his year long trial in the woods. The boy was very strong and his parents and the elders of the village were sure he would be able to survive this task.

“For the first few months the boy did very well, but one day, when winter was coming on, he came upon a baby fox in the woods. The fox had been abandoned by his parents and the boy took pity on the animal and put it under his tunic to keep both of them warm. Over time, the fox got stronger from the heat of the boy and the boy was able to sleep in the cold and live from the shared heat of the fox inside his tunic.

“When the villagers and the boy’s parents saw this-- because even though the boy was living alone, he was close enough to the villagers to be seen by them-- he was warned to get rid of the fox, because it was sure to eat him.

“The boy refused because the fox had helped him, and he kept the fox in his shirt and continued stealing food from the village to eat. But after so long the fox also became hungry and slowly started to nibble at the boy’s stomach…”

“The boy felt the pain of the teeth but kept the fox there because of his fondness for the animal and his refusal to admit the truth of the elders’ words. But most of all it was because in the village the worst thing anyone could do was admit to being in pain. Showing pain was the ultimate sign of weakness, while denying pain was the ultimate form of bravery.
“And then…”

“What?” Greta piped during his pause “What happens to the little boy?”

“I told you this wasn’t a good story for little girls….”

“What happens? You said you’d tell me the story.”

“Well… it’s been a long time since I’ve heard it and I can’t quite remember how it ends.”

“That’s not fair.” She pouted.

Wolfram sighed again. “I’m sorry… why don’t we make up an ending?”

“Make one up?”

“Yes. What would you do, if you were the little boy?”

She thought for a long while… the whole thing seemed crazy to her. “I’d move to another village.”

Then Papa Wolf laughed a little and told her to go to sleep.

Eventually she did fall asleep, but she stayed up thinking for a while longer. She thought about the boy and the fox, and if it really ate the boy and Wolfram just thought she was too ‘little’ to hear the real ending. But she also trusted her Papa because he had never lied to her before, and so it was probably more likely that he really had forgotten.

Her last thoughts that day weren’t about the strange bravery of the little village boy, however, but instead were about how brave her Papa was.

The next morning, Wolfram made a fuss over how that room shouldn’t go to waste and moved the rest of his things in. It sort of made sense because he had already been living in there with Yuuri, but Greta still thought it was silly because now Wolfram’s old room was ‘going to waste’.

That day was also the day that she convinced Wolfram to teach her how to play with swords. Greta squeaked in excitement and kicked her legs against the covers just thinking about how happy she had been. And also how disappointed to realize that playing with swords was a lot of work.

For two whole weeks all they had done was exercise. They did all sorts of ridiculous things that she was sure were impossible, like spending so much time sitting against a wall with her legs bent that the top part of her legs shook and she couldn’t even walk the next day. But it had all been worth it when Wolfram gave her her own little sword. It was much smaller than the one Wolfram had, and much lighter. Later on she had found out that he had gotten Anissina to help make it, which only made her treasure the semi-sharpened piece of metal even more.

Anissina had helped make Wolfram a new sword too. One to use when they were practicing so that it wouldn’t hurt too much when he hit her. Wolfram said that if she really wanted to know how to use a sword she would have to train the same way the boys did, with only a few exceptions. At first she had resented that she had accept any exceptions at all, but after she’d been hit a few times she changed her mind.

Even though it was hard, she loved practicing with her Papa. It made her feel so grown up. In retrospect that was probably one of the reasons Wolfram felt he needed to be so clingy. So even though sometimes she didn’t want to play with him, she had tried her best to make him happy.
Adults could be so needy.

Thinking about the past had done little to put her to sleep, so Greta sat up in bed and looked at the moon. Sliding out of the covers, she let her feet fall onto the cold floor. She knew she couldn’t go outside since it was way past her bedtime and anyone who saw her would probably tell on her. Besides, she wanted to go to sleep so that she could get up early tomorrow and play with Yuuri. But she knew she had to do something to help her fall asleep, so she got on her knees and crawled under her bed to where she hid her sword.

She knew she didn’t really need to hide it, but having it somewhere close made her feel safe. Even though Yuuri and everyone else inside the castle made her feel safer than she had in her entire life, her earlier years had created a constant need for as much protection as possible.

Once she had crawled out from under the bed, she slowly unsheathed her prized possession. It shone in the pale light and sang lightly as it was set free. Breathing deeply Greta began to practice. She knew she wasn’t very good yet, but time had helped her and now instead of burdening her arm with an oppressive weight, her thin blade felt firm in her hand.

While she was practicing she actually felt very free. It was fun to imagine that one day she could look as beautiful with a sword as grandma Cheri or even Papa Wolf’s old girlfriend Elizabeth.

*****

*****

Wolfram rubbed vigorously at his hair with a once-white towel as he paced up and down the bath hall. His feet were bare and they slapped unhappily against the water covered tiles.

The word “Wimp” had been muttered so many times with so many intonations that it hardly knew what to think of itself.

What had the wimp been thinking anyway? But more importantly, what had he been thinking… He must have known sometime before he started all this that it was a stupid stupid plan. But Yuuri had come back, looking all innocent and delicious and denying none of his more physical advances and he had lost all reason. Was he really so ruled by his emotions? Wolfram couldn’t believe that was true. With his brilliant military mind, really. If Gwendal ever let him a mere stone’s throw from a decent battle he’d be sure to show everyone how formidable he could be…

His untapped military genius aside, it still irked him that his irritatingly good looks had no sway in his reluctant fiance's decisions.

Wolfram the Beautiful.

How he hated that name! The way it made his troops snicker when his back was turned and gave anyone above his rank the false notion that they could flirt with him. When he had made sergeant, Wolfram had insisted on deporting half his troops to the borderlands for a year as punishment for inappropriate treatment of their commanding officer. There were only so many whistles and whispers he could handle before Gisela got on his case about the number of burn injuries in the infirmary.

But were his looks still going by unnoticed? Despite the more public humiliation at dinner, Yuuri had been remarkably receptive for most of the day. And while the concept of ‘I give you wine, you drink it’ seemed simple to him, it could have just been one of those things that his wimp was
obliviuous to.

Though the path of blind optimism was painfully seductive, the wine incident had shaken his confidence. Giving his hair one final scrub with the towel, he made his way over to a mirror on the opposite wall and peered skeptically at his reflection. Much to his chagrin, his hair and most of his face was still a light shade of pink, as were a few trails down his chest where the wine had snuck through his collar and beneath his cravat. Wolfram growled out a few obscenities and tied the towel around his waist before leaving the main part of the bath hall to pillage the old mahogany chest his mother had filled with all sorts of personal cleaning products in search of something useful.

After safely removing his mothers more floral items, Wolfram identified the most potent cleaning products and carried them back into the bath hall. He went through two bars of soap and a sticky mixture of smelled like sugar and honey that he rubbed on his face until he was sure that he had done more skin removal than skin cleaning before he was satisfied. His hair was another story, and after more than an hour of washing still looked the color of Greta’s bedroom in places. In the end he settled for combing it in such a way that the pinker parts were less visible.

Before he left, he took one last look at himself. All this time spent in the bath hall, so many minutes to brood over what to say to Yuuri and he still had no idea how he was supposed to act around him- - If he should just go back to how things used to be, when the only touches he could revel in were accidental and he didn’t push for anything more, or if he should continue testing the boundaries of what his fiance was willing to offer. Or was there an in between? Could he show Yuuri that he was eager for a change in their relationship without over doing it?

Simply yelling at his unfortunately slow fiance until the dull thud of realization collided between his eardrums was out of the question. It was hard, because Yuuri deserved it so often, but his vocal chords were still a bit sore from when he’d given the wimp a sound verbal lashing in the fountain. Also, he needed to be on his most amicable behavior if he had any hope of salvaging a delectable evening. Also, historically speaking, yelling didn’t seem to get him anything lately. Apparently he wasn’t as cute as he once had been…

He would just have to work all that much harder.

As he ran through the possible positive outcomes of his evening he couldn’t stop the embarrassingly giddy laugh from bubbling up inside him.

In a flash of shock he was suddenly aware of the time. The laughter stopped. How long had he been in here? Was Yuuri already asleep?

Wolfram still wasn’t sure what he was going to do when he got back his room, their room, but he knew he needed to get there as soon as possible. He ran into the mid-chamber and threw on some dry pants that may or may not have belonged to him as well as a white shirt of equally dubious origins. It didn’t matter what he was wearing so long as it was clean, he reasoned, as he rushed down the empty halls. If things went well he wouldn’t be wearing anything…

A loud crack as he rushed by his daughter’s room stopped him.

Immediately and intensely worried, he threw open the door to find Greta half-way on her bed with her head dangling upside down in the air and her right hand still holding the sword he had been suckered into buying her. The small potted plant on her night-stand was lying in a broken pile on the floor, and Greta looked like she was about to cry and laugh at the same time.

“Greta, WHAT---“
“I’m sorry!” She sniffled, righting herself “I woke up and I couldn’t get back to sleep and—“

“So you decided to jump on your bed with a weapon?” In a few steps he was by her side and had taken the sword. “This is NOT a toy!”

Greta pouted dramatically and let her eyes well up. “I know it’s not a toy! I just wanted to be tired so I could sleep and then get up early now that Yuuri’s come back and I really didn’t mean to break the plant but it just happened and please don’t take it away because it’s really my very favorite present from Papa Wolf and I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen so please please don’t take it!”

The anger in him deflated, but the worry remained. He sighed and sat down on her bed. “I won’t take it away, but just promise you won’t jump around with it when you should be sleeping… or inside the castle at all.”

Greta beamed and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you thank you! You’re the best Papa ever!”

Wolfram knew that he shouldn’t give in all the time, but she was so good at being adorable, and she had been so sad when Yuuri was gone that he had gotten used to doing anything to make her smile. As happy as her praise made him, he couldn’t help but tease her about its inaccuracy, “Really? What about Yuuri?”

“You’re both the best!”

He smiled at her. “Of course.”

“Will you tell me a story?”

“It’s late…”

“What about the fox story? Did you ever remember the end?”

Wolfram was regretting ever telling her that. She brought it up almost every night. “No. Now, Greta, it’s very late and both of us need to go to sleep.”

“Now that Yuuri’s back are you going to wear the pink one?”

His eyes bulged. “What?”

“You know, the pink night dress that grandma Cheri gave you. You know, she gave me a matching one so now the next time we all sleep together we can match! Won’t Yuuri think it’s cute!”

Wolfram didn’t know where to begin. “Um… I’m sure he’ll think you’re cute… Have you ever called her grandma? Because I don’t really think Mother would like it.” Taking advantage of her smaller size, he scooped her up and trapped her beneath the covers, firmly tucking in the edges so she wouldn’t have any thoughts about getting up again any time soon.

Greta yawned, and squirmed a little, but still snuggled back into the mattress with droopy eyes. “But I liked the pink one…” She yawned again and curled over on her side towards where he was sitting on her bed. “Papa Wolf looks so cute in pink…” Then her eyes closed.

The warm Greta-feeling swelled inside him and he felt so happy that Yuuri had adopted her. It was probably the best decision the wimp had ever made. So much of his attention had been focused on the little girl since Yuuri left, and even before then. It was surprising, because he had spent much
of his earlier years disliking children, but there was just so much that was special about his daughter, this little human that made everything right in a world of wrong. And every time he had to make a notch in the wall when she grew just that little bit taller he wanted to stop the time that flew by so quickly.

He watched her sleep for a while and let the anxiety from the day dissolve, then he kissed her forehead and cleaned up the pot so that when she woke up she wouldn’t step on any of the shattered porcelain. Wolfram was glad that he had gotten this moment to calm down. If he had just rushed in, things with Yuuri could have gone badly.

With a clear head he could see that it would be futile to try anything as forward as he had at dinner. Yuuri had just gotten back and was so easily overwhelmed. No. He would save what dignity remained and be as subtle as possible. Unless of course Yuuri was very obvious about feeling otherwise.

Now that the mission was clear and resolute, he now had to execute it with a soldierly perfection. But first he was off to Mother’s room to borrow something suitably pink to wear while doing it.
Yuuri prepared himself for the worst as he tentatively pulled open his bedroom door. During his
dreary trudge back to his room, he had practiced several very nice apologies in his head, and as a
bonus precaution he had brought some food from the feast back to the room with him. It had struck
him, as he kept glancing over at the empty chair to his right, that Wolfram probably hadn’t eaten
anything, and having to deal with a hungry Wolfram on top of an offended Wolfram was
something he didn’t think he had the strength to do after such a long day.

Poking his head in the door with an apologetic smile plastered to his face, he was a little
disappointed to find the room empty. Great. Now he was even more worried. However, in all
likelihood Wolfram had just gone to sleep in his room. After all, he had been spending more and
more nights there before because of the nightmares… A wave of guilt flooded his chest.

No, he had to hope that Wolfram was off blowing off steam or setting the castle on fire or doing
whatever it was Wolfram did when he was in one of his moods and stormed off. Besides, he had
said something about talking to him tonight so he would probably be back soon.

It was such a pain! The bed looked so comfortable. All he wanted to do was throw off his shoes
and slide beneath the covers. Yuuri set the tray of food on the dresser near the door and considered
just going to bed.

While he stood there, fighting the urge to sleep, he had a chance to take in the room. Though it was
clear the maids had been in to tidy things up, there were several things that seemed out of place.
For one thing, the large pile of rectangles covered in a sheet at the far side of the room near the
windows. Knowing Wolfram, they were probably canvases and he was a little annoyed that his
room had become a storage facility in his absence.

Wolfram’s sword was propped up against the dresser, as was another sword he hadn’t seen before.
He picked it up and was immediately surprised by how light it was. Upon closer examination the
hilt had Anissina’s seal engraved in it so he quickly put it back and stepped away. What was
Wolfram doing with something Anissina had made?

Since he was going to be waiting for a while, Yuuri decided to change for bed, so he opened the
drawer that usually held his Shin Makoku pajamas and was surprised to not only find them
missing, but the drawer full of those little white things that Wolfram and Gwendal wore around
their necks. What had Gunter called them? Not a carrot… Cravat! Why was his drawer half full of
impeccably folded cravats? There were also a few shirts in there he recognized as Wolfram’s.

The next drawer was full of dark blue, as was the next, and Yuuri was getting tired of the ‘where-
are-my-pajamas’ game. The bottom drawer farthest from the door was stuck tight, and Yuuri spent
a few minuets wiggling it before it jumped open with a crack of neglect. Inside were not only his
pajamas but the pink… thing… Wolfram insisted upon wearing to bed.

Well, at least he had found them, he thought, as he pulled out the comfortable blue cotton
garments. When he unfolded them a few pictures fluttered to the ground. Odd, mostly because he
was sure there were no cameras in Shin Makoku. But mind boggling once he saw that they were of
him! Where had Wolfram… but then he remembered who his mother was, and that these pictures
were from one of the photo albums at the house that he had had to wrestle from Wolfram when his
mother had brought them out while they were on Earth, and now it didn’t seem all that strange.
One was a picture of him when he was younger… and wearing something unfortunately frilly, and
the other one was more recent, from baseball practice. Both were in nearly perfect condition and
Yuuri wondered how Wolfram had gotten them back here without a drop of water.

Not wanting to think about why Wolfram had them, he tried to figure out where he could put them back in the drawer where Wolfram wouldn’t think he'd discovered them while he was getting his pajamas. Since he figured Wolfram would probably look for his own night things later, he slid the pictures into one of the bearbee hats that also occupied the drawer.

Yuuri slid the drawer shut and had just finished changing when he heard the doorknob turn. Immediately he jumped away from the dresser, feeling slightly ashamed of going through so many of Wolfram’s things. But it was Wolfram’s fault for moving everything in here, so… he had no right to get mad. Yuuri could feel the panic rising. When did Wolfram ever need a good reason to get mad? He was done for!

Yuuri had to act quickly, a preemptive strike to whatever lecture Wolfram had spent all this time thinking up. “Wolfram, I’m so sorry about--- What in the world is that!”

Wolfram colored and hesitated in the doorway. He was wearing the most… unclothed… piece of clothing he had ever seen on the blond. It was a pink robe, close in hue to what he usually wore to bed, but much much shorter and only kept on with a single tie around the smallest part of his waist. That, and the way the fabric hung loosely from his chest, leaving a thin line of skin almost down to the tie that held the skimpy thing together gave the whole thing an unshakable air of femininity.

“It’s a robe.”

“I can…um… see that.” Yuuri swallowed nervously. “Is it new?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.” This was bad. He couldn’t remember what he was going to say and he was very distracted by Wolfram’s new… robe. “Um…”

“Look, I only wore it to come back from the bath--“

“No! Don’t apologize! It’s …um… nice. Pink’s your color, right?” Ohh please let flattery work! Yuuri really didn’t want to argue tonight.

“Really? You think so?” His face lit up the same way it had during the ride back from the temple this morning. Wolfram moved into the room and closed the door behind him, never turning his back on Yuuri.

Thank goodness! Everything would probably go smoothly now. “Yeah,” he grinned and remembered the food. “Ohh Wolfram, I brought you some dinner in case you didn’t get a chance to eat… and there was plenty there… so…”

“For me?” Wolfram's eyes jumped between the tray on the dresser and Yuuri.

“Of course! What kind of person would I be if I let you starve after making such a big mistake at dinner…”

Wolfram just stared at him.

What? The food he had brought back for Wolfram had been his favorites, plus even some of the dessert that Conrad had mentioned that Wolfram had liked as a child. “Well, you really should eat some of it. I really liked this dessert, the fluffy cream stuff is great!” For emphasis he took a small swipe of it with his finger and popped it in his mouth. “Mmm, delicious!”
Wolfram must have been starving because his knees went out and he had to grab the dresser for support.

“Wolfram!” He rushed forward to help steady him. “Are you alright? See, you DO need to eat something! Come sit on the bed and I’ll bring the tray over to you.”

Yuuri congratulated himself on having the foresight to bring the food back for Wolfram. The blond would have been in poor shape if Yuuri hadn’t thought to bring anything. Even once he was seated on the bed and Yuuri brought the tray over to sit between them, Wolfram still looked completely dazed. Not only that, but his cheeks were flush. He had probably spent too long in the hot bath. Yuuri put a hand on Wolfram’s shoulder to shake him lightly back into reality.

“Come on, you have to eat something!” He gave his best smile of encouragement, but Wolfram continued to look at him like he had grown an extra head. Yuuri sighed in frustration and, picking up the spork, stabbed the closest bite-sized bit of food, which happened to be a strawberry. “Look, if you’re going to be difficult I’ll just have to force-feed you,” he preached, before pointing the spork at Wolfram’s face.

Silence stretched heavily across the room, and Yuuri wondered if he had done something wrong…”Not that I don’t think you’re perfectly capable of eating on your own, it’s just you’re not really doing anything and it’s a little nerve wracking because—“

In a fluid motion Wolfram met his gaze and swooped forward to take the red berry into his mouth, biting it delicately in half and leaving the green end attached to the spork in Yuuri’s hand. When Wolfram licked his lips there was a tickle in the back of Yuuri’s mind that said this whole situation was a little strange.

Quickly putting the spork back on the tray, he moved the whole thing over into Wolfram’s lap. “There, not so hard. Eat up!” He could feel his face turning red, though he didn’t know quite why.

Wolfram smirked at him and picked up the spork.

Well, at least he was eating.

Yuuri couldn’t help but smile as he watched his friend eat. He had never seen Wolfram this happy for so much of a day, and knowing that he was the cause of it made Yuuri feel very pleased with himself.

Even though Wolfram seemed sated for the night, Yuuri decided to finish apologizing. Besides, if he didn’t he was sure it would come back to haunt him in their next argument. “Wolfram…”

Wolfram looked up. He had been ignoring most of the food on the tray but had almost finished the dessert, even going so far as to wipe the remaining fluff from the bottom of the plate and eat it off his finger. The sugar coated digit was still trapped between his lips as he answered. “hnn?”

“I just wanted to make sure you knew that I was sorry about what happened… Gunter explained the tradition to me afterward, and I didn’t mean to do anything to upset you!”

Moving the tray from his lap and setting it on the bed to his right, the side farthest from Yuuri, Wolfram smiled back at him. “Don’t worry about it, you’re naivete is one of your most charming qualities.” Wolfram scooted closer to him, leaning his weight on his left arm in such a way that it caused the thin fabric of his robe to shift and fall off of that shoulder.

Yuuri swallowed and laughed nervously. “Really?” That robe really was distracting. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen Wolfram naked lots of times in the bath, but this…thing… made looking at him feel
“Definitely.” Wolfram purred, leaning closer.

Yuuri couldn’t take it anymore, “This doesn’t seem to fit you. You should think about getting a new one.” He stammered, and reached over to pull the silk back over Wolfram’s exposed shoulder. While doing so he noticed how hot Wolfram’s skin felt. Of course! He has spent too much time in the bath. “Wolfram! You’re burning up!” Yuuri used his left hand to feel Wolfram’s forehead, afraid if he let go with his right the fabric would slip again.

Wolfram fell forward a little and put his right hand on Yuuri’s chest to steady himself.

Yuuri held him tighter, worried he might collapse. Wolfram must really be sick! He wondered if he would be safe to leave here while he went to find Gisela. Wolfram looked like he could faint any minute. His eyes were half closed and his cheeks were red and he seemed to be having trouble breathing. Wolfram’s fingers tightened against his pajamas and his face had gotten even closer to his. So close that he could feel Wolfram’s breath against his face. It smelled sweet, like the dessert. Wolfram’s closeness made him feel dizzy and Yuuri wondered if Wolfram might be contagious.

“Yuuri…” Wolfram whispered.

And then Yuuri could feel his breath closer, the heat radiating from Wolfram’s skin closer, and something clicked.

Yuuri realized that this was horribly, horribly wrong.

He panicked, his entire body frozen in an intense fear that had every hair on his body standing on end. Looking down over his nose he could see Wolfram’s eyelashes meld into one blur as they fluttered closed just centimeters from his own. The hot breath on his mouth was so close that he could taste the strawberry dessert that Wolfram had been eating. There was a sharp buzzing in his ears that hummed from the tension that was pumping impossibly fast through every one of his veins. Yuuri couldn’t believe this was happening!

What was he going to do? What was he going to do? What was he going to do? His mind was stuck. He was somehow short-circuited. Broken. And it was all Wolfram’s fault.

But he couldn’t make himself move. No matter how much he knew he did not want this to happen, some part of him knew that Wolfram did. And wasn’t doing whatever made Wolfram happy the fate that he had resigned himself to?

Yuuri forced his eyes shut and wished desperately that he was somewhere else.

*****

*****

Wolfram could only feel half of his body, but what he could feel was more alive than it ever had been before. His right hand, where he could feel the heat of Yuuri’s body through the cotton of his pajamas, burned. Through that hand, he could feel Yuuri’s heart beating fiercely and his body shaking. Or was it his body that was shaking?

Everywhere that Yuuri touched him hummed with excitement, with want. Because he wanted this. In this moment he wanted this more than anything. He wanted the hand that rested on his shoulder to hold him tighter, until his skin buckled with the pressure of it. He wanted the palm on his forehead to slide down, to cradle his neck until he could feel the fingers twist between locks of hair. But he desperately needed for Yuuri to move the millimeter forward that would finish it.
He was floating outside himself, he could see his body through the blackness of his eyelids in Yuuri’s arms, losing himself in the breath on his lips. It went between his lips, inside him, but only to be sucked back out by Yuuri’s panted inhalation. In and out, bringing his quivering body closer only to back away again when the heat on his lips intensified as he almost almost touched him.

A part of him was still afraid, terrified, that Yuuri didn’t want this, still didn’t want him the way he needed to be wanted. But he was impatient, and moved forward until their lips touched. He only barely kept from moaning, the shock of it was so intense. Neither of them moved, but he could feel Yuuri’s bottom lip trapped between his parted mouth, only barely touching. Even through that light touch he could imagine how soft they would be. The way that Yuuri’s lips would meld against his if either one of them were to move, to just close their mouths that little bit.

His head felt so light, like he really might pass out. He was panting now, breath stolen from him by the air that Yuuri pushed and retracted from his lungs. Drowning him.

His thoughts were a garbled mantra, please want this. please move. please… please… please If the syllables wouldn’t have stolen the kiss, he might have even said the word allowed, in a choked gasp of a plea straight from his heart.

But no matter how the time stretched, no matter how much his body cried for it, nothing happened. Long painful seconds of nothing.

He opened his eyes and pulled back just enough to see Yuuri’s face. As he moved away his top lip slid against Yuuri’s bottom and the electricity brought from that simple sensation made the retreat excruciating.

But not nearly as excruciating as the look on his fiance's face.

So he pushed him. He pushed him so hard that Yuuri fell backwards onto the bed and Wolfram propelled himself up and away from him. As far away as he could get. He stumbled a little, as his feet remembered that they were attached to his body, and felt his hip crash into the dresser. He brought his arms out to support himself, elbow to wrist, on the solid wooden furniture. His legs felt like jelly and his body spun in a vertigo that made him nauseous.

Damn that WIMP!

He wanted to scream, and maybe he did because his throat felt raw. His nostrils curled at the sent of smoldering oak and he could feel his arms sinking into the wood beneath them. And he had never felt more humiliated.

*****

*****

Yuuri didn’t know what to think. He had almost made up his mind to just move forward and get it over with when Wolfram went crazy and shoved him backwards onto the bed.

It had been an odd feeling. Mostly because their ‘not-kiss’ hadn’t been nearly as disgusting as he thought kissing another boy would have to be like. He had been curious, and never kissed anyone before, and so much of him had wondered what harm could come from just trying it out. It wasn’t as if his eyes were open or anything and Wolfram felt and smelled so much like he thought a girl should feel and smell like; and his breath had been so warm. If his temperamental companion hadn’t become randomly violent he might have actually moved… eventually.

As soon as his eyes opened, he started to remember how his universe worked and the curiosity
slipped away.

Wolfram had his back to him and was leaning against the dresser. Smoke was rising from the innocent furniture and Yuuri wondered if they would have to buy another new one. When he sat up he noticed that Wolfram really shouldn’t be bending over in that robe, especially when he had his back to him, a few centimeters more and well…So he quickly focused on a piece of carpet down between his knees.

It wasn’t fair! Things had been going so well until Wolfram tried to kiss him. Yuuri had hoped they would be able to go to sleep without fighting. Why did Wolfram have to be so difficult?!

“Wolfram—“

“QUIET WIMP!” Wolfram looked up to glare at Yuuri through his reflection in the mirror that sat at eye level above the dresser.

Yuuri had forgotten about avoiding almost-naked-Wolfram-backside and made eye contact through the glass. What he saw reminded his gut that he was feeling very very guilty. Why was Wolfram so… affected by something like this? He looked so… hurt in the reflection, his body shaking with fury and sad eyes framed by the brilliant red his face had taken on.

How did he always manage to hurt Wolfram?

He felt so terrible, and he tried to think of something he could do to make it better.

“Stop it.” Wolfram croaked out.

Yuuri snapped out of his own thoughts, “What?”

Turning to face Yuuri, Wolfram stood up straight to glare down at him, arms shaking and fists tight. “Stop looking at me like that!”

His mind reeled, “Looking at you like what? Look… I’m sorry, Alright? I’m so sorry… Can’t--”

“No. Yuuri.” He crossed the few steps between them and grabbed Yuuri painfully at the shoulders, “You do NOT get to look at me like that!”

Yuuri was so guilty, so ashamed, that he didn’t mind the fingers that clawed his skin through the cotton. He looked up into Wolfram’s eyes and couldn’t help being just a little afraid of what might happen to him. “Like what, Wolfram—“

“You do NOT get to pity me! And don’t look at me like I’m going to hit you either!” Wolfram shook him for emphasis, “We were ---! You trusted me. Do you think so little of me now?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m fine now. Don’t you understand that?” Wolfram tried to laugh for emphasis, but it came out strange and only made Yuuri more worried. “I don’t need you to take care of me… To lie to me.”

Now it was Yuuri’s turn to be angry. He had never lied to Wolfram. “What are you talking about, I haven’t—“

“Ohh no? Then you want this?” He let his eyes almost close and leaned forward.

Yuuri flinched.
“I knew it!” Wolfram growled and pushed him a little, not enough to push his back to the mattress but enough that Yuuri still felt the rejection.

“What?! What do you want?! I’m not fighting with you! I don’t want to fight with you!” Yuuri shouted, clenching his own fists as he watched Wolfram pace angrily in front of him.

“So that’s it, is it?” Wolfram was gesturing dramatically and growling half to himself. “Poor pathetic Wolfram can’t handle it when he doesn’t get what he wants, better just give in!”

“No!”

“Then what?” He stopped pacing. “Still feeling guilty?”

Yuuri tried to stop the flush he felt creeping up his neck.

“Damn it, Yuuri!” Wolfram covered his face with his hands, his words were muffled, but still audible. “I thought---- You made me think---- And I---” He moaned, “Ohh Gods! In front of everyone … In front of Gwendal I…” A hand fell from his face and he walked backwards until he could support himself with one arm on the dresser.

“I’m sorry…”

“Just…” Wolfram removed his hand from his face and showed Yuuri his palm, “Stop.”

Yuuri didn’t know what to do. Every nerve in his body screamed at him to apologize more, but now Wolfram didn’t even want him to do that. It was so frustrating. “It’s not like I wanted---“ “No, Yuuri. It’s not like you wanted anything from me—“

Yuuri could almost hear Wolfram’s vocal chords tearing.

“Of course I do! You’re my friend and I wanted you to forgive me for what I let happen to you!” He lowered his head, unable even to look at Wolfram, the guilt was so heavy. “I just wanted to make sure you didn’t hate me.” Yuuri felt the bed dip next to him.

After an uncomfortable silence, Wolfram put an arm around his shoulder, “You really are stupid if you think I could ever hate you.”

“But I let you… if I had paid more attention… and you had been having all those nightmares…“

“If I remember correctly, you also saved me.”

Yuuri blushed, “Well, yeah what else could I do?”

Wolfram was quiet for a while, “You could have realized that you were just feeling guilty and not… said…”

“What?”

“Never mind, Weller probably just made it up…” Wolfram removed his arm from Yuuri’s shoulder to fiddle with a renegade string on the hem of his robe.

A bolt of panic slid down his spine, “What? Conrad?’’

“He was just trying to cheer me up, probably would have said anything… Just don’t follow him on that quality would you?”
“Hey!” Yuuri was pretty sure he knew what Wolfram was talking about, he had spent so much time worrying about it, it was hard not to pick up on it. “Conrad wasn’t lying.” He had to look away, but fought the desire to cover his face with his arms as protection from the impending fire.

Wolfram stood up. “I wish he had been…”

“I don’t understand!” Yuuri yelled up at him, glaring angrily up into Wolfram’s face “Isn’t it what you want from me?”

He expected Wolfram to get even angrier, to set the bed on fire, or start throwing books around, but what actually happened was far worse. A kaleidoscope of emotions whirled on the pale face before him before Wolfram turned on his heel and bent over to pull his night things out of a drawer.

Yuuri had to look away lest he be distracted while the other boy unknowingly displayed himself. It just wasn’t fair! How did a guy get to have such a nice butt? He was sure his butt wasn’t nearly so nice…

The distraction quickly vanished as Wolfram moved behind the folding screen.

A moment later, Wolfram had changed into a pair of grey pajamas. Yuuri blushed madly and pretended he had been distracted by a different train of thought entirely.

Wolfram had calmed down a little by the time he spoke, “What I want I have no more delusions about receiving any time this decade…”

“That’s not fair Wolfram! It’s just, you know, we’re both boys—“

Wolfram groaned, “Not this again…”

At a loss, Yuuri pouted.

Then Wolfram forced the left side of his mouth up into a weak smirk, “At least you’re acting like you’re usual wimpy self again.”

“I’m not a WIMP!”

Wolfram chuckled lightly, “I missed that.”

Yuuri beamed, “I did too.”

Thank goodness! The storm had passed, now maybe he could get some sleep. Yuuri yawned widely, bringing up a hand to cover his mouth.

Wolfram seemed to be back to normal, or rather, back to ‘calm-Wolfram’. He sighed, walking around to the other side of the bed to slide beneath the covers.

“Yay! Time for sleep! It’s been such a long day.” Yuuri followed Wolfram’s example and jumped under the sheets.

Wolfram threw a pillow at him and waved out the oil lamp.

Yuuri pouted and took the pillow off his face to wrap his arms around it. The pillows in Shin Makoku were so fluffy. Probably because they were made of feathers instead of the stiff rice-like stuff his pillows at home were filled with.

This pillow smelled like Wolfram.
As he clutched it, Yuuri couldn’t help but replay the events of the evening in his head. It struck him that even after all the fuss Wolfram had made before about wanting to get married, Yuuri hadn’t really understood what he had meant. At first he had thought that everyone in Shin Makoku was just very confused about the concept of marriage. And that people of the same sex got married because they were such good friends, or it made sense for political reasons and it wasn’t necessarily because of any physical or sexual attraction.

The idea that a person as physically attractive as Wolfram could find him attractive was completely foreign. At school he had never been very popular with girls. He never kept up with the latest hair trends or unbuttoned the collar of his uniform, and he had never gotten a single letter in his locker. But Wolfram… He was sure if Wolfram ever went to his school he’d get three home made lunches a day and would have a fan club by the end of the week.

After a few minutes, all Yuuri could come up with was the weird cultural fetish everyone here had for black hair and eyes. That was all it had to be.

Yuuri was surprised by how disappointed that thought made him.

*****

*****

Wolfram shifted hopelessly in an attempt to find a comfortable position. With Yuuri back he was sure to spend at least an hour trying to sleep as parts of his anatomy were very happy about the warm Yuuri presence to his left. It was extremely annoying and he wished that he had taken care of it in the bath. Thankfully, Yuuri was impossibly innocent and hadn’t noticed a thing, though Wolfram had managed to turn away when it was a real problem.

He distracted himself by thinking about how this whole misunderstanding was entirely Yuuri’s fault.

Though, in truth, Wolfram was more annoyed at himself for forgetting after all this time how ridiculous and immature his fiance was. He was still kicking himself for thinking that Yuuri was actually interested. Anissina would have a field day tomorrow, not to mention that he had probably lost a good amount of respect from Gwendal. And the gossip...

He shuddered and tried not to think about it.

After a few minutes he had come up with a new rule for himself: Never again would he try anything physical with Yuuri until he was absolutely positive it would be well received. It might take years, but he was sure it would be worth the wait. Having the affection of someone like Yuuri was the best thing that could happen to anyone, and Wolfram was determined to have it.

A long time ago he had promised himself he wouldn’t become what everyone expected of him—Beautiful, but… “loose” like his mother. He knew that Mother always loved the men she was with, but also knew that she was blind when they didn’t feel the same way about her. She had been left so many times because of the type of person her physique attracted, and he was determined not to suffer the same fate.

Wolfram was sure that if Yuuri ever were to love him it would be forever. And Wolfram desperately wanted that, and only wanted it from his wimp.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Wolfram rolled over to look at his fiance.

Now that his eyes had adjusted to the dark, he could see Yuuri’s profile illuminated by the moon
outside their window. It certainly didn’t help his new resolution that Yuuri was completely edible, not to mention absolutely endearing on the days when he didn’t act like a cheating wimp.

Wolfram smiled and let the memory of the day’s ‘not-kiss’ shiver over him. After almost tasting success it would be even harder to hold himself back in the future. He chewed his bottom lip as a painful reminder not to indulge in such thoughts, otherwise he would be up all night.

It would be best to get a good night’s rest so that he would be completely awake the following day to enjoy Yuuri’s return and the tortuously platonic companionship it entailed. As eager as he was for more, now that Yuuri was back in his life, Wolfram felt much more prepared wait.

But when the day came that Yuuri was at all interested, Wolfram vowed that he would try anything and everything to win him. Heart, mind… and body.

* * *

The next morning, Wolfram woke up in an empty bed with the sun on his face.

Immediately furious, he ripped the covers from where they had become twisted around his waist and jumped out of bed, sending a piece of paper fluttering to the floor across the room. Distracted, he picked it up.

Wolfram smiled despite his irritation at being left behind. Yuuri’s handwriting was adorable, and it was obvious he hadn’t been practicing their writing system while he was on Earth. His fiance had obviously given up because half the words were crossed out or misspelled.

Even more endearing was that the handwriting changed halfway down the page to the equally adorable but much more elegant writing of his daughter.

Good morning Papa!

I tried to wake you up but Yuuri said he didn’t think you slept much and you were snoring so loud that I thought you wouldn’t be too mad. We both wanted you to come on a picnic with us near the big tree on the hill. You know the one right? Where I climbed too high and you had to come up after me, but then we had fun watching the birds? That one. I convinced Gwendal to let us go play. We have lots of sandwiches so come help us eat them as soon as you can! If you don’t Yuuri will get fat.

Love,
Greta &
Yuuri

Wolfram decided then and there that it was the best letter he had ever received. The anger melted and he hurried off to get dressed.

*****

*****
Murata Ken hummed lightly to himself as he walked along the winding dirt road away from Shinou's Temple. It was a beautiful day, and since the peace ushered in by Shibuya would only last so long, he felt he should enjoy the luxury of walking around without a protective entourage while he still could. In fact, he was mildly surprised that nothing more serious had happened in their absence.

Still, he knew it was hardly luck that the empire had remained. And it was an empire, or the beginnings of one, which only made the surrounding countries that much more nervous. The continuing peace was due in large part to the efforts of Sir Voltaire who, as he had come to understand through his briefings from Ulrike, had kept the borders very well maintained with the delicate balance of just enough troops for the Kingdom to appear... virile, but not enough to be particularly menacing.

The other part was Shibuya’s miraculous ability to coax actual friendships out of the rulers of most of the more powerful surrounding nations. Saving said nations from impending doom only twelve months previous also did not hurt their allegiances. Neither did his childish nature, which lured the stupider trouble-makers into a false sense of security.

Probably the best move Sir Voltaire made was taking almost nine months to even acknowledge Yuuri’s absence outside Blood Pledge Castle. Of course there had been rumors, but nothing solid enough to give anyone the confidence to stand on.

There was no way to know exactly what would happen, but Murata had been around for much longer than most, and history had a tendency to repeat itself. The rise of a new nation into the forefront of politics tended to have the messy side effect of bloodshed.

He would just have to wait patiently for the next game to start.

Further along the road ahead, Murata noticed another figure walking towards him. Even with the aid of his glasses it took another minute of walking for him to recognize the hurried navy blue figure of Sir Belefield. Having only just passed Shibuya and Greta having a picnic a few minutes ago, he didn’t need to guess where he was hurrying to.

Murata grinned.

Sir Belefield was so much fun to tease, especially when his mind was elsewhere as he had a tendency to be more… honest in his subtler gestures. It was also just plain fun to seem him flustered, as the expression had almost never graced the face of Shinou, whom the young man so closely resembled. If the soldier’s obsession with Shibuya wasn’t so embedded, Murata might have attempted something a little more fun with the boy.

As it was, Murata wasn’t one to put energy into anything pointless, so he just pleased himself by looking.

Harmless lechery aside, he owed Sir Belefield a favor or two, as Murata's Great Plan had placed him first on the probable casualty list. So Murata smiled and politely blocked his way when Sir Belefield tried to pass.

*****

*****

Wolfram made a mental note to talk to Gwendal about the number of roads to the palace. Of course, he could have just stepped onto the grass and walked around the impending uncomfortable situation by a radius of several yards, but that would have been hardly proper. So he sighed,
straightened his shoulders, and hoped that he would be allowed to pass with a brief nod and a
comment about the weather.

“Sir Belefield, lovely weather we’re having today.”

Wolfram shuddered. Was the Sage leering at him? Probably just some strange Earth mannerism.
“Indeed.”

When Wolfram tried to walk past him, the Sage side stepped with him so he was still directly
blocking Wolfram’s path. If the road block had moved without the maddening grin plastered to his
face, Wolfram might have made an effort to hide his discontent.

“If you’ll excuse me—“

“Don’t worry, I won’t keep you from Shibuya too long.” He waved a hand to his right, a gesture
Wolfram took to mean he would be allowed to pass. Well, it wasn’t so much that he had been
wrong but that the Great Sage turned to walk next to him. “We’ll head in that direction.”

A hand that didn’t belong to him found its way to Wolfram’s back and he almost jumped for
goodness sakes. He considered himself a trained solder but it wasn’t his fault if the Great Sage was
innately sneaky. When he stopped to ponder the situation, the hand pushed him forward so he fell
into step next to his self appointed companion. Any lower and Wolfram would have been forced to
say something, but he did his best to ignore it. “Your Grace—“

The Sage hushed him, “Please, no need to be so formal, ‘Murata’ isn’t that hard to pronounce.”

Wolfram bristled. This whole situation was very uncomfortable and he wished for the millionth
time that he had no memories whatsoever regarding what the Sage’s past self and Shinou got
around to when they were alone. Especially in libraries… “Your Grace—“

“Fine. Be difficult.” The Sage chuckled, “I suppose it’s part of your charm.”

“Excuse me?!” This was getting ridiculous.

“Don’t tell me you’re that uptight? I’m only being playful.” His companion purred.

It sparked a memory, almost painful in its clarity:

He was in the throne room, but everything was different, the tapestries seemed much newer, and
the door had just closed behind the last dignitary scheduled to see him for the day. They had been
having an argument. The Sage had been teasing him all day, but they had been equally devoid of
privacy. A voice that wasn’t his scolded the Great Sage’s past self, who was standing to his right.

Then…

“I’m only being playful.”

The words had more irony than the lighthearted ones now spoken to him, but they were the same.

Even more annoying than the fact that he had all these inappropriate memories, was that that was
all they were. Inappropriate. Nothing remotely useful like battle experience, or even some lost
peace of history. Just hours of the most… intimate… useless… embarrassing…

“Something wrong?”
“No.” He could feel the eyes boring into his face, but he refused to look.

Seconds dragged. “I see…”

Wolfram chose to ignore the implication of the Sage’s tone. The following laughter, however, was more than he could bear. “I’m sure it’s all your fault anyway.” He growled under his breath.

The laughter only increased. “That’s so like him.”

Wolfram was incredulous. There was no way that the Sage could have read his mind. “How DARE you!” he roared. As if almost killing him wasn’t enough, the Sage had somehow devised away to continue torturing him.

The Sage was still laughing. “Just consider it an early wedding present, a few more tricks up your sleeve to win poor Shibuya.”

Sparks fluttered from his fingertips, “So this IS your doing!”

The Sage managed to scrape together some self control and sat up, “Hardly.”

Considering that Gwendal would dig him an early grave, brother or no, if he harmed their political ace-up-the-sleeve, he extinguished the mounting flames and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring hatefully down at the Sage. “I believe I’m owed an explanation.”

“So you expect me to believe that Shinou, the all powerful thearch, decided that the appropriate compensation for possessing me over a period of weeks, during which time he used my body for all sorts of interesting ‘errands’, was a detailed memory of his sexual escapades.”

“Don’t take things too far, most of the possession business wasn’t really Shinou anyway, so you should be thankful for his generosity.” The Sage was still looking at him like he expected Wolfram to take this nonsense seriously.

He snorted.

The Sage laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his head, a gesture Wolfram abhorred to see performed by the Sage because it reminded him so much of Yuuri, “I suppose I should apologize for that business, too.”

“Don’t bother. It was what had to be done.” Wolfram flicked a speck of dirt off of his pants, “Every soldier is prepared to give up his life for the sake of his country.”

The Sage put a hand on his shoulder, “But the lucky ones die old in their beds.”

Wolfram ignored the touch and instead focused on the breeze running through his hair.

“Aren’t you interested in my compensation?”
“No.” A futile statement he knew, but there was always hope.

“No.” A futile statement he knew, but there was always hope. “Really? I would think that more knowledge about Japanese… courtship would be very useful to your agenda.”

He balked, “The feelings of my fiance are hardly an ‘agenda’, any more than they are any of your business!” The jealousy he felt about the Sage’s constant proximity to Yuuri, especially on Earth, re-surged; and he glared at the Sage.

“Ohh stop that, the jealousy thing gets so tedious.” The Sage waved a dismissive hand in his direction. “I’m going to inform you whether you like it or not, but you’d better pay attention because I’m sure it will be useful. But first I’ll warn you not to try anything too quickly or you’ll scare him off.”

“Why does all my ‘compensation’ involve my personal life?”

“Because it’s the area in which you are the most incompetent, now listen… no, first stop glaring at me, your face will stick that way. Look at Shibuya and Greta they’re so cute playing under the tree. It’s not surprising that there’s barely seven years between them. Seven years. Compared to what? Seventy? He’s awfully young—“

“What exactly ARE you insinuating? That I’m some sort of—“

“No, no, nothing like that, I’m merely encouraging you to take your time. The country is at rest now. There’s peace. Let them be children.”

Wolfram frowned, “Even though it’s none of your business, I’ve already decided to do that.”

“I’m sure…” The Sage didn’t sound like he believed him in the slightest but Wolfram didn’t mind. He sat silently, vaguely listening to stories about how much of a social taboo the love between men was on Earth and how Shibuya had no experience, something that admittedly made his heart give a happy flip-flop, and felt the sun on his skin and the wind on his face. But most of all he watched his family. Up on the hill, playing like the two children they were, feeling very close and very far away.
Interlude I

Fernan Delgado’s boots squished as he trudged through the fields, each step nearly sucking the old leather soles into a hole of rotting soil. The spring was wet, good for the rye that had only just started to spring up in tidy rows of beige that brushed against his knees. His head hurt, had been hurting all day.

Probably just too much thinking.

When he could no longer see his modest house he sat, bottom sinking several inches into the soaked earth. Fernan always came to the fields when he needed to clear his mind of its incessant pounding. Even as a child, when this land had belonged to his father, he would come here, lay his back to the ground and focus on other things. It was calming. The colors that swirled in the clouds above his head and the whispers from the rye that brushed together in the wind, made everything seem right.

His wife Rosalina wouldn’t bother him about not working now; she couldn’t see him and was probably busy with the children. She was always busy with the children. They were her little dolls. Both of his daughters were old enough to run around the house and squeal, so their small home was a constant source of noise. Inconvenient though, that the youngest had caught the miasma and would probably lose her leg in the coming week.

It didn’t bother him. He’d already lost a son to the gods.

Thinking about the gods reminded him and he stood, desperately searching through his pockets. His fingers were covered in mud and they slid clumsily between the rough layers of cloth. When he found the paper he let out a sigh of relief and hugged the folded square to his chest. He had been given numbers.

He, Fernan, had been given numbers! He had had to hide them from his wife, lest she steal them for herself. His fingers had been somewhat cleaned by their search through his pockets, so after a quick look around he sat back down in the mud and carefully unfolded his prize. Not lost!

Here. Safe. With him.

The white paper blinded him for a moment, bathing his face in reflected sunlight. Even through the pain, Fernan’s eyes ran lovingly along the delicate curves of his numbers. Such a row of them! Beautiful. He had to keep them safe, to figure out what they meant if he had any hope of reaching the pinnacle of his existence.

He had always suspected he would be special. His wife wasn’t. She thought he was the perfect husband. Fool. All of them fools.

None of them noticed the messages in the papers. Everyday the same thing: Numbers Manifest the Chosen. The same message was scrawled in mud on the black walls of alleys, stuck on the top of every page in every book.

But no one ever spoke of it.

The night he’d married Rosalina he truly thought he loved her, such a pretty thing with wide hips. Good for children. They had met a few years ago and he had been working since then to pay her bride’s price. He had been completely captivated by her, the light in her eyes that made him think that she could be different. After their first wedding night he had rolled over and spoke, voice
below a whisper to ask her about the numbers. She had cooed at him about being such a handsome husband with the prettiest blond hair she had ever seen. It was then that he realized she was just another one of the misguided populous.

Those who see only what they wish to see.

Fernan shook his head, dislodging his brown hair from his eyes.

It had only been two days ago, just a week past his twenty third birthday, that he had first heard anyone besides the voice of his own mind speak of numbers. He had been in the city that night, staying at an inn after buying some supplies for his farm at the common market. It was his favorite place to stay on such nights, where he had lingered in the city too long to risk his horses on the return. The tavern downstairs was what really drew him to the place, not only for the fresh bread and goat butter that was relatively inexpensive but because above the bar someone had carved in shaky script: Numbers Manifest the Chosen. When he had asked the barkeep about it the man had just looked puzzled and tried to sell him more ale.

That night he had started his dinner alone in the tavern, but just after dark three city guards stumbled past the wooden door frame, their laughter rattling the silent walls. They sat in the corner farthest from him and ordered bacon sandwiches and ale. Despite their rowdy demeanor, they were relatively clean with long ponytails gleaning at their backs, but then again most were. It was only the townsfolk that carried the familiar scent of grime.

In his youth Fernan had dreamed of becoming a guard if only so he could bathe more often. It would have paid more too. Much more than what he earned following in the footsteps of his father. He would have been able to live past the first ring of gates, closer to the pristine white walls of the inner circles. That was another mystery his mind ached for: What exactly was behind those walls.

But Fernan hadn't been allowed to become a city guard. Not with the 'higher calling' that his family had been a part of for centuries. In Shou Shimeron the guards were the highest class citizens outside the inner circles, but farmers held the most prestige among the people. The guards had told him that his current position was much more valuable, but as important as he knew the crop was, he longed for a job with less physical labor and more benefits.

Fernan had been slathering his bread with a thick helping of butter when the voices of the guards intensified. The three men dressed in the traditional black uniforms were mocking one of their group who seemed to be shamefully intoxicated. To distract attention, the offended guard called out to the barkeep.

"Oi, Tono! When you going to scrape that graffiti off your wall?

One of the drunken guard’s companions frowned and glanced at Fernan, who had looked up from his butter in confusion.

Disappointed by the barkeep's silence, the rowdy guard continued his provocation. "That shit phrase is written more than enough places as it is. I’d like to get a decent bite to eat without it hovering over me."

Then the guard stopped, startled by the sound of Fernan's chair falling over in his rush to stand.

"You know? You've seen the…?" Fernan's hands were shaking and his mouth was numb with anticipation. All three of the guards focused on him and the comforting background noise of the barkeep's obsessive tidying seemed to stop. Even the bacon seemed to stop sizzling in its oil bath.
The guards went back to their meal.

Fernan didn't understand. Why would they just ignore him? Did they think he was crazy? But nothing could be farther from the truth. It was everyone else who was crazy. Not him. They weren't even aware of what was really going on around them for the gods’ sakes and it was he who could see the message. What was going on? Was there something else? Some other part of the picture that he had missed?

What if he was only half aware? What if there were other messages that he couldn't see, and therefore he didn't know better than to ask about the numbers? Had he ruined his chances to rise above the mediocrity of his own existence?

He stayed where he was, standing stiffly in front of his wooden table feeling his fists shake and staring down into his meal. What could he do to redeem himself? Fernan sat back down and swallowed the rest of his bread without tasting it. He was completely lost in thought when a shadow fell over his plate and he looked up to see the guard who had spoke of numbers towering over him. The guard's face twisted into a grin and he leaned on the table to get closer to him.

"Let me pay your bill. As compensation for interrupting your meal."

Fernan could only nod before all three of the guards made their way out of the tavern's creaking door. When he looked down not only were there a few copper coins but also a neatly folded square of paper. His heart leaped into his throat as he peeled back the crisp folds to reveal the dazzling row of numbers.

It was the same exhilaration he felt now.

Fernan's eyes slid over the now familiar row and his stomach spun with joy. The only thought that soured the sweetness of this feeling was that he had no idea what he was supposed to do with his numbers. They must be some sort of code… but how was he to decipher it? What if he was incapable and he was to be tortured with the knowledge that he would always be a single step from greatness?

The sound of horses pulled him from his thoughts and he stood, carefully folding his numbers and slipping them back into the safety of his pocket. Four men and five horses were making their way up the dirt road to his house.

Concerned, Fernan made his way to meet them, jumping over the low stalks to reach them faster. He didn’t like the idea of a group of strange men near his house.

By the time he reached them his breath was heavy and beads of sweat crawled down his spine. Rosalina was near the door, holding back his curious oldest daughter with her left arm while the sick one squirmed in her right.

“Are you Fernan?” Asked one of the men, looking down at him from his mount.

Fernan looked suspiciously up at the man and nodded.

“Fernan Delgado?”

He nodded.

The men who hadn’t spoken dismounted and Fernan could feel the hairs on the back of his neck starting to stand on end.
From atop his horse the last man grinned at him. “You’re coming with us.”

Two of the men grabbed his arms before he came back to himself enough to speak. “What? Why?” Fernan tried to squirm loose, this wasn’t right… He was so close… so close and now…

No one who was taken by the guards ever came home. Fear started to blend with his anger and he kicked and tried to pull his arms free with all his might. Then came the blow to his stomach that collapsed his knees, the urge to vomit from the pain almost as strong as the sting in his lungs as he realized he couldn’t breathe.

The sound of laughter along with the screams of his wife and daughters reached his ears and he looked up, the sun was high and over the horsemans’s shoulder and kept Fernan from reading his face.

“If you come peacefully we’ll leave them.”

An empty offer if he ever heard one. Before he could say anything the men grabbed him from either side again, this time hauling him to his feet and over to the last horse. They bound his wrists with rope and then tied his arms to his chest. The end of the rope was attached to one of the men’s saddles.

“You can ride, or you can try something funny and we’ll drag you to the capital. Your decision.”

Fernan could only glare as he let the men put him onto the horse. He glanced at his wife whose face was wet with dirt and tears. She was sobbing and holding onto their daughters, staring on with her big eyes full of confusion as his horse started trotting down the hill.

His mind was spinning. This wasn’t right. He was supposed to rise to greatness… He had been given numbers!

This was not how his story was supposed to end.

*****

Six Months Later: Blood Pledge Castle

*****

Wolfram wrinkled his nose at the smell of the melting glass. Unlike the paper that wafted above his hands in ash, the thin and floppy glass melted black and slid between his fingers, leaving thick stains on the carpet. It was hardly his fault. Destroying the thing was nothing more than an obligation Yuuri placed on him by even bringing the filth back here. Wimp.

At least his fiance had had the decency to hide them. Not that he could be blamed for going through Yuuri things. It wasn’t like he was looking for whatever Yuuri had squirreled away between boxes. He was looking for his annual letter from Jennifer. Well… not-quite-annual in that it came back with Yuuri whenever he returned from Earth.

Despite the wimp’s whining, Wolfram still hadn’t bothered to learn their stupid earth scribbles, so he took advantage of his artistic talent and he and his future mother-in-law amused themselves by
swapping drawings and the occasional photograph. After a brief consideration Wolfram had decided that photographs were the best thing about Earth, as they provided him with the most adorable pictures of his fiance.

Or rather, he had thought them to be the best thing until he had come across the large floppy book filled with indecent photographs of women. At least, he hoped they were women and not girls. The faces on some of them didn't seem much older than Greta. And it was going to take months to rid his mind of that thought.

What an awful way to end his day. It had started out so nicely, too. He had gotten up early and done a few drills before cooling off in a bath before breakfast, which he had gotten to share with a still sleepy-eyed Greta. Getting up early was new for him, but he couldn't deny it made him feel somewhat more productive. It was exhausting, feeling the way he did all the time. Finding things to distract him was the best cure for his problem.

Although it wasn't really HIS problem, it was the wimp's. If he would just get over his stupid earth prejudices and...

Wolfram sighed.

He really could understand why Gwendal seemed to avoid personal relationships. They simply weren't practical. There was a time when everything his eldest brother did seemed perfect. It had been a painful realization that following in the footsteps of such perfection would only leave him forever in its shadow. And being the pretty shadow of anyone was not the life he had in mind. Even though it was illogical and made him look a fool, he simply wanted Yuuri too badly to give up without fighting tooth and nail. The thing he had hated most about himself before the wimp showed up, his feminine features, ironically seemed to be the only advantage in winning his sexually picky fiance.

Wolfram could remember that night years ago, standing in front of his mirror in that ghastly night gown and working up the courage to sneak into Yuuri's room for the first time. He didn't have many ideas about what a woman would wear for this sort of occasion, but the pink frock seemed a likely candidate. Before Yuuri came, he had been meaning to get his hair cut but had been putting it off since it seemed to cause an unfortunate squabbling amongst the maids. That night he had pulled his bangs down, pinched his cheeks, and practiced the right way to angle his face to make his eyelashes look longer.

It was exactly that sort of behavior that he had spent the past several months trying to extinguish. This infatuation had definitely gotten out of hand... or more to the point, Wolfram had let himself get out of hand. He still had nightmares about the day Yuuri had returned, so unexpectedly after his heart had only begun to heal from his fiance's absence. The day Anissina had started calling: 'The Day Which Proved That Anissina Is Always Right'. The details almost made him physically ill upon each spiteful replay his mind insisted on torturing him with.

Even worse was how poorly Yuuri had reacted to him. It had hurt. The way Yuuri's face had been the perfect mirror of disgust after his attempted kiss. But the pain of rejection only strengthened his resolve to act with more tact in the future.

Wolfram's New Strategy was working wonderfully so far. He had reeled in almost all of his physical advances, but when he did go out of his way to touch Yuuri he made sure that each casual brush or bump was memorable in its subtlety. Occasionally he would even pretend to be asleep, letting his arm curl absently around his fiance's sleeping form and bask in the precious moments of contact before Yuuri would wake and carefully remove the wandering limb before scooting to the opposite side of the bed. With each attempt Wolfram was sure Yuuri's body took longer to register
that there was something 'wrong' with the situation. And if Wolfram could convince Yuuri's body to be okay with him he had a realistic chance of convincing his obnoxiously prejudiced mind. Because really, Yuuri had the most open and irritatingly benevolent opinions about everything else and it was absolutely infuriating that he was so impossibly stubborn on the issue of two men together. Yuuri's body, unlike his mind, was much less likely to be affected by Earth brainwashing.

Recently Wolfram's growing fear was that Yuuri was actually asexual. Sure, he stared at women's cleavage at parties and seemed to be infatuated with Weller, whether he admitted it or not, but never once, despite his almost constant attempts and proximity had he caught Yuuri consciously aroused. If it weren't for some early mornings where sheets and limbs were positioned just so he would be concerned that there was some sort of legitimate physical problem. The one good thing about the picture books he'd just destroyed was that they told a different story. He was morbidly impressed that Yuuri could have kept such a... habit hidden from him for so long.

He noticed that he had almost crushed the box he was holding. Jennifer really could be overly generous with strange presents. The pile of boxes in the middle of their bedroom was a testament to that.

Wolfram was getting annoyed. Where WAS his letter? He had almost gone through every box. Yuuri would probably come back from wherever he'd run off to soon and Wolfram didn't want to be caught knee deep in packages.

Two boxes later and not only had Wolfram NOT found his letter but he HAD found a third indecent picture book as well as a very large and very shiny photograph of a man playing baseball. He glared at the way the fabric stretched almost indecently over his buttocks, one leg raised as he threw the blurred image of a ball. After a few minutes of inspection, Wolfram came to the reassuring conclusion that he was much more attractive than the man; however, its presence was almost more annoying than the photo book.

Before he burned this example of his fiance's wimpy tendencies, curiosity got the better of him, and after a few failed attempts he finally succeeded at removing the thin layer of glass from the picture book. Sitting down on their bed, he flipped through some of the pages.

Needless to say, it was disgusting. Pages upon pages of doe-eyed women who looked much too young... Anissina would have been horrified. He could just see the old bat now, starting a crusade to Earth to destroy all those who made such things possible. All of the women were of similar complexion to Yuuri and the Sage, all of them had perfect skin, wide eyes, and sloppy hair cuts. They posed in ways that made innocence provocative and most seemed to be in pain or at the least very uncomfortable, and a few toward the end were covered in unseemly quantities of ejaculate. Wolfram wondered what Yuuri could see in them. None of them had his complexion, none were blond, and worst of all none were men.

From his position on the bed Wolfram could see his reflection from the shoulders up in the vanity mirror above the dresser. After removing the slight dejection from his features, he stared blankly at his face. He had always been told he was beautiful, but what good were his delicate features if the person he wanted didn't want him? He tilted his head forward a bit and let his lips fall apart, trying to look like them. Then he growled and flopped back onto the bed, covering his face with the floppy book and inhaling the odd smell of whatever glue was in the binding.

What was Yuuri thinking? Wolfram had spent most of his life beating off countless suitors with the proverbial stick and then his wimpy fiance has the audacity to bring dirty pictures of other women into their bedroom. There was no reason for it. It didn't make any sense. After all, he was in their bedroom most nights. And wasn't he better than any stupid Earth photographs?
Wolfram looked nothing like these women and he didn't want to. The part of him that yearned for Yuuri also craved to be wanted in return, for being nothing other than himself.

*****

*****

Sometimes Yuuri felt like his mother was actually insane. He had explained at least a hundred times that no, they did not need dry noodles, that it was a palace and they had cooks who would probably defenestrate themselves if they saw their 'king' eating things like that. And as much as yes, he loved her curry, he really didn't think it would keep during his trip between the two worlds.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to talk his mother out of the two boxes of new dresses for Greta. Since his descriptions of her size were apparently insufficient, his mother had insisted on sending along multiple garments of multiple sizes, some obviously too large, in the hope that Greta would grow into them sooner or later. After delivering the boxes to an overjoyed Greta, Yuuri was on his way back to his room.

He was still exhausted. Yuuri had come back from Earth this morning and collapsed upon arrival. He hated that the trips were so draining. Even with Murata’s help he had been out for most of the day. Yuuri could feel the extra powers he had gotten from Shinou still struggling against him, uncomfortable in their new owner. He wouldn’t have gotten up today at all if it hadn’t been for Wolfram making a racket trying to get into the packages. All the rustling was distracting, and being awake had made him realize how hungry he was, too hungry to go back to sleep, and then Greta had found him up and about and had insisted on getting her ‘Earth Souvenirs’ which Yuuri always brought back for her, and he had ended up spending much more time awake than his tired mind had the energy for.

His visit to Earth in itself had been exhausting this time around. He missed when going there was the same as a vacation. But since Yuuri had decided that he would be spending the majority of his time in Shin Makoku from now on, getting everything settled there and catering to his family was more work than studying with Gunter. It hadn't been the easiest thing to tell his parents, let alone Shouri.

Adding to the magnitude of his decision was that since he didn’t have the hang of controlling his passages between worlds yet, he couldn’t really control the different speeds of time, and so time on Earth would move more similarly to time in Shin Makoku. This meant he couldn't even tell his family how long he would be gone for between visits.

It was strange leaving. But Yuuri didn’t see any way around it. He was a King. He could do more here, for his people, than he could ever hope to accomplish on Earth. That was Shouri’s domain now.

The weirdest part had been officially dropping out of school. Ever since he was a child, the focus of his life's accomplishments were measured by standardized tests-- that and the occasional baseball game. Had he been on Earth he would be cramming for University entrance exams. Now he could focus that energy on learning what he could about his kingdom. Or trying to, at least.

His parents had understood. Yuuri suspected they had been preparing themselves for it for a while. The only condition his mother had had was that they at least be allowed to come to his wedding… which was something Yuuri didn’t even want to think about.

It was one thing, to try to grow up and be what the battle with Shinou made him realize he needed to be: a real King. But dealing with The Wolfram Debacle was another thing entirely. At least Wolfram seemed to be losing interest in him recently, if only a little. He was hovering less and
starting to act like a normal person. It was actually refreshing.

The strangest thing involving Wolfram lately was a letter he had just found mixed in with Greta’s dresses. His mother really was odd... Though if he was completely honest with himself, the green-eyed smiling figure with yellow scribbled hair drawn onto the back of the envelope was almost cute.

It had been tempting to open it, but he figured once he gave it to Wolfram he would get some sort of explanation. It might even be the origin of the photos he had found in Wolfram's drawer. Besides, if he did open it Wolfram would probably throw a fit. Although the more he thought about it the more it seemed like Wolfram hardly ever yelled anymore... It was scary. Passive Aggressive Wolfram.

But it did leave him with fewer headaches.

Yuuri raised a hand to his mouth to cover a large yawn as he pushed open his bedroom door. It took him a few moments to fully process exactly what he was seeing. The room was a complete disaster, crumpled paper and half open boxes covered most of the floor in between where he stood and the bed, but worst of all the room reeked of burning plastic.

On the bed was Wolfram. Lying in a bit of a sprawl with his feet still on the floor. His hair was peeking out in strands from beneath a magazine that completely covered his face. An “adult” magazine.

Where on Earth...

Shouri.

Yuuri remembered Shouri getting angry when his mother had mentioned the possibility of a marriage between himself and Wolfram. Actually, Shouri had been pretty upset about most of what Yuuri had had to say during his visit. But he had been furious about Wolfram in particular. Yuuri could understand his feelings because, after all, he and Wolfram were both boys. However, seeing his brother quite so adamant had been shocking. When Shouri had come to Shin Makoku it was with Wolfram that he had gotten along the best. So the sheer level of disapproval had been unexpected. He remembered Shouri going on about how Shin Makoku had poisoned his mind and that he needed to be 'treated' for his own good.

Yuuri had written this off as Shouri just being, well, Shouri. In other words, overly excited about stupid stuff. But sneaking something like that into his things... was going to far. And Yuuri had thought his mother was insane.

The worst part was now Wolfram was going to set the castle on fire. Now was just the calm before the storm. He was probably calling up the elements as he lay there and if Yuuri moved at all or tried to run it would only set off the cascade of terrifying events that would be the end of him. It was too bad that it was going to end like this. After he had just started down the road to becoming a 'proper king'. Tragic that it was going to end here, in his room, burnt to a crisp by a male fiance over his brother's stupid porn magazines--

"Whump," came a muffled voice.

Yuuri clutched the doorknob in despair. "What...?"

The blond in question pulled the magazine off his face, "I called you a wimp."

"Oh."
Silence.

"Wolfram... Before you say anything-- would it do any good if I swore that it wasn't mine?"

Wolfram snorted. "Because it's so much more fun being a lying wimp?"

"It's not mine, alright!" If this was going to become a yelling match anyway, Yuuri reasoned he might as well get a head start.

Wolfram simply raised an eyebrow in response. "You're acting like I'm about to set the castle on fire." He stood. "I've given you no reason to yell."

Yuuri swallowed. No no no no. Warning signals abounded. Something was definitely going to happen. It was going to happen to him in the next several seconds and it was going to be painful.

"Why are you just standing there?" Wolfram was much too calm. "Come in already."

"Erm." Yuuri's eyes darted down the hallway, wondering how much of a head start he could get from this distance. When he looked back, Wolfram was two feet in front of him. "Eep..."

Wolfram sighed, pulled Yuuri into the room, and closed the door behind them.

When Wolfram let go of him, Yuuri took the opportunity to back away several paces. Wolfram stayed by the door, blocking his escape, arms crossed over his chest and foot tapping mercilessly against the rug. "Look... Wolfram... I know you won't believe me. You NEVER believe me when I tell you anything. But I promise that I had nothing to do with that magazine!" The volume of his voice increased with each word. He didn't really know why he was yelling, but he felt he HAD to make sure Wolfram believed him.

"Oh, really?"

Yuuri shivered. Wolfram's voice sounded so cold. "Yes!" Yuuri tried to be firm, but with Wolfram glaring at him like that it was difficult.

Wolfram started towards him. Yuuri closed his eyes, but opened them again when a gust of air signaled that Wolfram had gone past him. He turned to see the blond rummaging through one of the half opened boxes on the floor. Yuuri hoped that his brother hadn't stowed away anything even more incriminating. Having found what he was looking for, Wolfram turned to face him, wearing his best 'menacing' face. "Then I'm sure you also had nothing to do with this... this man..."

Yuuri almost laughed but instead it came out as a choked sound in the back of his nose. "Daisuke Matsuzaka?"

"DAISUKI?!" Wolfram roared. "YOU WIMP! You CHEATER!... for THIS--"

For the hundredth time, Yuuri wished Murata would stop trying to teach Wolfram Japanese. "Daisu-KE! It's a name. Daisuki means what you're upset about... I promise I don't have feelings for him, he's a boy anyway. And the poster is for Conrad because he plays for his favorite team... Stop having a fit over this!"

"Well..." Wolfram was red now, but he wasn't yelling. "It's not my fault your language is stupid."

"AND it's not MY fault that you keep letting Murata teach you strange things. Really, I wish you'd just let me teach you if you want to learn--" Wolfram was being so ridiculous that it was hard to take him seriously anymore. At least he had stopped yelling.
Wolfram huffed. "I have no interest in your Earth scribbles."

Yuuri rolled his eyes. "Oh really? It might be easier for you to communicate with people if you ever have to come to Earth again." He pulled the letter out of his pocket.

Wolfram's eyes latched onto it immediately and his eyebrows twitched. "That's none of your business."

"Letters from MY mother?"

"Stop trying to change the subject! You still haven't explained THIS!" Wolfram waved the magazine for emphasis.

Yuuri shook his head. "They're probably Shouri's..."

"Then what are they doing in YOUR things, Yuuri, and not on Shouri's?"

"Because! Shouri thinks..." He stopped. What was he about to say? To tell Wolfram to his face that Shouri had given him pornography because he hated the idea of them getting married, of his little brother being attracted to another man? It was the truth... but Yuuri couldn't make himself say it, which was odd. Wouldn't he normally tell the truth about everything? Why was his voice caught? "He thinks..."

"That this sort of THING is appropriate for his precious little brother? I find that hard to believe."

Yuuri colored. "It's not uncommon... You can get them at the corner stores..."

Wolfram moved closer. "That's not all of it." He peered into Yuuri's face, close enough that Yuuri could feel his breath on his nose. "You're still hiding something."

"No..."

"Wimp." Wolfram shoved the magazine against Yuuri's chest.

Yuuri grabbed it out of reflex, looking down at the glossy cover of a woman with a finger in her mouth. He blushed and tried to figure out what to do with it. He felt dirty even holding it. "I don't want it!"

"Then why don't you throw it away? The filth smells awful when it burns."

"That's because the cover is plastic... You know, it's going to smell like that for at least a week..." Yuuri eyed a black stain on the carpet suspiciously. How many magazines had Wolfram found, anyway?

"Well, you shouldn't have brought it." Even though he wasn't yelling, Wolfram still seemed hurt by the whole thing.

Yuuri lost it. "For the last time, I DID NOT BRING IT!"

"Liar! Cheater! I can see it in your face!" Wolfram hissed.

"Well, FINE then! Far be it from me to avoid telling you that these things are really YOUR fault! You call this dirty but what about THIS!" Yuuri gestured between them. "Two men?! My brother--!" He managed to stop himself.

Wolfram looked stricken for a moment, but he quickly came back to himself and huffed, turning
his head to the side. "So this is to keep you occupied? This...this... is more appropriate than..."
Wolfram stopped, collecting himself, taking himself away from the Wolfram Yuuri had gotten so used to and into this frightening shell that he couldn't read. It reminded Yuuri a little of Gwendal. "Well, I can't do anything about your brother's feelings."

Why did seeing Wolfram like this bother him so much? "Wolfram..." Yuuri reached forward to lay a hand on his shoulder. "I can't help how my brother feels..." For a second Yuuri felt guilty... The way he said it... was like denying his own feelings on the subject. But the way Wolfram's eyes lit up and he had to bite his lip for half a second to suppress a smile, made Yuuri forget what he had been feeling guilty about.

Wolfram looked at him for a while before removing Yuuri's hand from his shoulder and heading for the door. "Fine. I'll let it go this time. Just don't let me catch you with anything like this again." When he had gotten a few steps away he turned on his heel, facing him again. "I'll even ignore that you got Weller a present."

Oops. Yuuri knew he had forgotten something. "But, Wolfram," he whined. "You don't even like baseball." It wasn't his fault. He had seen the poster and immediately thought Conrad would get a kick out of a Japanese player being so influential in his favorite American team. Still, Yuuri wished he had picked something up for Wolfram now. His mother usually was in charge of presents... and Wolfram had gotten something special from her at least.

Wolfram rolled his eyes.

"Besides, you got a letter from my mother... I don't even get letters from her." He waved the envelope. "It's got a cute picture, too."

Wolfram huffed and came over to take the letter from him. "At least someone in your family has some good sense."

Yuuri laughed nervously as he watched Wolfram leave. As he disappeared through the door, Yuuri could have almost sworn that Wolfram's last step looked suspiciously like a skip.

Now that Wolfram was gone, the exhaustion hit him again, stronger than before, and he kicked his shoes off and headed for the bed. But not before he tore Shouri's magazine into several pieces.
Chasing the Dragon: Chapter 1

****

Four months past Interlude.
Shin Makoku, Fall.

****

Gwendal rubbed his forehead in a futile attempt to alleviate the dull throb between his eyes. A bad omen, to be sure. So much arranging had gone into the evening ahead that he was almost wishing for a military crisis to calm his nerves. Something he was good at dealing with, something that made sense. Not like this.

Weddings were always trouble. Gwendal never really did understand Gunter's unbridled joy at organizing the blasted things. But at least his friend's enthusiasm saved him the trouble of having to decide which flowers were in style and season, and how their hue went with the new linens. Even though the ceremony was necessary to show the strength and unity of Shin Makoku, Gwendal could help but feel deep down that the whole charade, politics, and formality of it was contrary to the feelings supposedly represented.

His youngest brother was handling it well enough as his relationship with the young Maou seemed to be improving. That, however, did not mean that there was any less noise in his office as he was trying to finish copying down the new codex for times of Less Than Peace which seemed to be looming on the horizon.

"How many times do I have to tell you, wimp, that I've no interest in learning your ridiculous Earth scribbles?" Wolfram's voice pierced his concentration.

The Maou whined in response, "But Wolfram, I learned how to speak your--"

"Learned how? When? How many classes did you take before Adelbert re-awakened your spirit's linguistic talents?"

Gwendal had glanced up from his work long enough to notice the way the Maou tugged at his brother's arm to make him look at a scrap of paper while Wolfram let every returned touch linger much longer than necessary. The accusatory finger to the chest that dragged up to poke Yuuri in the nose. Practically indecent.

He coughed and caught his brother's eye. At least Wolfram had the courtesy to move a step back and look up, like he had no idea what he was being scolded for. Some things would never change.

Gwendal almost longed for the days where the predatory advances of soldiers were his biggest concern regarding his youngest sibling's innocence. Ever since Yuuri's arrival his worries had done an uncomfortable flip flop. As irritating as the young Maou's childish persona was when it came to ruling a kingdom, knowing that Yuuri had absolutely no interest in defiling his little brother was the only thing that kept Gwendal from dragging Wolfram from his fiancé's bedroom by the ears.

Wolfram's new found subtlety in goading attention was amusing, though uncomfortably effective. He did have to give his brother credit for actually developing the sense of tact and patience that he'd lacked for so many years. It appeared that Wolfram's blind desire to get what he wanted had brought on some level of personal growth. It showed that, despite his age, he was finally maturing away from the terrifying decade in a young Mazoku's life where most horrendous mistakes of the
heart were made. It varied from person to person, but the average age level of the afflicted had left
The Seventies a victim of capitalization and associated fear for centuries.

Even he had made one of his larger, more red-headed mistakes during that time of his life.

But thanks to a few strategic reassignments of troublesome guards, and Conrad's assistance in
keeping the watchful eyes ever present, his littlest brother seemed to have escaped the dreaded
decade relatively un-corrupted. Relatively.

The memory of a particularly stubborn insubordinate caused the quill he was holding to snap in
half with a loud pop. Luckily, the room's other occupants were to busy crossing the line of public
decency to notice.

Yuuri had gotten his "reluctant" brother to sit at the table, and was hovering over him in an attempt
to teach him to write his name in Earth scribbles with no lack of shoulder contact. Wolfram, though
very loudly and vocally protesting, glowed under the attention.

Gwendal shook his head and reached for the jar of quills to his right before a tapping at the
window demanded his attention. Wolfram was closer to the glass and had already stood to let the
pigeon in. As soon as the window opened a well trained flutter of wings circled the room before
landing on a small perch at his desk.

Before he could give his brother a subtle request for privacy, the Maou’s voice interrupted.

“What’s that?—”

“Silly wimp. It’s air mail.”

“I know that, but—“

“I can’t believe that as advanced as you claim your Earth to be, you don’t have something as
simple as pigeon mail carriers,” Wolfram continued, waving his hand in dismissal and heading out
of Gwendal’s office.

“Hey!” the Maou protested, following Wolfram. “We don’t need pigeon’s. We have airplanes to do
that sort of thing, or have you forgotten the time you spent—”

Their voices trailed off down the hallway. Gwendal didn’t know whether he should be pleased that
his brother knew what was needed without him having to ask, or concerned at his Maou’s
distractibility. Though lately it seemed only Wolfram could goad such an effect.

Stepping eagerly away from that trail of thought, he busied himself with freeing his tiny letter from
the pigeon’s leg.

Big Kitty,

No worries to the north.
East? West? South?

~Red Sheep

Gwendal picked a new quill and was a breath away from sending him south, to the bad tidings he’d
been hearing from Caloria, but hesitated. He would see Flurin tonight during the reception. There
would be plenty of time to hear more details before sending his reply.
“Weddings…” he mumbled, and shook his head. And that was the least of his worries.

********

********

Greta was careful not to get any mud on her new dress as she tiptoed barefoot through grandma Cheri’s garden, hands balled into angry fists that held up her laced skirt. It wasn't fair that she couldn't go to the reception ball! That lady had been beyond rude and trying to sneak a frog into her dress was hardly punishment enough.

And besides, that had been a whole two months ago, at Yuuri's birthday party. She and Beatrice had been playing jacks under the buffet table and looking at all the pretty shoes walk by when a gaggle of high heels and lace herded over from the dance floor. The women were giggling loudly and talking about how cute they thought her Papa Yuuri was. She and Beatrice had been forced to cover their mouths, lest their laughter give them away.

But then they kept talking, and the conversation had made an ugly turn...

"I'm serious," Red Shoes said in a high voice, toes squeezed impossibly into the pointed end. "I have three very reliable sources that say he's not interested at all."

A pair of deep blue velvet swiveled. "How could anyone not be interested! I would kill for his eyelashes alone, not to mention his hair!"

"Of course you'd say that. You've had your eyes on him since you were in your sixties!" Red Shoes rebuffed.

Some pink flats stepped between them. "It is curious though, that they still haven't gotten married..."

"It only means Sir Belefield's already doing his nightly duties, why bother with the ceremony."

Red shoes again, now even closer to the table.

"That or he's not as good with his sword as half my friends say!"

They all laughed.

Greta frowned. Wolfram was great with a sword, a real knight no matter what anyone said. How dare those women!

"--friends are liars, everyone knows you need something extra for Wolfram the Beautiful to look twice your way."

More laughter.

That was it. Greta had to do something to punish them for laughing at her Papa. She whispered for Beatrice to watch Miss Red Shoes and her friends and snuck out the other side of the table, walking low until she could duck behind some guests and hurry out of the ballroom.

She had just the trick in mind. Earlier in the week she had been playing out in the garden with Wilfrido, the new Stablekeep's son, and they had spotted a large bullfrog. After they chased it around the small pond a few times it had holed itself up in a large crack in the stone lining. With any luck it would still be there.

Just a few splashes of water on her white stockings, some muddy fingers, and a few minutes were
all it took before she was sneaking back through the main entrance with her tiny purse full of bullfrog. The music drowned out its frightened croaking as she made her way back to her hiding place, taking a moment to glance at the faces of the ladies. They may have had pretty shoes, but they all had ugly hearts.

Red Shoes in particular wasn't nearly as pretty as some of the other ladies at the party. Her toes weren't the only thing that seemed uncomfortably squeezed in, almost every bit of her that wasn't covered in cloth bulged dramatically. She was probably just jealous of Wolfram, who was much prettier than her, even if he was a boy.

Under the table, Beatrice had barely been able to contain her laughter, biting her fist and rolling helplessly as she watched Greta move into position. It would only have taken a second more. Her hand had snaked out from under the tablecloth, only to disappear beneath Red Shoe's skirts. Just one good upwards toss and the lady would have been sorry she ever said anything. The bullfrog croaked in her hand.

But then she was out from under the table, pulled by her ankles into strong arms. She squealed and dropped the poor bullfrog, which arced through the air and landed in the bowl of wine with a great splash. Greta could still picture it swimming circles between the floating berries.

By the time she realized she was in Papa Wolf's arms, the mean ladies were glaring at them.

"My apologies, Ladies. Just collecting little girls for their bedtimes."

Greta squirmed, but her knees and shoulders were trapped by each of his arms. "YOU shouldn't apologize, they--"

"Hush." Wolfram used The Voice. He hardly ever spoke to her that way... she stiffened. What was going on? She had done nothing to deserve it. "Miss Beatrice..." Her Papa bent down slightly to address the head that had emerged from the table cloth. "Your father is looking for you."

Beatrice curtsied and hurried off, but not before using a cloth napkin to bundle up the now pink frog. Greta hoped she hadn't gotten her friend in trouble.

"Oooohh, you're so good with them!" said the same lady who had wanted to take her Papa's eyelashes. Greta could see why, as the lady seemed to have rather small eyes that were almost lost in charcoal. "After you put the little ones to bed, would you mind reminding my friends how good of a dancer you are with me? It's been so long since you've--"

"Never mind the dancing, Mary." It was Red Shoes. "My new dress is stained thanks to that horrid swamp thing. You should keep your little human better trained."

"You couldn't be referring to the Princess, Madam, the music is rather loud..."

Greta smiled. Now Red Shoes was getting The Voice.

"Ohh is she still?" The large woman brought a gloved hand to her mouth, which was covered in a matching deep red shine.

Behind her, Pink Flats had leaned into Mary. "--not the only thing we thought he would be renouncing--"

Wolfram's chest burned, and Greta had to move her cheek away. "The wind instruments are very loud this waltz, Madam, but since I must be getting little ones to bed I will caution you to be careful on your carriage ride home. It's been a dry fall and we've been having some brush fires in the
provinces. You know how easily such sparks could jump to a wagon wheel." He bowed slightly. "Goodnight."

Greta barely managed to stay still until they passed through the main entrance. She could tell Wolfram was still angry. So much so that she could hardly stand to touch him. "Hot! Wolfram, calm down, you're burning me!"

Wolfram dropped her immediately, making sure she landed feet first. "I'm sorry, Greta. Follow me to bed, then. You're getting too big for me to carry you around now anyway."

He continued down the hall a few steps before Greta had the chance to follow him. She had expected him to turn back, say something, or even just look at her with eyes that said everything was okay, but he kept walking. She supposed he was still mad, so she decided to be the grown up about it and slipped her hand around his clenched fist, relieved that he had cooled down enough to touch and that he grabbed her hand in return. They walked in silence until they reached her bedroom door.

Greta had begged him to tell a story, if only so she wouldn't have to go to bed with this awful feeling of confusion, and after a few seconds of looking up at him with big eyes he'd sighed and led her to bed. But he didn't tell her a story.

Instead they had talked about a lot of things. Mostly things she knew already, like how you should never listen to things people say about you, unless they love you and are only trying to help. And how Yuuri loved her very much. Mostly he talked about how now that she was older she couldn't spend all her time at parties under tables with Beatrice. She had to act responsibly so as not to shame Yuuri. He went on for a long time, until his words meshed together and she was left with the comforting sound of his voice.

She had learned a lot from listening to him, but not because he told her anything. It was more like something in her head clicked. All the games people had been playing around her since the beginning started to make sense. Things she knew before but had never really understood. Like how Wolfram loved Yuuri the same way Hube loved Nicola and that the way Yuuri loved him back was different. That she was somehow more aware of this than Yuuri, because she was the only one who got to talk to Papa Wolf like this. It made her feel oddly protective of both her papas, like she was the one who could take care of them.

Since then, she had been more careful about the things she said. Thinking back she could remember times where she had said things that had probably hurt Papa Wolf's feelings, like when she thought it would be fun if Elizabeth were her mother. She could remember worrying then about Wolfram, and what would happen to him if Yuuri did get married, but now that a clear picture of that 'what if' had formed in her mind, Greta wanted nothing to do with it. Because, more than anything else, she wanted the three of them to be a real family.

She had Anissina for a motherly role anyway, whether the title was there or not.

But even if such thoughtless words were in the past, she still blushed to think of them. Especially now that Elizabeth had been at the castle for the past few days preparing for her wedding. Greta still really admired her, and wanted to become just like her when she grew up. A powerful, beautiful woman who could beat up men with her sword. But she was glad that Elizabeth was getting married to Arnold, who was a nice man and seemed to love her very much.

By the time she reached her destination, the sun had started to set, casting long shadows from the feet of trees. The bullfrog wasn't home, scared away by the fallen brown and red leaves that blanketed the water. From her seat on the fountain, she could see the beginning of the wedding
reception she was going to miss out on. She wiggled her toes and felt the caked mud slide between them. It would have been fun to watch Elizabeth dance. Yuuri wasn't very good and always danced with the mean ladies who copied Greta's dresses from Earth to impress him. At every party she went to they always cooed over how cute she was, but Greta learned quickly that they were only after her clothes.

Papa Wolf never danced with anyone. Well, with the exception of herself, but when he did that he had to bend over funny so she didn't ask often.

Greta examined her toes and wished she could dance with him now. Or if not Wolfram then Wilfrido, who was only an inch or two taller than her, but he didn't seem to like her very much so his loss.

"Well someone looks like they've got a fox eating them."

Greta jumped so high that she stood up, turning to face the voice that seemed to come out of air.

The man emerged from the shadowed bushes, smiling in a way that seemed kind but was somehow wrong. He was wearing the familiar uniform of the men Wolfram trained, but she couldn't remember ever seeing him before. It wasn't unheard of for one of Wolfram's men to go away for a while, and that he was one of her Papa's men made him seem like he should be trustworthy enough, but just to be safe she walked to the side a little, making sure the fountain was between them. She didn't plan on running yet, because his allusion to the story that had bothered her imagination for years was too much to resist. Like you've got a fox eating you...

"Why a fox?" she asked, hoping it wasn't a mistake.

The man's smile broadened. "Ohh that. It's an expression. It just means you look sad. I didn't mean to worry you. It's from an old story I know."

Could it really be the same? "Do you know how it ends?"

"How it ends?" The man brought a hand to his chin. "It's not a very common story... did Wolfram tell you?"

That was strange. Normally soldiers called her papa "Sir Belefield" or "Sergent." Maybe this man really wasn't so frightening. She let some of the tension out of her legs and nodded. "He told me, but he couldn't remember how it ends."

The man laughed a bit. "Well, he never did pay attention unless it was something 'necessary'. He was always the all or nothing sort about parts of training."

She felt her eyes widen. "You trained with him? For what?"

"For what else?" The man sat on the edge of the fountain, making it more clear that he wasn't going to jump at her. "We're about the same age, so we went through the Flame Rites together."

"Flame Rites?"

"Ohh that's right. You're a little human. It's easy to forget when you're the little princess of the demon kingdom." He winked. "When mazoku are in their early thirties, they're sent to create their bond with the element that chose them when they came of age. Your father and I were in the same batch, sent to the mountains north of Caloria to meet the spirit. But that's a long story and you're still waiting for another one, though I don't know why you'd want to hear the end." He paused. "It's a strange story... or at least... it seems that way to some."
Greta had suspected as much... "The little boy dies, doesn't he?"

"Not so much that..." The man frowned and seemed to lose himself a bit, staring into nothing. "In that village his death was honorable. Denying pain was the ultimate form of strength, so for the boy to die like that, slowly eaten alive by the thing he wanted to protect... He became a legend." The man smiled.

She shivered; it was almost completely dark now and the shadows nearly covered the man's face. Something about him had changed. Before he had just been strange, but now he was downright creepy. Greta backed up a few paces, casually, just for a better head start. She had learned through experience that you never could be too careful in situations like these.

He looked up at her. "It's getting late. Do you know where I can find your father?"

Greta glanced toward the party going on inside. Couples were already spinning on the other side of the glass. When she looked back, he was right in front of her. She froze as every muscle in her body went taunt.

"That's no good... if he's already there..." He put a hand on her shoulder and held on uncomfortably tight. "Why don't you go and get him for me? Tell him an old friend wants to meet him in the garden... Can you do that for me?"

She had two options. She could try to run, in which case he would probably catch her, or... "Sure!" She smiled up at him. "No problem."

The man seemed relieved, though that unidentifiable edge was still there. "Thank you very much, little princess. Your father has you well trained."

Greta curtsied as she backed out of his grasp, and hurried off in the direction of the party. Of course she would go nowhere near it. At first she planned to inform the first guard she saw about an intruder in the gardens, but hesitated. The man did seem to know a lot of personal things about Wolfram, and though he was very creepy he hadn't done anything to hurt her... But going to tell Wolfram about the man would be exactly what he wanted, and if he did have some sort of evil plan she didn't want to play directly into his hands.

She chewed on a fingernail as she headed in the direction of her room. Her sword was there and she would feel better about any situation with its familiar weight on her hip.

********

********

Anissina studied her fingernails in the dimming light of her assumed corner of the ballroom. She never had been completely comfortable in formal wear, and her long dress made her feel slightly exposed even though the hem reached the floor.

Couples spun colorfully on the dance floor to her left, while long tables of dignitaries flanked the smaller round table where the bride and groom sat, still flushed and recovering from earlier dancing. Elizabeth's eyes were bright as she clinked glasses with her new husband, their laughter not reaching her ears over the music and combined chatter of the guests.

The upheaval of weddings after Yuuri's return was becoming progressively less entertaining as the young Maou learned what exactly to do with himself during his speeches before the service. She smirked, remembering the first dedication he had bumbled through. A rogue hand gesture had sent one of the tall center candles clattering to the ground, almost catching the bride's skirt on fire.
Luckily, Wolfram, who had the exciting job of standing next to him as his "fiance", had extinguished the flames before the lady had noticed the small scorch mark.

Gwendal's face had been priceless.

Out of habit, she picked him out of the crowd, raising an eyebrow as he discreetly passed Flurin something she disposed of down her dress. Interesting. She would have to investigate. The two conspirators were speaking in the midst of the crowd waiting for their turn on the dance floor, just close enough to the band so that their voices wouldn't travel. To reach them she was forced to trail a winding path around the edges of the mass of twirling couples. The Maou was right in the middle of it no doubt, being traded about like an un-coordinated piece of meat. Which meant Wolfram was off glaring subtly in every other direction.

Why the selfish loafer had been hounding her for months to help him with that sentimental present was beyond her. She wouldn't have even entertained the project if it didn't employ elements of magical inter-fusing that she had been tempted to play around with for ages. After numerous attempts she had found a method that was working brilliantly and she would have to share the ground-breaking techniques at her next "Sharing of Ingenious Inventions Made by Unexpectedly Gorgeous Women" conference in the spring.

Gwendal spotted her approach a moment too late to make a polite escape. Men... She smiled innocently and watched his eye twitch. "Flurin, don't tell me you're passing notes with this old man."

Flurin laughed and they exchanged greetings. Anissina had always thought Flurin was a wonderful example of women's natural grace at politics. If only more women were in charge of countries.

Anissina looked at Gwendal and politely radiated 'I'm waiting'.

"For goodness sakes! It's the new codex, do you have to notice everything?" Gwendal growled, voice low.

She shook a finger at him. "If you would just tell me these things, I wouldn't have to go through the trouble of making you twitch in public. I could easily have made some sort of encryption device--"

"Hardly necessary, the new code is sufficient on its own. Besides, we're not even sure we're fighting anything but nature..."

It was hard to miss Flurin's cringe. "It's too much of a coincidence."

Gwendal swallowed a mouthful of his drink. "I know it's hard to accept death, especially when it's your citizens--"

"It's worse than that!" Flurin's eyes had glazed over as she looked into the fluted glass she held with both hands. "People surviving, losing limbs, black fingers that crumble off of children..."

"Perhaps we could be without Gisela for a few weeks, see if she could come up with a treatment," Gwendal sighed. "She's our best medic."

Flurin smiled sadly. "I'm still grateful to her for her aid in earlier disasters."

Enough was enough. Anissina coughed.

Flurin blushed. "Ohh Miss Anissina, I was distracted. I had meant to ask you for help earlier, do forgive me."
Gwendal's temple danced and Anissina beamed. "Not at all. Now if I could only get more details about the situation. From what I gathered, Caloria is suffering from an epidemic of some kind?"

Flurin nodded sadly. "We haven't seen so many victims of disease since before my time, during the Blue Storm. I had thought to look for similarities between the two, maybe look for a way to cure it, or at least find a method to ease some of the suffering, but there was none."

There were always odd reminders of the short span of a human life. Anissina remembered hearing about the Blue Storm when she was younger. It was a human affliction, no mazoku had ever died from it, but she remembered the adults being scared that the illness would jump to demons. The fear was of course centered on the half bloods, since they were more similar to humans, and thus if the disease was to jump the half bloods were the most dangerous and likely candidates.

It had created a wonderful uproar in politics as Conrad had been born around that time. If Queen Cheri was good about anything it was her indiscriminate love, and she had fought against the segregation facilities that had sprouted up overnight. Lord Weller, who still lived at the castle during the time, had been furious, but was largely unable to affect the politics of the matter, as influential foreign dignitaries treated him like nothing more than one of Cheri's boy toys. The matter was only made worse by his human blood.

Being so young, she hardly paid attention to it at the time, but in her later years while going through her education, she had looked more closely at the strange human disease: The Blue Storm. The name originated from the blue tinge people acquired before death. The sickness seemed to stay in the lungs, suffocating its victims with their own blood and fluids, creating the ominous hue.

At the Blue Storm's highest mortality point, some human colonies had run out of people to dig graves. Desperate villages dug huge pits, vowing to come back and give the tagged bodies a proper burial later.

Because the disease only affected humans, the human countries suspected a mazoku conspiracy. Which, of course, was completely stupid. No one could engineer disease, it was the will of the gods. It was odd, however, that most of the dead were among the young and previously healthy. The armies of some of the leading human countries were completely wiped out, a fact that only fueled the rumors that the whole thing was a plot by the mazoku nations to eliminate humans.

The suspicion lingered for generations and was one of the contributing factors to the eventual war that had caused the deaths of so many.

Anissina nodded. The situation in Caloria was certainly grim if it was being compared to the Blue Storm. "Besides the number of casualties, are there any other similarities between the two ailments?"

Flurin frowned and shook her head, pain evident in her features. "Nothing in the symptoms, but I strongly believe--"

"A belief that could easily lead to another race war," Gwendal interrupted. "As much as I respect your judgment, there is no evidence--"

This was getting ridiculous. "Will the two of you stop this bickering and explain?"

Gwendal sighed. "The lady believes that Shou Shimeron is responsible for the epidemic."

"Shou Shimeron?" Anissina couldn't help but question it aloud. It seemed wholly unlikely, as the country had dropped of the edge of the political world before she was born, content after its
separation from Dai Shimeron to keep to itself. At least as far as she knew.

"They border us to the south and seem to be unaffected by the sickness."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"No one *is* sure," Gwendal mumbled, just loud enough for both women to glare at him.

Flurin looked back at her. "We've tracked the outbreak back near the border, but all of our scouts were affected..." She trailed off.

"What exactly are the symptoms?"

"Like nothing I've ever seen." The wine in her glass trembled. "There are lots of things... In some cases fingers, toes, noses, all the extremities turn black, sometimes amputating a limb is all we can do to stop the steady spread, like their bodies are rotting while they're still alive. Others just seem to go insane, they have mild physical symptoms, vomiting, convulsions, but something inside them..."

It was more then enough to pique her interest. She would defiantly have to figure this out.

Gwendal spoke, pulling her from her thoughts. "I assure you that the news is more than troubling and that you will always find an ally with Shin Makoku, but making any sort of large scale political movement at this time would create a social maelstrom. The new alliances are tentative at best and we have no evidence. I'll send you all the medics we can spare and supplies to help with food shortages and the like, but making the first steps toward a conflict with a human nation? I'm not sure you've felt the weight of your request."

Flurin frowned, "I understand your concern, but there's something in my bones that knows I'm right about this. Call it women's intuition" She caught Anissina's eye.

Anissina let out a sly grin. "How stubborn men are. I'll see what I can do. Why don't you steal a dance from his majesty and see what shade Sir Belefield turns?"

Before Flurin could leave, Gwendal caught her eye.

"Don't worry. " Flurin glared. "I won't mention a word to your king about it. Tonight." And she slipped away into the crowd.

"Well," Anissina purred, "isn't this just the sort of political discord that gets you out of bed in the morning?"

"This is not something to joke about." He looked away from her, eyes running over the crowd, noticing every interaction.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm well aware, but do you really intend to do nothing?"

"Sending our best medic during such unstable--"

"And what exactly is unstable?" Anissina looked between Gwendal and the reception until he brought a hand to his forehead.

"Anissina," he growled tiredly.

"Out with it. You know I always win."
He sighed. "Everything is stacked just perfectly. We've been ignoring some of Shou Shimeron's other... actions, and I'd rather wait for certain monarchs to do a bit more maturing before a conflict breaks out."

"What do you mean by 'other actions'? As far as I'd heard, Shou Shimeron had dropped out of politics before we were born." It was so irritating to have to ask all these questions. She was used to being the one to explain things. Gwendal really must think less of her if she had fallen so low on the information ladder. Men. They were just intimidated by her brilliant inventions, afraid that one day she would find a way to replace them.

"Out of politics, yes," Gwendal hissed, voice barely reaching her over the music. "There have been instances in the recent past, when we were collecting the boxes, in which they made a nuisance of themselves. Nothing we couldn't easily handle in terms of military power, but the fact that they are the only nation to openly oppose us without punishment while the current Maou is in power, combined with how little we know about them is certainly unsettling."

The music had gotten louder, so she had to step closer, still keeping her voice low. "Still, there must be something else if you're this concerned. I know you, Gwendal. There's nothing you like more than a good military chess game and--"

He grabbed her arm, just below the shoulder. Hard. "Ohh you know", he growled into her ear, "this isn't about me being bored or whatever you've gotten into your head. This could build into a legitimate situation. If what Flurin says is even half true--"

Anissina broke away, ignoring the way her heart raced and color spread across her cheeks. "I thought you didn't believe in women's intuition."

"I don't." He was still glaring at her. "But I know how long I've been watching state affairs and things like this always become some kind of trouble."

She was quiet for a while. Running everything over. Sure, there was some cause for concern, more for Caloria than Shin Makoku as of now. Nothing serious enough to make him lose himself and get rough with her. But something else worried her much more. Flurin had likened the disease to the Blue Storm, but that was only a human disease... Gwendal was more worried than he should be about human death in Caloria, no matter how good an ally they were considered to be. If her suspicion was correct it would easily lead to large scale panic, which often went hand and hand with war. "It's affecting mazoku , isn't it?"

Gwendal finished his drink and looked away, out into the crowd once more. "I've been losing scouts."

********

Wolfram frowned and set his drink on fire. It gave him something to do while he watched Yuuri dance with the female half of the court. The pretty pyrotechnics burned out the alcohol, leaving him with a clearer head than most of the room.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Conrad weaving his way towards him through the bustling crowd for another one of his blasted "conversations". Wolfram considered moving, but this was the best spot to watch the dance floor and he'd be damned if he was giving it up to Weller. So instead he used the last of the fuel in his glass and molded the small flame into the shape of a dragon. It looked up at him and yawned before curling around the rim and going out.
"You've gotten much better at that." Conrad smiled.

"Of course I have," said Wolfram, turning up his nose.

Conrad kept smiling. It was maddening. “I’m sure it makes Gwendal feel more... secure.”

He could feel his cheeks burn. “I’m sure.”

When Wolfram was younger, he would set up small "magic shows" to entertain his mother. Gwendal had always told him he was being frivolous, but Wolfram could see a small glimmer of pride in his brother’s eyes that made his words of disapproval more than tolerable. It wasn’t until later, when he entered his military training and he saw other, equally thoroughbred mazoku having difficulty even summoning a spark, that he had fully understood why.

During his brattier years, when he started the magic shows, he didn’t only do it to win respect from Gwendal and attention from his mother, but also to show Conrad what he was missing out on, being only a half breed.

Looking back it was ridiculous, that Conrad could ever choose or change what he was.

The last time Wolfram put on a show he had been especially keen on receiving praise from Gwendal as his oldest brother had made a fuss about even attending because of his numerous "duties". So naturally he tried to mold him a kitty. The little creation was nearly perfect, though it probably looked more like one of Gwendal’s knitted cats than the real thing. He let it out of his hands to hover over the floor, imitating the proud prance of a young kitten. Wolfram could still feel the swell in his chest at the way Gwendal’s lips had curled up, just the tiniest bit.

But the smile had made him cocky, and he had kept up the game, going so far as to have the kitten jump into Gwendal’s lap and curl up in a mock nap.

It wasn’t until the smoke started to rise and Gwendal jumped about three feet that his young mind had noticed his mistake. It was an easy one to make. After all, the kitten wouldn’t have burned him.

In an attempt to put the past comfortably behind him, he let his eyes drift to where Yuuri was now dancing with Flurin. His fiancé was laughing and bobbing around the dance floor in some vague imitation of a waltz while Flurin smiled politely and was probably praying her toes would live to see another day.

“He’s gotten much better.” Wolfram couldn’t see Conrad, but he could practically hear the smile.

Ohh, not that Weller didn’t have every reason to be smug. Wolfram clenched his jaw. It was difficult, but he really was trying to be civil. If Weller would just avoid the subject of Yuuri... “The Wimp would be better if he’d dance with someone half decent.”

“By your standards ‘half decent’ would be...”

Wolfram rolled his eyes before a hand fell on his shoulder.

“Just give him more time.”

He couldn’t look at him. Looking at him would mean controlling the surge of emotions long enough to convince his "dear brother" that everything was fine. That they were fine. Wolfram nodded.

Why wouldn’t Weller just leave him alone?
But he knew the answer to that: Weller was just too perfect to do anything else.

Conrad Fucking Weller.

The best swordsman in the kingdom, in any kingdom. He would go down in history as the Hero of Ruttenburg, while no matter how skilled a fighter Wolfram became he would only be known as the pretty third son, Cheri’s doll. But more than that, Conrad was the man who just by reaching out a hand could take the person Wolfram wanted most away from him. The filial bastard of a brother who allowed him to pursue what he wanted purely out of the goodness of his heart.

Not that Saint Weller would ever see it that way. He was much too busy worrying about making other people happy to even notice what he wanted for himself.

Or at least that’s how Wolfram saw it. He could be wrong; Conrad really could be the perfect parental figure. If there was any bit of him that really did want to take Yuuri from him, it probably would have happened by now. But no matter how much he rationalized it away the fear stayed.

For all his actions, however maddening it was, Conrad really was a good older brother. Since the conclusion of the whole Dai Shimeron fiasco he had given no reason not to be trusted and seemed genuinely concerned about Wolfram’s relationship with Yuuri. Though Wolfram was sure it had more to do with Yuuri than himself.

Still, Conrad was his brother, and Wolfram was doing his best to get over any "paranoia" he might feel.

Wolfram had lost himself in brooding and hadn’t even noticed when Conrad turned away from him to address… “Elizabeth?”

“At time, brother dearest!” Elizabeth took the opportunity to step around Conrad and pounce on him. “I’ve been trying to give Arnold the slip all night.”

Thankful for the distraction, he hugged her back. “I meant to congratulate you in person—”

“Oh hush, I’m just glad to see you!” She broke out of the hug just enough to latch onto his arm. “It is burning up in here. Why don’t you take me out for some air?”

Before he knew it they had slipped out of the crowd and Wolfram found himself standing out on the balcony looking down on the gardens with Elizabeth still on his arm. He was genuinely surprised that she was being so friendly. Though they had been childhood friends, they hadn’t ended on the best terms. “I really am happy for you, you know. You deserve the best.”

“Of course I do.” She grinned, spinning around so she could lean on the stone railing and look him in the eyes. Her entire presence had changed with the turn and now she glared at him. “And so do you. I THOUGHT I left you to someone you loved, someone who would love you the way I once did—”

“Elizabeth—”

“No! You listen to me. This is supposed to be the happiest day of my life!” Her voice shook as she tried to keep herself in check. “I love Arnold more than anything and I wanted to share that with the people I care about but all I’ve been able to think about is the way he treats you! The things I’ve heard from women who should be wishing me health and happiness…”

Tears were welling up in her eyes and Wolfram had no idea what to do. He hadn’t expected anything like this.
“What happened to you? You would never have let people say things… never let anyone treat you like this…” Then she reached out and hugged him.

Wolfram froze. Her cheek was wet, pressed against his neck and her fingers dug into the back of his jacket with more force than he would have expected. But then again this whole thing was unexpected. He couldn't remember the last time he had been hugged with so much feeling by anyone other than his daughter, maybe Jennifer... His mind trailed off and he made himself hug her back. It seemed like the right thing to do.

She wasn't crying, not the way he was used to girls crying anyway, with loud sobs and big sloppy tears that let everything go at once. He could feel a tear slide down his neck only to be soaked up by his cravat, but she was silent, body barely trembling. "I don't know what to say..." Wolfram breathed, feeling incredibly awkward.

Elizabeth laughed into him, but it sounded more like a sob. "You never did." She stepped out of his arms but kept both hands on his shoulders, eyes piercing him. "You know I still love you, right? I don't want to marry you anymore, but I spent so much of my life loving you that I'll never want anything but the best for you." She let her arms fall, crossing them beneath her breasts and holding herself like she was cold. Her eyes fell, looking to the side out over the shadowed gardens. "I'm scared you're hurting yourself for nothing."

It was so strange, that someone he hardly ever thought about could care so much about him. Along with the guilt that welled up in his stomach came the nagging question of whether it was the same with him and Yuuri. The boy from another world never asked for or wanted the feelings that now absorbed his own existence. Yuuri had the habit of stealing the direction of his thoughts. Even now, when he should be worrying about the woman in front of him, someone who unexpectedly seemed to care more about him than anyone else in his life.

What kind of person did that make him?

He had cared about Elizabeth. She was probably the best friend and playmate he had growing up, but even then they hardly ever got to see each other. Wolfram had completely dropped out of contact with her after Yuuri came. He had dropped out of contact with almost everyone after Yuuri came.

"I'm sorry," he said, meaning it more than he probably sounded. "I never thought... I didn't expect you to--"

"Just because the people that should care don't doesn't mean that no one does. I wish you'd let me take care of you, gods know you need looking after." She winked. "Now, why don't you tell me why in the world you're still chasing around that cheating wimp of a half breed?" The grin that spread across her cheeks was mildly frightening.

********

********

The music swelled for a moment before coming to a close. Yuuri let go of Flurin and took the opportunity to catch his breath. Formals were always so much work! It seemed like he never got to relax and enjoy himself. Although, he did get to catch up with a lot of old friends.

"Thank you for the dance, Your Majesty." Flurin curtsied. Something had seemed off about her demeanor all night. She wasn't usually so formal with him. He wished she would tell him what was wrong.
Yuuri rubbed the back of his head. "No problem... and I've told you call me Yuuri. We are friends right?"

Flurin closed her eyes for a moment and seemed altogether much too serious for a party. "Yes, we're friends..." The worry still hadn't gone out of her voice. "It's just that--" She paused, and looked for a moment as if she had to think of what to say. "Given the circumstances I don't want to be a part of your problems, so I'll be properly formal in such a setting." She turned to leave but stopped when he grabbed her hand.

"What problems? Everything here has been going great."

Flurin gave him the same look Gwendal did when he thought Yuuri was being impossibly stupid. "You can't be serious? I know sometimes social things like this are easy to ignore, but..." She trailed off, the look of disbelief still overwhelming her features.

Now Yuuri was really concerned. "What do you mean? I know I can be oblivious sometimes... If I'm doing something wrong, please tell me! I know I can be a real klutz when it comes to formalities."

Her expression didn't change.

Yuuri looked down at his feet. "It's the dancing, isn't it... I've been getting a lot of practice lately, but I know I'm still far from perfect." When he looked up, he managed a weak smile. "At least I didn't step on your feet this time."

"It's not the dancing... It's just hard to believe you haven't heard... Maybe I'm not being clear." Her eyes bored into him. "About Sir Belefield."

Yuuri was shocked. He and Wolfram had been getting along great lately. Now that Wolfram didn't harass him every hour and call him a cheater three times a day, he was really the perfect friend and roommate—ignoring all the times he had woken up completely tangled with the other boy of course, but Yuuri easily wrote that off as a side effect of Wolfram's violent sleeping habits. Besides, Yuuri much preferred the occasional, accidental, platonic, morning cuddle over waking up with a bruised spleen. "What about Wolfram?"

Flurin shook her head. "Men really are oblivious..."

"Now you sound like Anissina." Yuuri couldn't help but joke. "But really, what's going on with Wolfram? Is something--"

"It's been over two years, Your Majesty."

Yuuri blinked. "Two years since what?"

"Two years since your engagement was announced." Flurin sighed. "We shouldn't talk about this here. Let's go where standing still isn't so obvious." She looked pointedly at the twirling couples around them.

Yuuri nodded and let her lead him off the dance floor. Along the way, he glanced over at the wall where Wolfram seemed a permanent fixture on nights like these and was surprised to see him gone. His stomach sank and he could feel moisture start to accumulate on his palms. The Engagement Problem had almost seemed to disappear in the last year. He had hardly given it a second thought since the night he came back from Earth for the first time after defeating Shinou.

Flurin stopped walking when they were near the small orchestra that was playing in the corner of
the ballroom. "We can talk here, the music will drown everything out and goodness knows leaving
together to talk would be the social scandal of the week." She rolled her eyes. "It's still hard to
believe you haven't noticed anything."

Yuuri couldn't believe he had been missing something so seemingly obvious. "I still don't
understand..."

"His reputation is ruined, Yuuri. He's a laughing stock even in human countries. Tonight I've seen
women beneath his rank speak openly about it and most of my attention has been elsewhere."

Reputation...Laughing Stock...No. It was impossible. If anything like that was happening, Wolfram
wouldn't give him a moment's peace. "Why would anyone say bad things about Wolfram?"

For a second he thought Flurin was going to smack him. "You've been engaged for over two years
and you've spent the entire night on the arm of every woman in the room. They're saying Sir
Belefield isn't even suited to be the King's Whor--"

"STOP IT!" Yuuri covered his ears. He didn't want to know. If he didn't know then it wasn't real.

Flurin just looked at him. "Fine. I have more important things to deal with now anyway." And she
stormed off, leaving him to stand alone with the bass section ringing in his ears.

He stared after her for a while, concentrating on why she had been so angry instead of letting his
mind travel to other things. Yuuri walked out into the crowd and felt very much alone while
surrounded by these decadently dressed strangers. It didn't help that none of his friends were
nearby.

Flurin had disappeared. Gwendal was talking to a group of dignitaries he didn't want to deal with at
the moment. Conrad was nowhere to be seen. He felt his eyes pull to that familiar wall where
Wolfram always watched him. The entire room seemed wrong now that he wasn't there.

Several ladies asked him to dance as he made his wandering circle of the ballroom but he politely
turned them all down. When he reached the windows he noticed the bottom half an elegantly
dressed man sticking out of the curtains.

Strange.

Desperate for a distraction, he tapped the man on the shoulder. "Erm..."

"Oh!" The man jumped about a foot, "Your Majesty, I'm sorry for my appearance--"

Yuuri recognized him at once, "Arnold? What are you doing in the curtains?"

Arnold blushed and dug his hands into his pockets. "I guess I'm not the best new husband." He
nodded his head to the side, toward the window. "Jealous already and all."

"What do you mean?" Yuuri rushed to look out the window. Wolfram was out on the balcony with
Elizabeth. Their backs were to the window and they seemed to be looking out over the gardens.

"They're just talking. I should be more trusting, I know, but..." Arnold came to stand beside him,
letting his hand fall against the glass. "Well, you know how she felt about him."

Outside the window Wolfram turned to her and laughed. Not the sarcastic humph or or single snort
Yuuri was used to hearing but a real laugh. Or at least it seemed like it by the way his shoulders
shook and and a tension in his face Yuuri had never noticed before lifted. He wondered what it
"You know, I almost feel like I know him." Arnold continued, "The whole way here, *three weeks* of traveling and the stories never seemed to end."

Yuuri's throat felt like it had turned to stone and sunk several inches down into his stomach. "Really..."

"Strange, isn't it? I'm almost afraid to stand next to him... I mean... she... for so long." He trailed off.

Yuuri did the only thing he could think of and put a hand on his shoulder. "But she married you," he said, trying to sound encouraging.

His eyes glazed over a bit and he smiled. "Yeah... she did." Then he slapped an arm down on Yuuri's shoulder, leaving them diagonally entwined. "And I have you to thank for it."

"Erm," said Yuuri and dropped his arm. "How's that?"

"By getting rid of the competition, of course!" Arnold grinned for a moment before letting his arm fall and gazing back out the window. "I'd never have gotten her to warm up to me otherwise."

It was so strange to watch him talk about her. For Arnold, Elizabeth was the most important person in the world. It was beautiful, really. "I'm sure she would have warmed up to you anyway. The love you give comes back to you." Yuuri did his best to smile at him.

"Perhaps you're right." Arnold said, then winked at him. "We've given them enough time. Let's go steal them back, shall we?"

Yuuri could only nod and follow him along the wall until they reached the door to the balcony. He didn't know how he felt about seeing Wolfram now. He certainly didn't want what Flurin said to be true, mostly because he didn't want Wolfram to be mad at him. They had been getting along so well lately...

The closer they got, the more Yuuri found himself looking forward to seeing him. Wolfram would say something snarky and they would talk about something mundane and everything would go back to normal. Flurin was just upset about something else and taking it out on him. Unfortunate as it was, nothing else made sense.

Before Arnold could say anything, Elizabeth spotted them over Wolfram's shoulder and grinned. "I was wondering how long I was aloud to have to myself." She walked around Wolfram and moved toward her husband.

"Can you blame me? You're the most beautiful person here. I have to keep my eye on you." Arnold opened his arms for her and they embraced, oblivious to everything else around them.

Behind them, Wolfram looked on with guarded features. Yuuri made eye contact and smiled as warmly as he could. Wolfram looked surprised for a moment before letting the corner of his mouth twitch up. "Getting tired, Wimp?"

Yuuri could feel his face heat up. It was weird to feel so nervous around Wolfram. "No. I mean... It's not that late."

"What time is it, anyway?" Elizabeth asked, gazing up into Arnold's eyes.
They had to separate so Arnold could get at his pocket watch. "Almost eleven."

"Eleven!" Wolfram started. "I completely forgot... Excuse me, Elizabeth, Sir Critenden." Wolfram bowed slightly and headed for the door back into the reception.

Yuuri caught his arm as he passed. "Where are you going?"

Wolfram sighed. "I should have tucked Greta in an hour ago. She's probably still up skewering pillows with that blasted sword."

"That doesn't sound like her..." Yuuri puzzled.

"I didn't let her come tonight. She threw a colorful fit--"

"Why didn't you let her--"

"She threw a frog at Lady Francesca during the last formal." Out of the corner of his eye Yuuri could see Elizabeth's hands fly to her mouth to cover a laugh.

"Why would she do that?"

This time Elizabeth cut in. "Because she's an ugly bitch, that's why. Remind me to send that girl of yours a new dress..."

Wolfram pinched the bridge of his nose and looked uncomfortably like his eldest brother. "No daughter of mine is going to go around throwing frogs during formal occasions. It's hardly behavior suited to a princess."

"Would you rather she threw something else?" Yuuri asked, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Elizabeth giggled and Wolfram's eye started to twitch. "I'll return after she's settled." Wolfram glared at Yuuri in a way that screamed "Don't do anything stupid", turned on his heel, and left.

He was gone for several seconds before Yuuri realized he should have asked to come. Compared to Wolfram, he was turning out to be a terrible father. Still, Wolfram hadn't seemed mad at him in particular, so what Flurin said couldn't possibly be true. Yuuri smiled and turned, only to be met by one of Elizabeth's most intimidating stares.

"I liked it when you proved me wrong about you, Your Majesty." She was half dragging Arnold, who seemed completely out of the loop, by the arm. Right before she passed him to go inside she smiled at him, evil still dancing in her eyes. "Why don't you start working on that again...hmm?"

And then they were gone, leaving him on the balcony alone, feeling much more miserable than he had in months.

********

********

Another hallway clear.

After Lady Elizabeth had apprehended his little brother, Conrad had gotten word from one of his men that a suspicious man had been sighted in the gardens. He kept his hand on his sword as he walked silently down the stone corridors. There was something calming about the way the hilt dug into his palm, the way the leather binding molded perfectly to every curve of his hand.

He hardly ever got to use it outside the training grounds these days, and the men he trained, though
skilled, still weren't good enough to be much of a challenge. Lately Conrad had found himself becoming jealous of the men out in the field. Men who got to actually serve their country, use their skills every day out on the borders to make a difference. Men like Yozak.

Conrad was sure his friend was out somewhere having the time of his life. Sneaking his way deep undercover in a foreign court or working as a tavern girl in a place where the gossip was fresh. It had been too long since Yozak had returned to the castle to swap stories, the spy always filling the air with his voice deep into the night while the rest of the castle slept.

Conrad wished he could be of more use. With Shin Makoku at peace there was little for him to do besides look after his King, and without the earlier sense of political upheaval Conrad found himself being needed less and less.

To be completely honest, he was almost excited when his man had come to him about a possible intruder.

Conrad stopped. Could he be any more stupid? In his eagerness for a conflict he had left the most important thing unguarded. Yuuri.

He let his fist slam into the wall by his side, and for a moment reveled in the pain it brought him. Then he turned and ran back in the direction he had come. Back toward the ballroom.

********

********

The door to Greta's bedroom creaked softly as he pushed it open. Wolfram had half-expected to find his daughter asleep, but nothing could have prepared him for the armed shadow that lunged at him from beside the door.

Instinct took over and a second later he was holding his crying daughter's sword hand by the wrist high enough that her feet couldn't touch the ground. She screamed and the small blade clattered to the floor.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!!" Wolfram yelled, putting her squarely on the ground. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook. "I could have HURT YOU!"

Then he hugged her, and every tiny quiver of her body made him feel like the worst person in the world. "I'm so sorry , Greta..." he whispered, stroking her hair. Wolfram knelt down and looked up into her face, missing the time when the movement had brought her to eye level. "You scared me."

Greta cracked a smile . "You scared me, too."

Wolfram sighed in relief, happy she wasn't as traumatized as he felt. "Now, why on earth did you jump at me like that?"

"There was a man..." She trailed off, eyes shifting to the floor.

The sense of terror was almost overwhelming; his ears buzzed and he swallowed hard. "What man...Did he touch you?"

Greta tilted her head. "Humm... I don't think so."

Wolfram was sure he'd never be able to feel his stomach again.

Oblivious to her papa's near-death experience, Greta continued. "He was sort of nice, but sort of
creepy... I suppose the longer after I got away the more worried about it I got. Which is why I was lying in wait in case he did turn out to be bad. I think I got a little too into my game, though." She rubbed the back of her head, looking every bit like her other father.

"Why didn't you come tell me about this sooner?"

"Because someone said I wasn't allowed to go into the ballroom..." Greta pouted.

Wolfram covered his face with a hand and growled, "GRETA--"

"Ohh don't get mad! I'm not serious. It was because he wanted to see you. Since he was all creepy I didn't want to do what he said..." She squeezed the rug with her toes.

"To see me?"

Greta nodded. "He was wearing your colors, but I didn't recognize his face."

"My colors... You should know all my men..." Wolfram frowned.

"I know that! Which was part of why he was so creepy. It seemed like he had known you for a long time..." Greta brought a hand to her chin. "What exactly are Flame Rites anyway? I mean, Creepy Guy said that you have to go to a mountain, but he didn't say exactly what..."

Her voice faded into the background as troubled thoughts leapt to the forefront of Wolfram's mind. Only two other people had gone with him to meet the spirit, excluding their older escort, but that man had died during the war. That only left Lucien, who spent most of his time at the palace and he was sure Greta knew him by face, and "Marques..." Wolfram whispered, and tried to push down the feelings of hatred and self-loathing the name evoked.

Greta, who had been talking the whole time, stopped. "Marques? Is that his name... Anyway, he knew about the story--"

"Stay in your room," Wolfram instructed, standing up and inspecting the door. "You have your key in here, right? Be sure to lock up after I leave and don't let anyone in unless you know them, and not even then if they sound suspicious. You can sleep in as long as you like tomorrow, how does that sound?"

"Ohh, just wonderful Papa, that's not menacing at all. I'm sure I'll have the best sleep ever." She pouted.

He sighed. "I don't think he means you any harm, it just never hurts to be safe. Next time something like this happens I want you to tell me right away no matter what. And if you can't tell me, you should tell Gwendal or--"

"I already told one of the guards , just to be safe." Her hands were on her hips and she looked more than annoyed at being patronized. "You still treat me like I'm too young, Papa Wolf."

Wolfram blushed at the name. It was just too adorable when she called him that. It was hard to watch her grow up so fast, and easy to forget how quickly she matured. "I'm sorry. I know you're much more clever than any other girls your age, I'm just trying to take care of you."

"I know." She smiled before curling her arms over her chest and walking dutifully towards her bed. Gretta plopped down on the end and stuck her nose in the air. "I expect a proper story tomorrow, like about Flame Rites, or how you know Creepy Guy."
It really was amazing how much he let himself spoil her. Wolfram wondered if there was anything he could do at this point, but she really was a good girl where it mattered most, so he couldn't really see how it hurt. "Of course."

Greta seemed pleased for a moment, before a suspicious smile crept up on her lips. "AND Yuuri has to come tuck me in, too. I never get to have BOTH of you."

Wolfram chuckled nervously. "I'll see what I can do... Now remember. Stay here. Be safe."

"Yes Sir!" She gave a mock salute and collapsed backward onto her bed.

He shook his head and turned to leave, making sure to lock the door on his way out.

Wolfram leaned against the wall by her door for a few moments. He told himself it was to keep watch for a while, just to be safe, but in truth he needed time to collect his thoughts. There was no reason for Marques to be here. The corporal had deserted almost three years back. Since it was around the time his body was being used as a toy by a possessed thearch, Wolfram hadn't paid it much mind. What in the world could bring Marques back, and asking for him no less? Sure, they had some sort of history, whether he liked to admit it or not, but Wolfram had been very discouraging about that even before he'd gotten engaged.

He sighed and pushed himself off the wall. The hallways were almost deserted this time of night, with only the occasional guard standing out on patrol. With the current state of peace, there hadn't been any need for a huge night staff in the palace. Which was why Marques likely had an easy time getting in, especially since he seemed to have kept his old uniform. Anyone outside Wolfram's own units would hardly give him a second glance.

Given that, Wolfram wasn't surprised to see Marques leering at him from a shadow outside his old bedroom. Wolfram stopped a good distance away and crossed his arms, waiting.

"I was beginning to think the rumors were true," Marques drawled, stepping away from the wall and moving a few paces toward him.

Wolfram put a hand on his sword and Marques stopped.

"Or are they?" He grinned. "His majesty still hasn't kicked you out of his bed?"

"State your purpose, Corporal," Wolfram hissed, his teeth grinding against the words.

Marques raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Sorry, sorry. It's just hard to imagine, you make the sweetest sounds--"

"SILENCE!" Wolfram half-screamed in outrage, fire building in his palms.

"-- not to mention how stunning you are," He winked.

"You have ten seconds to tell me why you're here before all that's left of you is a perverse pile of ashes." Wolfram seethed.

Marques pouted dramatically. "I didn't think you'd still be so uptight, if rumor serves His Majesty's loosened you up quiet a bit--" He stopped as a wave of flame passed over him, nearly searing off the hair on his arms. "HEY!"

"You've gotten better... Pity. I thought I'd at least get your eyebrows." Wolfram frowned. It was a juvenile trick to be sure, but all the force he was willing to use until he figured out why Marques
had come. In early mazyoku training their instructors had let students of similar elements fight one another for practice. It was an easy way to let young mazoku test their skills against one another without having to worry about the youngsters actually killing each other. Any fire user worth half his salt could protect himself somewhat from fire, simply because they shared allegiance to the same spirit. That wasn't to say, however, that Wolfram couldn't burn Marques to a crisp if he so chose. But that was only because he really, truly, wanted him to disappear so badly.

Marques was still trying to wipe the singe from his uniform. "Why are you always so mean?"

"Why do you insist on wasting my time with your perversions?"

Marques grinned and licked his lips, "Ohh, but I could waste your time so well..."

Wolfram could feel his cheeks burn. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

"Fine." Marques sighed and dug into his right pocket. "As long as someone didn't burn the damn thing." A folded square of paper emerged from the fabric and Marques held it out. "You'll have to come get it."

Wolfram rolled his eyes and stepped forward, still cautiously aware of Marques' every move. When he took the paper, Marques made sure their fingers touched uncomfortably and grinned. Wolfram did his best to ignore it and moved back a few paces, unfolding it without looking before letting his eyes dart down to the paper in his hand. "Numbers?"

Marques nodded, now serious.

He raised an eyebrow. "And...?"

"And you should consider it a warning."

Wolfram's eyes narrowed. "Why are you really here?"

"Besides convincing you to run away with me?" Marques ran a hand through his hair, but his eyes didn't carry any sparkle. "I'm serious. I would have given it to Gwendal but he hates me."

"I wonder why."

"Why indeed..." He huffed and let his eyes rake over Wolfram. "We're from the same country and everything. I think he's jealous of my hair..."

Wolfram snorted. "Clearly." The corporal's hair was dark and short, but still long enough to curl slightly around his ears. His eyes matched his hair and Wolfram noted uncomfortably that Marques was as close to a double black as normal mazoku came. He didn't have the same skin as Yuuri, or the same regal slant of the eyes, but the resemblance was there. Even their build was the same. "You still haven't told me why you're sneaking around the palace scaring my daughter half to death. Do you expect me to believe anything you say after you abandoned your position?"

"With orders is hardly an abandonment of one's post."

"Orders from who?"

Marques stared at him for a moment before smirking, eyes covered in shadow. "Who indeed..." Then Marques pushed himself away from the wall and headed towards him.

Wolfram stood his ground --doing anything else would show weakness-- but Marques walked by
him without incident. Wolfram turned to watch him leave. "Is that it? Why bother even coming?"

"Besides seeing your pretty face..." Marques muttered before twisting to face him. "In all seriousness, give that to your brother. If he doesn't know what it is by now then Gods help us all."

He watched Marques disappear down the corridor before he realized he should have stopped him. Though, the man was mostly harmless and was probably just off in his own perverse little world playing games with the rest of society. Wolfram shoved the note into his pocket absently as he tried to push down the memories Marques had brought with him. Those filthy hands on him that he had been too stupid--

His fist hurt, forced against a wall. How crude.

Wolfram hurried off in the direction of the ballroom, spending so much time not thinking that he hardly noticed when the dark scenery of castle walls changed to the bright swirls of color and sound that engulfed the ballroom. He found a chair in the corner, pulling a drink off the buffet table as he passed.

It wasn't until his third trip up for more that he realized he'd forgotten to light any of them.

********

********

Yuuri checked one last time that Gwendal's attention was elsewhere before he slipped out the main entrance to the ballroom. Wolfram was gone. Conrad was nowhere to be found. Even Gunter was suspiciously absent. Something must be going on.

Or, really, something HAD to be going on. Something to get him out of that oppressive room, where everyone spoke with cruelty behind his back.

A moment later, he turned a corner and was almost run over by-- "Conrad?"

The older man was breathing heavily and looked relieved to see him. "Your Majesty, what are you doing outside the ball room? It could be dangerous--"

"Ah HA! Something is going on. I knew it!" Yuuri grinned. "What is it?"

Conrad sighed. "Nothing huge. Just rumors of someone suspicious in the gardens. You shouldn't go wandering around alone at any time , though. Wolfram will throw a fit if he finds out." Conrad smiled a bit through his seriousness.

Yuuri's mood sank. That was the other reason he'd left. "Have you seen him?"

"Wolfram?" Conrad's eyes widened for a moment. "He was talking with Elizabeth--"

"And then he went to tuck Greta in... That was a while ago though," As much as Yuuri didn't want to confront the rumors, he needed to talk to Wolfram. Just something to reassure himself that he wasn't this terrible person who hurt his friends through carelessness. But maybe there was another way to find out...

Conrad must have noticed his concern, because he put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure he's fine. Are you certain he's not in the ballroom? There are a lot of people in there. I'll help you look for him."

"Wait. Conrad... Flurin said... well according to her a lot of people have been saying... And I don't
want to believe it!" He paused, having to force the words out. "I haven't ruined Wolfram's reputation have I?

Conrad's eyes were sad. It was all the confirmation he needed.

Yuuri let his fingernails dig into his scalp as he grabbed his own head in frustration. "Why didn't anybody tell me?" Yuuri choked out, surprising even himself by how much his chest hurt, by how much his tone betrayed that pain. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Yuuri..." said Conrad, his own voice mirroring his king's feelings. "It wasn't for me to tell you. Wolfram has been very adamant--"

"Wolfram knows?" Yuuri almost whimpered. He had been holding on to the hope that maybe Wolfram didn't know, that that was the reason he hadn't been burnt to a crisp. For Wolfram to know, for him to knowingly give up the reputation he cherished just to... "I'm terrible..." He trailed off, focusing on the cracked stone beneath his feet.

The hand on his shoulder tightened. "You're not terrible-- It's not your fault the way cruel people--"

"Still. I feel terrible. I wish there was something I could do..." Yuuri blushed, realising the implication of his words. "I mean, besides..." As bad as he felt, he wasn't about to jump into a marriage. Even Wolfram wouldn't be happy with that. He looked up at Conrad, hopeful.

Conrad smiled in a way that never ceased to be reassuring. "I'm sure we'll think of something, but let's go find him first. I'm sure he's off in the one corner you overlooked.

Yuuri nodded and let himself be led away from the dark stone corridors.

********

That's it. Wolfram thought, staring morosely at the spinning tile beneath his feet. The floor was moving. The floor hadn't moved since his seventyth birthday party. He was done for.

Wolfram was always consumed by unavoidably bad thoughts on nights like this, but tonight really was something special. Sure, he'd gotten used to the comments, the looks, those ghastly giggles that made his spine crawl, how Yuuri's eyes always lingered on the cleavage of the numerous women he danced with. And he'd thought he'd been making progress!

"Wimp." Wolfram hiccuped, and put his head between his legs. His elbows dug into his knees where they were the support for hands that held up his heavy head. The roots of his hair stung near the sides of his face, where his fingers gripped mercilessly, the pain consoling the dull throb in his chest.

He was used to having a bad reputation. It had followed him all his life. Bratty Prince. Selfish Loafer. Third Son. Wolfram the Beautiful. Yuuri's stupid Earth word and the way he said it. Wolfram wasn't even sure what 'gae' was, but it seemed to be bad as much as it seemed to be something he was and Yuuri wasn't. Wolfram sighed. At least before most of his bad reputations were more important to him than anyone else.

Being the subject of conversations from here to the Great Seas was interesting to say the least. In some ways it made it all seem less real. Almost impossible.

He couldn't be The King's Pet because Yuuri avoided his company. He couldn't really be The King's Whore because his fiancé wanted nothing of it. To be unsuitable for those two false titles
was unreal. Why should he care what any of these people thought? They were all blind fools.

Tonight was definitely his low point, however. Wolfram had been forced to remember a part of his past that he had almost *almost* let himself forget about. Marques' visit forced the realization down his throat. He was very nearly unworthy to be in the position he was in. Very nearly unworthy of Yuuri.

He and Marques had never had sex in the strictest of senses, but he wasn't as *untouched* as the king's fiancé should be. Wolfram had regretted that mistake for years before Yuuri had come and now...

Well, now it didn't exactly matter. It wasn't like they were ever going to get married, anyway. Wolfram tightened his fists until he could feel a few strands pull out, desperate to make the sting in his eyes legitimate.

And now what was he on top of it all? Drunk. How humiliating.

Wolfram pushed back the thoughts. Pushed back the hurt. Counted the colored tiles beneath his feet until his eyes dried, not allowing any weakness to splatter down below. Contrary to popular belief, he hadn't let himself cry since the day Yuuri left for, he had thought, forever.

He sat up straight, opened his eyes wide and tried to make the color and noise focus into something intelligible. When the spinning lessened, he went up and got some water to drink and dilute the poison in his mind before hurrying back to his seat, afraid he would stumble and give himself away. He just wanted the night to be over, to go bed and fall asleep watching Yuuri breathe.

********

********

The first bit of Wolfram Yuuri managed to spot was his boots, almost hidden behind a potted tree in a corner behind the buffet table. He was sitting up straight with his arms crossed over his chest and seemed to be staring intently at a particular point in the distance. He also seemed a little sad.

Yuuri swallowed the lump in his throat and walked toward him. Wolfram hadn't noticed him yet... It wasn't too late to turn back. But then he would still have the bad feeling, and he'd try anything to make that go away. Yuuri could feel his palms starting to sweat, so he tried to discreetly wipe them on his pants before taking his last few steps, until he was standing almost in front of Wolfram.

Wolfram didn't seem to notice him, though. Yuuri glanced in the direction of his gaze and didn't see anything all that interesting--

"What is it, Wimp?"

Yuuri jumped, and could already feel the color spreading across his face. "Erm... well... lovely weather..."

"Quite." Wolfram snorted. "Out with it."

"O-out with what?" Yuuri stammered, and wondered where his voice had gone.

Wolfram sighed. "Fine." His teeth were clenched. "Why are you over here bothering me instead of enjoying the party?"

Bothering? Wolfram had never been bothered by him before when he wasn't even making a mistake. He was trying to fix things now and everything and Wolfram was still mad. Not that he
didn't deserve it. What if Wolfram never forgave him--

"Don't make that face. I'm sorry I snapped at you. It's just... unexpected."

"That's alright!" Yuuri smiled, relieved. "Look, Wolfram, I was thinking... Well... About having fun at parties... I... You..." Yuuri stopped and shoved his hands into his pockets; they kept moving around and it was distracting. He pinched his thigh through the lining of his pocket. Hard. "Doyouwannadance?" Yuuri looked intently at the floor and tried to will the burning in his face away.

The moment of silence that stretched was almost unbearable.

Finally Wolfram spoke. "Who put you up to this?"

Yuuri peeled his eyes from the ground and looked at Wolfram's face. "What?" His mind raced. "No one--What? No."

"You're a terrible liar, Yuuri."

Why did Wolfram always have to be difficult? Why couldn't he just get this over with so he could start making things right? "Wolfram," said Yuuri, trying with all his might to make it sound stronger than he felt. "Can I have this dance?" And he held out his hand.

Wolfram stared at him, then his eyes flicked over Yuuri's shoulder. His jaw clenched and when he grabbed Yuuri's hand it stung as his knuckles were forced together. As he stood he pulled Yuuri to him, just enough so Wolfram could whisper through teeth into his ear, "You will NOT embarrass me tonight."

When Yuuri turned to lead him to the dance floor he almost ran into a group of women who looked nearly as confused as he felt. "Wha-" He looked over at Wolfram, but he had a slight smile plastered smoothly over the anger Yuuri could feel crackling against his hand. Yuuri felt Wolfram tug slightly and remembered to walk, amazed at the way conversation stopped in a wave around them. He swallowed. They would be fine... He was less clumsy than ever and Wolfram was supposed to be a great dancer. He wouldn't do anything to make Wolfram feel worse. He couldn't.

They reached the center of the dance floor and Yuuri could feel his knees starting to shake. Everyone was looking at them. He couldn't imagine how Wolfram managed to look so calm. The situation couldn't be more awkward and then-- The music stopped. The sound of his own heartbeat rushed into his ears he looked desperately at the conductor.

"Call the dance." He heard Wolfram hiss, but when he turned back it didn't look like he'd spoken at all.

"Wha-... Oh!" His mind was completely blank. Why was this so difficult? They never asked him to call the dances before. "Erm... Waltz?" He managed, voice only slightly shaking. It was the only thing he was remotely good at...

Wolfram nodded and moved toward him, almost touching Yuuri's waist before sweeping the hand up and through his hair in an attempt to cover the gesture. "Right. You lead." Something about him seemed off. There was a crease in his brow and when Yuuri did reach out and grab his hand Yuuri could feel it shaking. Maybe Wolfram was as nervous as he was. For all his reputation, he hadn't actually seen Wolfram dance-- Excluding all the times years ago when he was first starting to learn and the clingy prince had insisted Yuuri practice with him. What if Wolfram was getting rusty?

When he put his right hand on Wolfram's waist and the music started, Wolfram stepped forward,
bringing them completely into position to wait for the beat. Then his breath hit him, hard and bitter
and "Wolfram? Have you been--"

"Yes." Wolfram whispered. He seemed almost... *scared*. His eyes widened for a second, "Move.
Wimp." And they were off.

Yuuri tried to concentrate on his feet without looking down at them. "Are you--" Talking while
dancing was not his best idea and he thought they would stumble for sure, but something about the
way Wolfram pulled on his shoulder and shifted made the misstep unnoticeable.

Wolfram's cheeks were red and his brow was creased, and he seemed to be concentrating so hard
his eyes were starting to cross. _It was almost cute_. Yuuri barely noticed that three steps had gone
by. It was strange, but somehow reassuring, the way Wolfram managed to lead him when Yuuri
wasn't even aware of himself.

Yuuri felt the hand holding onto Wolfram's waist relax away from the nervous stiffness it always
held whenever he was dancing with anyone else and simply appreciate the warmth pressed against
it. The heat covered by folds of cloth and the cool leather of his belt. Yuuri felt the hand holding
his shoulder relax in turn, pressing against him just softly enough that Yuuri found a tickle in the
back of his mind wishing for even more of that pressure.

It was overwhelming. Spinning, being held and holding-- It was too much to think about so Yuuri
didn't. He just let himself feel it as long as the music played.

Looking at Wolfram's face was too hard, too much to worry about. So without thinking Yuuri
pulled him closer, until just the slightest misstep would brush their entire bodies together. But
Wolfram wasn't going to let them misstep. Yuuri could feel Wolfram's breath against his ear from
where the sides of their heads nearly touched. "You were right..." Wolfram whispered and Yuuri
almost shivered.

"What?" He asked, mind starting to spin as much as his body.

Wolfram squeaked and Yuuri realised it had been a poorly controlled hiccup. "I'm drunk."

"Oh..." It was hard to believe. Yuuri's mind was so clouded that it seemed like he was the one who
should be drunk.

"So--" Another squeak, "Are you going to tell me whose idea this *charming* public display of pity
was, or not?"

The music was going by so fast and the couples around them were hardly a blur. Yuuri was
vaguely afraid of falling into them. "What?"

"Or is this just you feeling guilty--"

"No..."

"Liar!" His breath was harsh, burning Yuuri's neck as the anger slipped inside his collar.

Yuuri fought back a shiver and tried to focus his thoughts. "Just because it wasn't my idea doesn't
mean--"

"So you admit--"

Yuuri tightened his grip on Wolfram's waist and felt a small blip of accomplishment at the sound
Wolfram made. Was Wolfram ticklish? He would have to remember that later. "Just because it wasn't my idea doesn't mean I don't want to do it--- stop fighting me on this."

Wolfram was silent for a bit, but Yuuri noticed the way the hitching of his breath seemed to speed up. Then-- "Dizzy..." he whimpered.

The song was almost over. If he could just do something to help for a few more seconds... After all, Wolfram had led him through this dance even though he was mentally impaired. Yuuri had almost forgotten where they were, that they were even moving, and with more grace on the floor then he'd ever hope to manage on his own. "Hey... Stay with me okay?" He squeezed Wolfram's hand.

Yuuri could feel Wolfram's hair brush against his cheek as he nodded, but the way the air shuddered out of his lungs was still worrisome.

Something about it sparked a memory. Needing to support Wolfram, spinning-- "Wolfram... remember how to breathe..." He could feel Wolfram starting to slip, so he pinched at his waist again. "Hey! Focus. In, in, out... he, he, huu..."

Slowly, he could feel Wolfram's breath start to match his, the synchronous rise and fall of their chests almost bringing them together each time. Yuuri was so lost in the feeling that it startled him when Wolfram brought them to a stop.

They separated.

Yuuri looked at Wolfram and was relieved to see his friend smiling slightly back at him. Wolfram's cheeks were flushed, but he didn't look as shaken as Yuuri knew he was. As he was distantly aware of a few people clapping and the whispers that seemed to break out around the room, Yuuri was much more focused on how he could get his friend out of here. For all he had done to bring Wolfram to this place, Yuuri was determined to save him from the scrutiny of this vicious crowd.

"That was fun, but boy am I tired. Why don't we go get some air." Yuuri nodded toward the balcony.

Wolfram answered with a blank stare, but followed him when Yuuri headed toward the balcony. Yuuri was still amazed at the way the crowd parted for them.

Once they were on the balcony, Yuuri closed the tall glass door behind them, trapping the eager onlookers inside the ballroom before sliding the huge outdoor curtains shut. The night air felt cold on his skin as the wind cooled the sweat on his neck.

Wolfram had moved forward to look out over the gardens, knuckles white on the stone railing. "I'm going to tell you to do two things in the next few seconds and I expect nothing less than compliance, Wimp." Wolfram gritted out.

Yuuri, still standing behind him, decided to wait for his instructions.

"The first is to never try to be subtle again. It's painful to watch." Wolfram shuddered and brought his other hand up to brace the stone. "The other is, don't look."

How Wolfram knew when he actually did turn away, Yuuri couldn't be sure, but he was rewarded by the sound of Wolfram emptying his stomach over the railing. Seconds later, Yuuri was by his side, rubbing Wolfram's back and feeling unimaginably guilty.

When he was finished, Wolfram let himself hang over the railing on his stomach, arms dangling
below his head, and moaned pitifully.

"Let's get you in bed..." Yuuri wrapped his arms around Wolfram from behind and pulled him upright. The blond muttered a few words of protest but otherwise let himself be moved however Yuuri wanted. "I don't want to go back in there... but... it's only half a story down to the gardens from here, we can get to our room by cutting through the East wing."

Wolfram, who seemed to be standing well enough on his own now, nodded. Yuuri let him go reluctantly, still worried about his friend's balance.

"We'll climb down over here... away from...yeah..." Yuuri hurried over to the other end of the balcony and looked down. There was a low buttress hanging out from the wall right next to where the balcony ended; it would be easy to slide down from here. When he looked back at Wolfram, Yuuri was surprised to see him standing next to him on the other side of the railing. "Erm... what are you--"

"It's half a story. Easy jump." And then he disappeared.

Yuuri was horrified. "Wolfram!" he yelled, rushing to the edge and looking over.

Wolfram was smirking up at him a few feet away. "Don't yell. We're supposed to be sneaky, remember?"

Yuuri jumped the railing and tackled him. "Don't scare me like that!"

When Yuuri landed on him, Wolfram hit the ground with a soft "ooph" followed by an uncoordinated attempt at struggling away. "Mean..." He trailed off, looking up at Yuuri, who was sitting on his stomach. His cheeks were red from drink and his hair had fanned out prettily around him after the fall.

Yuuri leaned over him, still teasing. "Who's mean? You're the one who jumps off buildings and scares people half to death."

"Oh..." Wolfram managed, still looking dazed.

There was a pleasant humming in the back of his mind. Wolfram's hands were warm on his thighs and something about it made him not want to move. But not moving would just be strange. Who goes around sitting on people anyway? So Yuuri stood up and pulled Wolfram to his feet.

A silence followed them back to his room. It wasn't embarrassing or exactly awkward, but it wasn't pleasant either. The buzzing in his mind had dulled, but Yuuri was constantly annoyed at they way Wolfram thwarted his attempts to help him walk. He wouldn't even let Yuuri put an arm around his shoulder and that profound lack of contact was suddenly very distracting.

Compared to the lively ballroom, the deserted hallways seemed dark and cold, but mostly lonely. Yuuri crossed his arms and shivered.

Wolfram muttered something suspiciously like "wimp" and put an arm around his shoulder.

"Hey!" Yuuri pouted. "I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

His friend just snorted and pulled him closer.

They arrived at their room sooner than he'd expected and Wolfram let his arm drop.
"You'd better hurry back." Wolfram reached for the door but Yuuri stopped him.

"I don't want to go back..."

Wolfram stared at him. "Yuuri, if you don't go back everyone will think we're..."

"We're...." Yuuri copied, trying to make sense of it all. Then-- "Ohh!" He stammered, immediately trying to look anywhere but Wolfram's face.

Wolfram nodded and opened the door. "I suppose I should thank you... for tonight..."

Yuuri could see the blush crawl onto his friend's cheeks, and something inside him made parting this way seem... wrong. So before Wolfram could disappear inside, Yuuri hugged him.

Wolfram tensed on contact, but otherwise accepted Yuuri's clumsy embrace.

As good as holding him felt, it also made him sad. "I'm sorry, Wolfram... for everything... I didn't--"

"Don't." Wolfram growled and tried to push him away.

All the feelings of guilt Yuuri had been suppressing for hours seemed to crash down on him at once. Yuuri squeezed him tighter and pushed Wolfram back until they hit something solid and the door shut behind them, leaving Wolfram pressed firmly against the wooden frame, and his own head buried in his friend's chest. Since they were still in the hallway he had to struggle to keep his voice down. "Please... don't be mad! Don't leave! I didn't know! If I had known I never would have--" He was almost hysterical now, holding on to Wolfram with all his strength and sniffing as tears threatened to fall. Wolfram was so solid against him. This pillar in his life that he couldn't imagine being without. He hated himself for causing pain to this irreplaceable person.

Wolfram relaxed in Yuuri's arms, reaching up to hold him in return. "Calm down. I'm not going anywhere. If I left there'd be no one to keep you out of trouble. My brothers are much too easy on you lately."

The thought of Gwendal being easy on him made him snort with almost-laughter and Yuuri brought his head up from Wolfram's chest to settle in the crook of his neck. "I still feel bad about what I--"

"You didn't do anything on purpose, Yuuri. I don't care what people like that say anyway." Wolfram's hand started to move along his back, soothing him.

Yuuri tried not to glow at the comforting feeling, but moved closer to Wolfram anyway, until he wasn't sure they could get any closer. "But I never do things on purpose... Shouldn't I be blamed for ignorance at some point?"

"But it's so cute... you and your obliviousness." Yuuri could feel Wolfram smile so he returned the smile into his friend's shoulder, trying to hide from the way his face heated.

They stayed like that for a while. The position kept Yuuri from thinking any more about unpleasant things and he was about to fall asleep standing up when Wolfram's knees buckled, jerking them a bit until Wolfram regained his footing. The movement reminded Yuuri about Wolfram's condition and he felt terrible all over again for keeping him out of bed. "I'm sorry! Here, let's get you--"

"Don't I get a goodnight kiss?" Wolfram slurred slightly, eyes glazed and looking for the first time
how he had probably felt for hours.

"Erm," said Yuuri and started to back away, but was forced to come forward and catch Wolfram when he almost collapsed. Yuuri could feel his breath against his neck, and something hot and wet- and decidedly NOT kiss-like... press against his jaw. Wolfram wouldn't kiss him. Because if Wolfram did it would be the grossest thing, and the world would end. Spectacularly in fact, with something dramatic and world shattering. It certainly wouldn't send a shiver of... something good through his core.

So nothing happened. At all.

Yuuri managed to convince himself of this by the time he had gotten Wolfram's boots off and rolled him into bed, only taking a second to brush Wolfram's soft bangs away from his face before slipping back out into the hallway.

He leaned against their door for a long time, willing himself to forget and his heart to stop racing.

********
********

Red Sheep,
The south is sick, but will not lose my best sheep,
Stay far, yet close enough.
Big Kitty
------------------
Wolfram sighed and looked up at the glass clock hanging over his daughter's bed. There was a reason he was normally the one to tuck her in. Yuuri was completely inept when it came to winding children down. It was an hour past her bedtime and Greta was more awake than she had been when he and Yuuri arrived.

Whenever the three of them were together, Wolfram couldn't help but feel like a third wheel. He was always the one who had to act like a parent, make sure she became a proper lady, enforce bedtimes... to tell her and his wimp to take down the fort constructed out of pillows and get into bed.

And then they'd given him the eyes. Both of them at once. And his entire body had melted and it just wasn't fair that he always had to be the bad guy.

That had been several minutes ago. Now he was tucking Greta's sheets in so tight that she had no choice but to stay put while making significant, though futile, glances at Yuuri, who was oblivious as usual and pouting almost more than their daughter.

"Wolfram, why do you always have to be so proper about everything?" Yuuri whined from his seat on Greta's bed.

Wolfram could feel his eyebrow starting to twitch. "Why must you always be so decidedly not?" He crossed his legs and shifted defensively in his chair. "And Greta, you shouldn't trick Yuuri into letting you stay up late when you know you have early lessons tomorrow. You're going to fall asleep on your horse."

Yuuri had the decency to look appalled before he noticed the way his daughter blushed and studied the ceiling. "Sorry, Papa..." She mumbled.

"Ehh~?" Yuuri moaned in disbelief and flopped down on top of the covers next to Greta, the girl's queen-sized bed offering plenty of room. "Now even my own daughter is tricking me."

"Don't be sad, Yuuri!" Greta wiggled, still trapped beneath the sheets. "It's only because we hardly ever get to have family time with just the three of us..."

Wolfram watched Yuuri's face as his fiancé struggled to ignore the latter end of Greta's words, and he swallowed away the tightness that gathered in his throat. How much longer would he be allowed into this family before Yuuri--

"It's 'Daddy', Greta." Yuuri corrected with a huge grin. "You're the only one who can call me that, so you should take advantage of it." Then he paused to think. "You can also say 'Father' or--" With a quick glance in Wolfram's direction, "'Papa'..."

Greta managed to slip her arms out from under the covers, but only so she could cover the giggles that rushed out.

Yuuri frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Ohh," Greta managed, between laughs, "It's just--since he's already Papa Wolf, you'd have to be Papa Wimp." She grinned wickedly before hiding her face with her pillow, smothered laughter still making its way to their ears.
Yuuri looked absolutely scandalized. It was fantastic!

It started as a chuckle, but in seconds Wolfram was laughing hard and trying not to fall out of his chair.

Once the shock wore off, a suspicious glint made its way into his fiancé's eyes. "Ohh? Laughing at your King? I hadn't hoped to use this so soon, but it's not my fault if you deserve it." In one quick motion Yuuri reached out and grabbed Wolfram by the wrist, pulling him onto the bed.

Wolfram didn't think to put up a fight at first. Yuuri pulling him into bed could only have positive-- And then Yuuri started to tickle him. He hadn't been tickled in decades.

Wolfram howled in outrage and tried to push away the hands that pinched at his waist, but before he could break free Greta figured out the game and tried to grab hold of his arms, squealing and trying to escape the blankets along with Wolfram's added weight. Afraid to use his full strength, lest he hurt either of them, Wolfram was forced to endure the torture until he maneuvered his way off the side of the bed, falling to the ground with an ungraceful thunk.

He immediately scrambled to his feet and ran a hand through the hair that now completely covered his vision. "Well!" He huffed, trying not to sound like he was completely out of breath. "It's been enough of THAT!" Wolfram glared at the two shaking forms on the bed, too absorbed in their mirth even to look at him. Wolfram turned away and tried to regain his composure.

How dare Yuuri touch him like that when he had no intentions of... Wolfram shivered and was mildly glad it happened where he was in no way tempted to... turn it to his advantage. Holding himself back for so long was agonizing, but Wolfram knew it was necessary to remain by Yuuri's side. He was still completely mortified by his actions the previous night. Their evening together had been going so well considering his intoxication and he was pretty sure he'd hidden it completely from everyone except Yuuri. But then the selfish, guilty wimp had held him. Pushed their bodies together and begged him never to leave, made Wolfram feel more wanted than he could remember.

It had made his head swim.

But then he'd ruined it. Kissed the sweet flesh already brushing his lips and reminded Yuuri that his "friend" wanted him in a way he thoroughly and painfully didn't.

Sometimes Wolfram thought his Plan was working. That through casual touches and more distance he could make Yuuri want him. But most of the time he didn't know what to think. There was nothing he could do, really. Wolfram's feelings were strong and unrelenting, suffocating him more each day; and all he could do was wait.

It was pathetic, really. Wolfram knew he should never have let anyone gain such power over him. That he should be more like Gwendal, strong and independent, but still--

"--Papa Wolf," Greta called out, sounding sad.

"Yeah... Don't be mad, Papa Wolf," Yuuri teased, sounding smug now that the attention had been drawn away from his own nickname.

Wolfram turned, arms crossed. "And why shouldn't I?"

"Because angry wolves aren't good for sandwiches," said Greta smugly.
"What?" Both her fathers balked.

Greta's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Because both of you are here, during story time I should have one on each side. A Papa Sandwich with me in the middle."

Oddly enough, instead of stammering out an excuse or looking intensely uncomfortable, his fiancé just colored slightly and scooted over on the bed, pulling Greta closer to him so there was plenty of room for Wolfram on the other side.

Pushing down the warm feeling that spread to his toes, Wolfram forced a slight frown and made his way to the bed. "Greta, it's almost midnight and--"

"BUT--!" Greta started desperately.

"AND--" Wolfram continued, sliding under the covers next to her. "You shouldn't expect to be so thoroughly spoiled often, but I'll let it slide tonight..." Wolfram smiled and cuddled up next to his daughter.

Greta squirmed in delight and moved closer to Yuuri, leaving Wolfram no choice but to scoot even closer. Then, "No Good." Greta pouted, turning around to face them. "If you're so far apart there's nowhere for my head to go... Here-" She grabbed Yuuri's left arm and pulled him closer to Wolfram before draping the limb over his shoulder.

Wolfram hardly had time to blush before his right arm was stolen and positioned down around Yuuri's middle. His elbow was pushing into the mattress to support him, making his forearm just long enough that if he wanted he could easily curl his fingers around Yuuri's slim waist. Because they were so close Wolfram couldn't see his fiance's face, but could only feel the light tickle of Yuuri's unruly hair against his cheek.

Now pleased by the positioning of her fathers, Greta snuggled happily between them, resting her head on both their chests. Even though the position was a bit unnatural, Wolfram allowed himself the pleasure and relaxed.

********

********

Yuuri couldn't remember a time when he longed for a rational explanation more. A reason why nothing seemed to sound as good as Wolfram's laugh. Why he had enjoyed pinching his friend's waist and letting his hands slide up Wolfram's sides to tickle him under the arms. Why he was so disappointed when Wolfram broke free and fell, their bodies no longer pressed innocently together in all sorts of places.

Now, mostly he was concerned with how natural having his arm around Wolfram felt, and the hot feeling that spread from where their bodies touched. The cloud in his head that made thinking seem pointless. How being here, holding him with Greta snuggled between suddenly felt more like home than... home.

But really, it all did make some kind of sense. Over the long course of his time here, growing up and becoming 'king'; Wolfram had been there, growing up beside him. They had been through so much together and Wolfram had never let him down. Supporting him when he didn't even know anyone was holding him up. It was only natural, to feel safe with a friend like that.

Being here with Greta, in a comfortable bed, in a kingdom safe and only peace on the horizon it was natural to feel at home. After all, Greta was his precious daughter.
And Wolfram was all hot and bothered because they were spoiling Greta and was probably deep into Furnace Mode. The heat had to be what was making his head spin.

Now that those troublesome thoughts had been put to rest, Yuuri could pay attention to his daughter, who was currently begging Wolfram for a story. He wondered what kind of stories Wolfram would tell. Tales of a world with no boats and dragons with overly proper names...

"But you promised to tell about Creepy Guy!" Greta pouted.

"Creepy Guy?" Yuuri heard himself ask.

Wolfram went stiff under his arm. "Greta--" He started in a warning tone, "That's not a story... why don't I read you one of Anissina's--"

"You said--"

"Who is this Creepy Guy anyway?" Yuuri interrupted.

Greta was quick to answer, sounding mysteriously pleased with herself. "Marques."

Wolfram snorted. "Someone not worth talking about."

"But Papa! It sounded like you were friends..."

Yuuri frowned. He had never heard this person's name before, but something about the way Wolfram was trying to push the subject away made Yuuri feel he needed to know more about this Marques fellow. All the things Wolfram had hid from him in the past, the nightmares that signaled disaster, the way his own actions were affecting Wolfram's reputation, had one detail in common. They all hurt him. Yuuri wasn't going to let another one of Wolfram's painful secrets slip by without doing everything he could to make the pain disappear.

Regardless of Yuuri's wandering thoughts, the conversation had continued.

"Were is the right word. Seeing him was not the highlight of my evening." Wolfram sighed. "Can you please just let it go, Greta?"

Yuuri was about to start his own quest for more information, but stopped himself. Wolfram clearly didn't want to talk about it... or maybe it was something Greta shouldn't hear? Either way, he would probably have better luck later. Yuuri grinned and congratulated himself on his cunning plan.

While Yuuri was busy feeling immeasurably clever, Greta had given up on getting a story about "Creepy Guy" and had started pestering Wolfram about something called "Flame Rites" instead.

Wolfram relaxed a bit in his arm, seemingly much more comfortable with the new topic. "Well," his friend started, after clearing his throat. "The Rites are something every pure-blooded mazoku has to perform if they want to become true wielders of their element."

Yuuri frowned. He had never gone through any sort of ceremony and he had gotten very good with his element. "But I—"

"Yuuri is a special case," Wolfram continued, ignoring Yuuri's interruption entirely. "He was introduced to his element without even knowing it, on the road to the castle when he arrived in this world for the very first time. Normally there would be some ceremony, but since the sacred waters are easily carried in one vessel or another, most mazoku claimed by water don’t have to travel far
to meet their spirit. Wind also doesn’t require a long journey, and prefers to find its chosen where they live. This was especially useful during times of war with humans because some of the sacred places are now deep in human territory.

“Now, the Flame Rites which you heard about are just the rituals binding mazoku already chosen by fire to their element. Every fire user, myself included, has gone through them, usually sometime during their early thirties.”

Greta who had been listening dutifully for all this time, shifted, and rolled onto her side, letting her right arm fall over Wolfram. “But, Papa, you must have been so small then, wasn’t it dangerous?”

**Yuuri did his best not to feel jealous while Wolfram beamed at getting the special cuddle.** “Very dangerous. Especially since the Flame resides so deep in human territory. But I didn’t go alone, we had a skilled guard to protect us and we were very careful not to draw any attention to ourselves. Besides, it’s a journey most mazoku only have to make once.” Wolfram was still glowing from Greta’s attention and the nostalgia of his story, and his hand had crept around Yuuri’s waist, fingers trailing absently against the cotton and bringing back that warm buzz that had clouded Yuuri’s mind when they danced.

“And Creepy Guy was there, too.” The hand froze against Yuuri’s waist and Wolfram was silent for a while.

“Yes, Marques was there. So was Lucien.”

Greta picked her head up a bit. “Is Lucien the one with the blond hair who sometimes helps you train the others?”

Wolfram nodded.

Yuuri searched his memory and eventually came up with a blurred image of one of Wolfram’s men. Was that Lucian? All of Wolfram’s men were so pretty that it was hard to tell them apart. It bothered him that Greta seemed to know more about who Wolfram spent time with than he did. After all, Wolfram was with him most of the time, or at least it seemed that way.

Although… it did make sense that he would spend time with other people whenever Yuuri was on Earth, as well as all the time he spent signing papers in Gunter’s office. He’d been trying to focus more on his studies and was becoming more comfortable with politics… All things that Wolfram encouraged him to do, and when Wolfram couldn’t actively help him with his studies he tended to leave Yuuri to them. Yuuri wondered if there was a reason Wolfram was more able to leave him alone lately…

A lump started to form in his stomach and Yuuri hardly noticed the way his hand curled around to grip his friend’s shoulder.

It was quiet now and Yuuri wondered if he had missed anything. Soft snores met his ears and he could feel Wolfram’s head shift toward him.

“She’s asleep…” Wolfram whispered, his breath moving the hair against his cheek and tickling him.

“Ohh…” said Yuuri, and wondered why that sensation was so distracting.

Wolfram shifted a bit. “It would probably be easier…”

Yuuri realized his arm was at the top of their pile of limbs. “Oh!” He stammered and promptly
lifted it away. Then he moved away from the warmth that had spread so nicely down his left side and let his bare feet touch the floor.

Since Greta was practically wrapped around him, Wolfram was having a more difficult time escaping. Just as he slid out of her grasp their daughter woke up and mumbled a sleep-filled protest. Wolfram stood up and tucked the blankets up to her chin before leaning over to kiss her on the forehead.

Instead of slipping back into dreamland after the kiss, Greta seemed to wake up even more. “But… Papa Wolf… Papa Wimp needs a goodnight kiss too! Otherwise he won’t be able to fall asleep!”

From the other side of the bed, Yuuri could see Wolfram turn the same violent shade he could feel spreading across his own cheeks. “Greta…” Wolfram stammered, “Yuuri’s… he’s a grownup so he doesn’t need kisses to go to sleep—“

Denying her request only seemed to wake the girl up more. “No! You have to!” She kicked her legs, upsetting the covers. Wolfram glanced over at him, looking somewhere between annoyed and embarrassed before trying to calm Greta down, sitting on the bed and trying to make her stop kicking.

Yuuri glanced at the clock over the bed. It was past midnight and Greta really would be miserable the next day if they didn’t get her to sleep soon. And really, it was just a kiss on the forehead. It would probably be gross, but sometimes being a good parent meant sacrifice. Besides, it had to be disgusting in order to make up for the time the other night that had been so disturbingly… not.

So now that the decision was made, he walked around the bed and put a hand on Wolfram’s shoulder, making the blond look up at him in question. His eyes were wide and the blush still hadn’t faded from his cheeks, his hair was frazzled from holding Greta down. And something about all of that made Yuuri’s voice stick in his throat.

Finally, “Erm…” he managed, and looked at Greta instead. “Calm down, Greta, Wolfram’s just trying to keep me from being embarrassed…”

“Because you don’t like kisses in public?” Greta answered for him.

He blushed even harder. “Something like that…” Yuuri finally dragged his eyes to Wolfram and focused on his nose instead of his eyes. The nose was safe… any higher and he’d give away all sorts of feelings he didn’t even understand himself, and any lower… Yuuri swallowed. “So… Okay…”

“Okay what?” Wolfram answered.

This was much too awkward. Yuuri shut his eyes. “Okay okay…”

And then there was darkness, and the waves of mild panic and anxiety that swirled maddeningly inside his eyelids. Something about that lack of sight made him focus strangely on his breathing. He didn’t want it to seem erratic, but he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe normally, how many seconds he should inhale and how far. Why deep breaths made his chest hurt.

The covers rustled and he could feel Wolfram stand next to him, followed by a brush of soft warmth and the flutter of an eyelash against his cheek. It was over.

It was over?

Yuuri opened his eyes to see Wolfram busily looking everywhere else besides him.
“Aw! I have the two cutest Papas!” Greta sighed and closed her eyes, floating on dreams in seconds.

Wolfram, unlike himself, seemed to have gotten his body under control and walked past him to open the door. “It’s getting late… We should—“

“Yeah…” Yuuri finished, and followed him out, eyes lingering on the flick of Wolfram's wrist as he waved out the light.

********

********

Annisina sighed and tried to ignore the small sounds of hunger that were beginning to growl their way out of her stomach. She had eaten an early dinner but now it was nearly two in the morning and she was increasingly tempted to leave this "emergency meeting" and steal some food from the kitchens.

There was no reason for Gwendal to keep her here if he wasn't going to take advantage of her brilliant ideas. At the moment he seemed much too busy drilling an increasingly uncomfortable Great Sage for information. Anissina was starting to feel sorry for the Sage. After living so long with the world in his hands it must really be something to live as blind as everyone else.

At least Gunter wasn't adding to the noisy male arguments that still enveloped Gwendal's office. The man had bags under his eyes darker than his hair. He had been up all last night picking useful reading material out of the library for Gisela to take with her to Caloria. His adopted daughter had left early this morning with an equally grim Flurin.

Conrad was leaning next to the door and being as helpful as armed furniture for all she was concerned. He seemed to know it too, and was staring morosely at a point beyond Gwendal's head.

"I've died from many things but as unfortunate as it may be, it's never been from anything similar to this," said the Sage in an uncomfortable dead-pan.

Gwendal frowned and rubbed his temples. "Forgive me, Your Grace, for all the questions, but you haven't been exactly open with pertinent information in the past and--"

"Regarding Shinou, that is over and turned out as well as could be expected. I'd imagine that instance would only give you more reason to trust me and not less." The Sage stood and put his hands in his pockets, walking over to the darkened window. "Now that the past is past, you'll have to excuse my lack of divine foresight as now my eyes are truly my own."

The only reply was the squeak of leather as Gwendal leaned back into his chair.

Anissina looked back and forth between the two rocks in human form for a minute before rolling her eyes. Gwendal was putting everything on himself as per usual, and normally he handled the burden with remarkable grace; but that was when the burdens were military, the questions always answerable to a calm will and a deadly resolve. All things that made Gwendal brilliant, qualities he had spent his whole life mastering. Now though, he had become accustomed to success in such potentially catastrophic areas, and his lack of experience in handling a pandemic that could wipe out half the population of their world, human and mazoku alike, was making him furious.

She had been watching his frustration build up for days, had tried to snap him out of it by being encouraging... however, the greeting "Aren't we cranky lately" seemed ill chosen in retrospect. But in all seriousness, for someone used to having the mere weight of a kingdom on his shoulders,
Gwendal was handling the weight of the world better than any man she could imagine.

It hardly mattered that he didn't want her help. Anissina could tell he needed it and therefore he was going to get it, even if it meant he was going to be more huffy than usual around her tomorrow. By this time she was more than used to it. "Your Grace," she questioned, voice penetrating the silence. "Even if none of the diseases you've encountered or learned about on Earth are similar to this one, just hearing your deductions on why your knowledge isn't helpful could help. Even if only by eliminating possible solutions that we might waste time formulating."

The Sage turned away from the window. "Of course, Lady Karbelnikoff." And some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "Well, the most distinct symptom of our Little Problem is the 'blackness' on limbs, which at first reminded me of something that wiped out almost half of Earth's Europe nearly six hundred years ago. But that disease, commonly called the Black Death during the time, had too many other symptoms... large buboes, or blackened pustuals that break out all over the skin, and the strain that killed the most people was housed in the lungs, and what we're dealing with doesn't have any respiratory symptoms that I've heard about."

"And this disease... it's not killing people on Earth now?" Gunter's voice surprised her. She'd been convinced he was sleeping with his eyes open.

"Not nearly so many these days..." said the Sage, shaking his head. "But as you know humans don't have the aid of healing maryoku, and because of this they have come up with a multitude of ways to cure the diseases that plague them. Back during the time of the Black Death on Earth humans weren't so... clever yet and most simply died. But, the ones who did live passed on an immunity to their children, diminishing later casualties."

"If, as you said in the beginning, humans have come up with ways to cure their diseases on Earth, why exactly would none of those methods be useful to us?" Gwendal growled, still glaring at the Sage.

The Sages default smile lessened and he turned his head toward Gwendal. "As I said, mazoku don't get human diseases and because of that, if it's true that you've been losing pure-blooded scouts to this affliction, I'm hesitant to suggest a human cure. The treatment itself could prove fatal." He sighed and sat down heavily in his chair. "Now as for giving aid to humans in Caloria I am hesitant to attempt the technological revolution on a world scale that would be necessary to cure such a pandemic if it spreads. Not to mention that I have a hard time picturing humans, even if they are from Caloria, lining up for strange injections from mazoku."

Anissina frowned. What exactly about their technology was insufficient...? "Your Grace--"

"I don't doubt your abilities, Lady Karbelnikoff. If that was the only barrier, we would not be having this discussion."

Gunter spoke up again. "You mentioned something... An ingestion? Some kind of plant or--"

"If only." The Sage grimaced. "On Earth humans give shots to prevent disease... a shot is a hollow needle... like a sewing needle but thinner... filled with liquid medicine that is pushed past the skin and into the blood."

Everyone but the Sage looked vaguely horrified.

"Besides," The Sage continued, "each liquid is unique to the disease it cures and since we don't have a sample of the pathogen... None of them would be able to help." The Sage trailed off, thinking for a moment before starting again. "I'm sorry, I'm trying to explain as simply as I can..."
There are two main causes for human infections. One type requires specific cures while the other can be fought by a more general medicine... But like I said, we shouldn't start scraping mold off of fruit until we know exactly what we're dealing with... And since acquiring a sample is so difficult..."

Gwendal's hand balled into a fist on the table. "That is the reason I agreed that Gisela be sent. If any doctor could identify--"

"It's not the same kind of identification. We need access to someone sick... some of their blood."

Gunter sat up. "And we can't risk bringing anyone back here--"

"Exactly." The Sage was grim.

There was a slight sound at the door. Conrad and Gwendal made eye-contact for a moment.

"It's three o'clock, change of shift," Gwendal informed them.

Conrad nodded but still seemed uneasy.

Inside Anissina's mind, all sorts of wonderful gears were turning. "Your Grace... I could easily construct a device that could carry a human without letting them contaminate--"

"It does little good if they suffocate before arrival--"

"You underestimate me, Your Grace. I have the beginnings of an air purification system that was on commission from one of Lady Spitzberg's exes. He wanted to be rid of her perfume..." Anissina smirked at the memory. "Said it clouded his mind... anyway, Her Majesty found out and had the project canceled... but a similar device should be useful."

Instead of being appropriately impressed, the Sage shook his head. "It's too dangerous. There's no way to make sure the disease doesn't escape."

"If your Earth is so advanced..." Gwendal frowned. "Shouldn't there be a way to test Anissina's theoretical device there?"

Anissina suppressed her smile at Gwendal's subtle endorsement of her brilliance.

"Yes, but don't you think Shibuya would be suspicious if I tried to take one of your inventions to Earth to see the sights?" The Sage smiled, light reflecting eerily off his glasses.

She knew that look. "What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything... I just think it's only a matter of time before Shibuya finds out, and the manner in which he does could make all the difference." Then he raised his voice, almost to a yell. "Don't you agree, Sir Belefield?"

Anissina turned around just in time to see Conrad open the door, revealing a slightly flushed Wolfram. He was wearing a dark blue dressing robe with only a rope-tie at the waist that went down to mid-calf. She raised an eyebrow, noticing the pink lace that escaped near his collar. Hadn't that boy given up yet?

But then again, his magic had been so fun to play with while she had worked on crafting the king's gift. The selfish loafer had never been of much use to her inventions before and it was about time he made himself useful as fuel for her abundant creativity. Though, admittedly the reason he had
escaped before was his uselessness as a demographic representation of average mazoku power. What good was an invention if only a select few would be able to power it? Anissina was reminded of the time a young Wolfram had over loaded Grow-Grass-Grow-for-a-Wonderful-Show-kun that she had worked on for months in preparation of one of Cheri’s garden parties…

Conrad’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Wolfram, what did you do to the guard?”

“Nothing he didn’t deserve,” Wolfram huffed. “He obviously wasn’t paying attention.”

“Obviously.” Gwendal growled. “Or was it also more or less obvious that you weren’t invited to our little gathering?”

Anissina marveled at the effect a chastisement from his oldest brother still had on Wolfram. Sure, he had gotten better at hiding it in his face, but his fists shook where they were clenched at his sides.

“Forget the interruption—“

“Don’t apologize, Sir Belefield,” The Sage grinned. “Sir Voltaire didn’t have Sir Weller turn you out when you disposed of the guard, so he must have given in to my persistent whining on your behalf—“

Gwendal glared at the Sage. “Since you are here now there is something you can do …”

The Sage raised an eyebrow but otherwise remained silent.

After a pause, Gwendal continued. “I’ve received a letter from Shou Shimeron that I want you to read.”

Wolfram’s brow furrowed as he walked toward Gwendal’s desk. “Why?”

Gwendal’s response was to hand him an official looking document.

“You’re still opening Yuuri’s mail?”

“Oh course.”

The room was silent as Wolfram’s eyes jumped back and forth along the page, expression changing from interest to confusion and settling on a mild form of disgust.

Anissina frowned. She hadn’t gotten to read the letter…

"This can't be real... It's insulting--"

"It's more than that," the Sage's voice rang out. "It's practically a direct threat--"

"But the subtle allusions! The way words play dangerously against each other with provocative intent!" Gunter sighed. "I think we have more to worry about than we realize."

Wolfram and Gwendal’s scandalized faces were amazingly similar. Anissina had to suppress a giggle.

"I'm sure..." the Sage responded, forcing seriousness back into the room.

"Actually," started Wolfram, making his best dignified face. "The reason I came was to give you this." He handed Gwendal a slightly blackened piece of paper.
Gwendal actually looked angry, the expression replacing his well perfected calm. "Where did you get this?"

Wolfram almost took a step back, voice raised in defense. "It was given to me... I didn't think it would actually be important--"

"There's no need to yell." The Sage had stood and was walking over to Gwendal's desk. He leaned over to look at the paper, and it could have just been a play of the light, but Anissina though she noted just the smallest twitch of his nose. "Maybe you should tell us, from the beginning, exactly how these numbers came to be in your possession."

Numbers?

Even Anissina was surprised. Earlier in their little "meeting," Gwendal had gone over various theories regarding the mysterious numbers that had been pouring in from the scouts that Gwendal had positioned near Shou Shimeron and Caloria. Or rather, a scout would send a few of these intercepted messages before dropping out of contact all together. The men that had been sent after the missing scouts had confirmed most of them dead. All as a result of the mystery illness.

The general consensus was that the numbers were a code of some kind, but after hours of examination, even the Sage had frowned and talked about needing something to go on top of his lap before he could figure it out.

She'd always suspected he was a pervert...

Of course she had already started planning at least three inventions that would easily decipher the code. Gwendal already had an entire drawer full of such messages, so she would have plenty of samples to work from.

Since the numbers were a complete secret to everyone in the castle not invited to this meeting (Ulrike being informed upon the Sage's return to the temple), Wolfram's possession of the numbers was more than unexpected.

After his eyes darted around the room in a futile attempt to judge the situation he had gotten himself into, Wolfram clasped his hands behind his back in formal military attention and began.

While he spoke about his encounter with the deserter Corporal, Anissina listened to both Conrad and Gwendal break in during various points and growl at him about not apprehending him, or alerting them to the situation sooner. Apparently, Conrad's patrols had been on double shifts since Greta alerted them to the intruder the previous evening.

Anissina also watched as Wolfram did his best impersonation of someone who didn't want to melt into the floor.

Several minutes after they had moved on from the pertinent questions of where the Corporal had been stationed and for how long and under what circumstances he deserted, Gwendal's lecture had started to move into the realm of excessive. Anissina was starting to wonder exactly what this Corporal had done besides deliver suspicious numbers that had made Gwendal so pissy.

Thankfully, a few moments later the Sage interrupted. "I'm sure Sir Belefield has gotten the point." The Sage smiled. "Since he's here would anyone mind terribly if I filled him in on our Little Problem?"

Everyone's eyes moved to Gwendal who seemed to have gathered more wrinkles since she last looked at him. "Wolfram," he started, eyes hard, "I trust you'll be able to keep the best interests of
Shin Makoku in mind and keep this information to yourself."

Wolfram seemed offended Gwendal would even ask him such a question. "Of course--"

"Don't be so hasty to keep information from Shibuya, he's grown up more than we give him credit for... And Sir Belefield, What if Shibuya became suspicious and asked you straight out? Can you honestly deny you wouldn't tell him the truth?"

Wolfram blushed and turned his head away.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. Every Great King needs at least one person to tell him the truth no matter what... No one would ever ask you to betray the trust Shibuya has placed in you."

While the Sage paused, Anissina noticed Conrad's expression darken and his hand clench up, nails digging obviously into the flesh of his palm. The poor boy was probably still beating himself up over the whole Dai Shimeron fiasco. Something Anissina viewed as more stupid than anything else. Still, she saw no reason he should continue to be so bothered by it, but Sir Weller always did have a fondness for excessive dwelling over the morose.

But that was just her theory.

"That being said-" The Sage face hardened. "You know Shibuya's tendency to run directly into the most unfortunate situations, and this... situation has dangers no one can protect him from. He should find out over time, gradually... with nothing emphasized to cause alarm. Shibuya isn't stupid, and if he is in the mindset to think rather than charge blindly into the fray, we should be able to prevent any of his usual... complications."

Wolfram nodded.

"Now." The Sage sighed and let some of the stress out of his furrowed brows. "How much do you know about our Little Problem?"

********

********

Gwendal allowed himself to relax a bit when the blasted woman left the room, laughing manically about some “brilliant” new invention that would soon be the end of his worries. He snorted. If only it was that easy.

Gunter had left soon after, his sleep deprivation clear from the small trail of drool that hung off his chin. He really was grateful for the panicked research his friend had preformed on the customs of Shou Shimeron all afternoon. The texts weren’t particularly recent, but traditions had their way of lingering on into later years and they were all in desperate need for a place to start. Both he and Gunter had spent at least an hour on the letter from Prince Saralegui alone, not to mention the subsequent letters from various dignitaries reinforcing their “story”.

All of the letters held threats and allusions about the disease in Caloria, each one more clumsy than the last. Saralegui’s letter had been the most subtle in its menace but the double threat that only appeared there worried Gwendal the most. And it wasn’t only because of the effects it would have on his youngest brother.

It was like letting a snake into one's bed. Gwendal’s eyes narrowed as he mentally ran down the list of precautions that would be necessary once the Prince arrived for the winter festivities. The Maou’s lenient reputation preceded him as usual and keeping the suspect Prince and their gullible King at a safe distance would be a huge task.
Conrad had left minutes earlier with the Sage to make up a list of men that could be trusted with the partial information necessary to fully protect their sovereign. They would have to be extremely careful not to draw attention to the multiple layers of security that would have to be used for the entirety of Prince Saralegui's visit. The young Prince would be accompanied by a single escort, which meant that they would have to be on the lookout for the inevitable surprises that such an open ploy to appear trustworthy came paired with.

The "bodyguard", as Gwendal had started thinking of him, was troublesome. The letter he had received from the man named Reyes revealed far too much about his character... It was a stark contrast from Prince Saralegui's almost playful allusions. No. This Reyes was fiercely protective of his Prince and his letter betrayed a dangerous intelligence.

Judging from the letters, Reyes would likely be his biggest challenge.

Gwendal rubbed his forehead with his left hand to soothe the dull throb that now seemed to live there and watched Wolfram's attempts at patience out of the corner of his eye. It was a waiting game he had been playing with his youngest brother since he was old enough to run around on his own. Wolfram always lost. After a long enough silence his brother would give away the most interesting things about himself. This game always saved Gwendal the time of figuring out what sort of trouble Wolfram was responsible for. Whatever Wolfram got defensive about first was what he thought Gwendal was upset about, and whatever was mentioned in passing with a huff and a glance at the floor was what was bothering Wolfram the most. Part of Gwendal felt bad about using his youngest brother's admiration so blatantly against him, but ethical or not Gwendal would do whatever was necessary to protect him.

Wolfram was biting the inside of his cheek. It was apparent by the way his jaw was clenching.

Gwendal knew it was only a matter of seconds, so he made a show of pretending to re-read the letter from Saralegui he had allowed Wolfram to read.

"He's just a pervert. And he was loyal to this country while he was under my charge... I don't think the Corporal's escape is--"

"You didn't **think**!" Gwendal growled and watched Wolfram's face redden. "I'm still trying to imagine why you let your guard down, something easily could have--"

"Nothing HAPPENED!" Wolfram bellowed in his own defense. "I did not let my guard down!"

Gwendal merely raised an eyebrow. "If you didn't let your guard down, then why did he escape? Or is this a reflection of your usual standards of--"

"Absolutely NOT!" Wolfram was scandalized, his feeble mask of professionalism crumbled, and he was no longer even trying to appear a soldier, instead looking every bit like a younger brother with a hurt pride. Both of Wolfram's hands slammed down on Gwendal's desk, rattling the quills that stood upright in a jar. "Gwendal, you know I'd never do anything that might put Yuuri--"

"His Majesty was not the one in danger in that situation. I will not stand for any more of this blatant disregard for your own person! Your growing infatuation with His Majesty has not escaped my attention."Gwendal eyed the escaping ruffles of his mother's old nightgown, poorly hidden beneath the blue robe. "Nor has it escaped the attention of anyone. I will not continue to support your engagement if the result is this pitiful self-deprecation just because His Majesty doesn't return your feelings. What will you do if a year from now he takes a mistress or realizes how feeble your claim to the engagement is since the two year anniversary of his *accidental* proposal? I will not have you trying to get yourself killed through reckless behavior!"
Gwendal had expected Wolfram to scream or throw a fit, but was pleasantly surprised when his brother removed his hands from the desk and stood up straight to look down at him. The whirlwind of emotions was clear in his eyes but respectfully absent in his face or body language. When he spoke, his voice held a twinge of pain but was reasonably controlled. "If something like that were to happen, I would not run off to get myself killed. I can protect him better than any woman he would bed and I would serve him and my country much better breathing then as ashes on the wind." Wolfram looked down at the floor, voice in a slight huff. "I'm sorry you think so little of me, brother."

It took almost all of Gwendal's strength not to smile and betray his pride.

Wolfram was clearly done speaking to him for the night and made a hasty exit, nodding his leave before closing the door quietly behind him.

Gwendal wondered briefly if he had been too hard on him, but he had gotten wonderful results, so he didn't dwell on his methods for too long. He glanced at the letter from Prince Saralegui one more time.

Yes. Given the circumstances, Wolfram's words had been very reassuring indeed.

********

********

The mattress dipped, pulling Yuuri's body over to the side with added weight for a moment before the down beneath him evened out again. He rubbed some sleep from his eyes and cracked them open, surprised to see the blurred light of dawn edging its way in from beneath the curtains. Yuuri had been waiting for Wolfram to come back from the bathroom so he could be all tactful and ask questions about Marques, but he realized dimly that he must have fallen asleep.

Where had Wolfram been all this time?

The question snapped all the sleep out of his mind and Yuuri bolted up in bed. Wolfram was snoring lightly, exhaustion plain by the light purple beginning to shade beneath his eyes. His body was sprawled stomach-down and unceremoniously on top of the covers over two-thirds of the bed. The ridiculous night gown was hitched up high on his thighs as a result of his spread legs, the curve of his friend's rear made even more distracting by the pull of the fabric. Yuuri had to tear his eyes away. Something unfortunate pooled in his stomach at the thought of Wolfram wandering the halls at night wearing nothing besides the pink... thing.

He was tempted to wake Wolfram up and demand an explanation, but he had been looking forward to acting with the ever elusive Tact and was hesitant to give it all up now. It didn't help when Wolfram curled inward in his direction and mumbled something in his sleep, lips moving slightly enough to catch on the pillow beneath his cheek, trapping the pink flesh for a moment before it jumped back into place. Strands of blond hair puffed in and out with the breath that escaped Wolfram's nose and Yuuri couldn't resist reaching out to tuck the fluttering strands away from his sleeping forehead, noticing how soft Wolfram's pale skin felt against the tips his fingers.

Yuuri shivered and convinced himself it was because of the cold. He slid back under the covers, determined to go back to sleep, but ended up spending several fretful minutes staring at his friend's sleeping features in the dull light and trying desperately not to think about what that meant.

********

********
Back in his bed at the temple, Murata was drifting. Through his own mind, through his own soul, through his own thoughts. He was asleep. Lost in the ups and downs, the waves between consciousness and dreams.

And then he was in an elegant garden, having tea with an old friend.

"You're looking ruffled." Shinou smiled, lips almost hidden behind the rim of his cup.

Murata paused and wondered what his body looked like. Which form his subconscious had chosen for this meeting, and what that could mean about it's purpose.

He let his head fall to the side, short choppy bangs obscuring his dream vision. --I suppose I am myself-- "And there's nothing you can tell me? We're having a Little Problem."

"But you say the problem is little. Surely you can handle it."

And he was tugged up, into the seductive lull of blackness, left only with the imprint of teasing blue eyes on the edges of his memory.

********

********

Wolfram finished tying his cravat and leaned into the mirror to get a closer look at his face. It wouldn't do to have his fatigue show during the day ahead and he was pleasantly reminded that his mother's almost infallible skin had been passed along to him: The dark circles he had worried Yuuri would question the night before had vanished during his few hours of sleep. If Wolfram moved his eyes to the side he could see Yuuri's sleeping form, still half covered by blankets. Wolfram smiled and allowed himself to drink in the sight of his adorable fiancé while no one could judge him.

Gwendal's lecture was still ringing in his ears, but Wolfram would not deny himself this small moment of peace, where nothing mattered except the shallow rise and fall of Yuuri's chest and the soft sounds of his breath. His brother's words were not to be suppressed forever and he felt his lips tighten into a frown. It had been completely uncalled for! No pertinence to the situation at hand!

Of course he felt the love in his brother's tirade, and his desires to protect him from Marques... But Wolfram had put a stop to that situation himself years ago and Gwendal's persistence in dragging his ghosts out into painful daylight was infuriating. So what if Marques showed up to make a perverted ass of himself?!

Wolfram suppressed a growl as well as a growing desire to set the dresser on fire, and slipped out of the room, afraid of waking Yuuri in his rage.

What was wrong with him? Wolfram stomped down the hallway, making his way toward the stables so he could prepare for Greta's lessons. How could he have let that bastard escape?! The sense of his own failure was overwhelming and Wolfram wanted nothing more than to go back in time and drag the charred remains of the cocky Corporal into an interrogation room.

Wolfram growled to himself and watched one of the maids about-face and head back in the opposite direction, an obvious attempt to avoid his fury.

The thing that bothered him the most was Gwendal's stupid notion that he was nothing more than some lovesick fool who would crawl in a hole somewhere when Yuuri eventually rejected him. After all the effort, after all the progress he'd made! Yuuri was actually paying attention to him lately, appeared to enjoy his company, actually asked him for a goodnight kiss...
Wolfram halted in his rampage to lean against a nearby wall, letting his anger slip away into the warm feeling of hope that bubbled up at the memory. His Yuuri... his woman-obsessed, engagement-disrespecting wimp of a fiancé had let him give him a goodnight kiss. Asked for it, even! Wolfram knew that his fiancé had only fallen for Greta's transparent efforts to bring them together... But still! The suspiciously asexual, prudish wimp was experimenting whether he admitted it to himself or not. And he was experimenting with HIM!

He grinned broadly and continued his journey, letting his worries about Gwendal fade into the background of his thoughts, briefly reminding himself to ask his brother to let him see the letter from Shou Shimeron's Prince again. Gwendal wouldn't have let him see it if the letter wasn't important. It was probably a test of some kind to see if he could grasp the significance. Wolfram resolved to figure out Gwendal's game as soon as he decided the right sort of push Yuuri needed...

 Yuuri tugged at his hair in frustration as he eyed the remaining stack of papers on Gunter's desk. He had gotten his daily regimen of paper signing down to a solid average of around two hours, but for some reason the pile of parchment requiring his signature was almost double today. It certainly didn't help that his mind kept wandering...

For the hundredth time, he wished Gwendal and Gunter would give in and let him use the name stamp Shouri had given him for his birthday. But apparently, since he had been signing things for so long already, it was now impossible to change his legal "mark". Eventually, Gwendal had huffed something about being able to use both but that was hardly the point, and would likely only increase the amount of time he spent trapped in this oppressive office.

He looked down at the current document awaiting his signature and raised an eyebrow. Normally all of them were about Shin Makoku, but this was the ninth one today about Caloria. He would have to ask Gunter about it when he woke up. His teacher was currently asleep standing up against the wall behind him, his neck lolled into a position that would likely make the rest of his day uncomfortable.

In the past Yuuri probably would have used this as an opportunity to escape for the day, but that would only lead to more papers tomorrow. Not to mention Gunter would cry on him the next time he saw him, wailing about how much Yuuri must hate him to sneak away so cruelly and avoid his precious studies. And then his shirt would be uncomfortably moist for hours.

Of all the times for Gunter to fall asleep! Yuuri had been looking forward to getting some information from someone other than Wolfram about Marques first. It was all part of his amazing plan.

He had tried to talk to Conrad this morning, but he seemed to honestly have no idea why Wolfram would avoid talking about his former "friend". Yuuri had been at his most pitiful, doing his very best impression of Greta when there was something she wanted from Wolfram, but Conrad had only looked sad that he couldn't help and suggested he ask Gwendal.

Not likely.

As close as he had gotten to Gwendal over his years in Shin Makoku, there was still something about the man that made asking such potentially personal questions impossible. Besides, if Conrad didn't know, Gwendal probably wouldn't either.

Yuuri wracked his brain in frustration. If Conrad didn't know something about Wolfram, if
Gwendal didn't... Who should he be asking? Cheri? The former Maou was more absent then ever it seemed, always on some love cruise or vacation or other. She was due back in time for the Winter Formal Gunter had already started to sputter about even though it was months away, but Yuuri wasn't even sure he would ask her if he could. Bringing Cheri into any situation normally upset Wolfram more than anything else.

He sighed. Wolfram had been spending a lot of time with Anissina lately, but that was recent and Marques seemed to have happened a long time ago. Greta didn't know either, otherwise her asking wouldn't have alerted him to this intriguing mystery in the first place. Who did Wolfram spend time with? Who would know something like this? Yuuri felt like a terrible friend for not even knowing who might know. For not knowing so many things about Wolfram.

It was possible Marques was even here. He could have walked by him in the hall way and not given him a second glance. Yuuri listed what he already knew in his head. The first thing was how Greta had described him. Creepy. Yuuri couldn't remember seeing anyone creepy today. The second thing was that this man's element was fire, so he would probably be wearing Wolfram's colors. The most glaring detail was how upset Wolfram had seemed just talking about him. What if they had been good friends who had some misunderstanding? Yuuri had always prided himself on his ability to fix misunderstandings, and people in Shin Makoku were uptight about ridiculous things so often... What if he could re-unite Wolfram with his old friend and make Wolfram happy?

Something in his gut clenched. But then what if after Yuuri fixed whatever was wrong Wolfram wanted to spend more time with Marques? Yuuri shook his head violently. This wasn't like him. Yuuri was supposed to be a good person, not someone who would deny a friend help for selfish reasons. But it made sense to be selfish about something like this right? Nothing strange. Wolfram was his friend. Yuuri had taken on some bizarre mental possession of him. In a way it made perfect sense. After all, Conrad had Yozak, they were great friends and had war buddy stories... Gwendal had Gunter and Anissina, the three of them had all grown up together... But, Yuuri realized with a pang of guilt, Wolfram didn't really seem to have anyone... besides him. So all this irrationality was just because he'd gotten so used to having gloriously undenied access to the other boy.

Wolfram had been his and only his since the day they'd met, it was only natural that he would have gotten used to having him around all the time. Gotten spoiled. Even though Yuuri had been too... something to notice it all this time. When had Wolfram's association shifted in his mind from bratty prince to best friend? From the annoying grip on his arm to someone Yuuri sought out to pester when he was bored? How had everything changed right under his nose?

Yuuri smiled to think about the times they had shared now. There was a time he would have only picked out the irritating details, the way Wolfram clung to him, mistrusted him, called him a cheater and a wimp. Now, well, it wasn't as if Wolfram had stopped doing all of those things, but he did do them less. Like everything was a private joke rather than a true sentiment. When Yuuri examined his more recent time in Shin Makoku he could see, little by little, something about Wolfram had changed. His friend was pulling away from him.

But why? What had he done to push the other boy away?

He let his head fall into the desk with a loud ka-thunk and listened to the strange sputtering noises Gunter made when he realized he had fallen asleep on the job.

"Ohh! Forgive me, Your Majesty, I--"

"Don't worry about it, Gunter!" Yuuri mumbled into his un-signed stack of papers. "I'm not
finished yet anyway." His words had little effect and Gunter went off on another one of his tearful monologues.

Yuuri sighed and forced himself to sit upright. He signed the rest of the papers without even trying to read them and let his mind go numb under the constant onslaught of Gunter's words. This was much easier than thinking. He was almost disappointed when he finished less than an hour later.

Gunter seemed to have work of his own to do for once, and so Yuuri found himself free of chores and wandering aimlessly around the castle. Maybe some baseball would sort him out? With this new goal in mind, Yuuri made his way down to the training grounds in search of Conrad.

When he arrived he was extremely surprised, not by Conrad's absence from the grounds but by the ring of tiny hovering fires that Wolfram and a few of his men were gathered around. Almost all of the fires were the familiar red or orange but Wolfram's was a brilliant blue. The blond man to Wolfram's right had a flame of a similar color, but his wasn't nearly so clear looking. As Yuuri approached the strange gathering, he could hear Wolfram's voice barking out orders.

"What part of hotter do you fail to grasp?"

A few of the men's faces screwed up in concentration, and a few of the lights fluttered blue for a moment or two before going back to orange. One man's bit of fire flickered and went out completely, making the man growl in frustration.

"What's the point anyway? Why can't we just use normal fire to--"

"It's a Winter Formal. The color scheme is to be elegant and blue, Sir Von Christ won't— Ohh!" Wolfram's demeanor changed abruptly when he spotted Yuuri, and a smile teased the corners of his lips. The blue flame in front of him flared before going out with pop. "Lucien," he addressed the man to his right. "Make sure no one gets lazy. Another hour or so of practice, that or a solid five minutes of blue. I'll expect a full report on everyone's progress before dark."

"Yes, Sir!" Lucien responded. A few beads of sweat slid down his forehead and his fire flickered back to red a few times before settling back on blue.

Wolfram gave him a nod of approval before stepping out of the circle and coming to meet Yuuri. "Already finished for the day?" His friend smiled, the harsh persona he applied when he addressed his troops vanishing completely. Wolfram's hand fell on his shoulder in a friendly way, but it was still radiating heat from producing the fire and Yuuri felt suddenly flushed.

"Erm, yeah," he managed, trying not to look over his shoulder to study Lucien. Someone Wolfram went on a life changing journey with as a child. Yuuri had seen this man around the castle, but had never given him a second thought.

Wolfram seemed to notice something was bothering him, because he raised a graceful eyebrow in question.

Yuuri pushed his mental tangent aside. "What are you making them do?"

"Ohh that?" Wolfram grinned, obviously pleased with himself. The hand dropped from his shoulder and Wolfram started to walk away from the circle of soldiers, Yuuri close behind him. "Well, everyone's been thinking about new security measures for the Winter Formal, but it wasn't a week ago when all Gunter could talk about was the color scheme." They had reached a somewhat secluded area of the grounds beside one of the castle walls, some sparse trees already turning the colors of autumn obscured his view of the few soldiers still out training. "So, I've decided to take
Yuuri just looked at him. It was hard not to when Wolfram had a smile like that on his face. Then he remembered. "Security? Why would we need to do anything unusual?"

Wolfram's smile faded and he went back into one of his more "proper" expressions. "I'm surprised Gunter didn't mention it to you this morning." He leaned back against the castle wall. "We're often the hosts of various important foreign dignitaries, not to mention that your protection is paramount, but we have a few guests attending the Winter Formal this year-- The Prince of Shou Shimereon and his personal guard-- that will require special attention."

Yuuri was confused. "I thought Shou Shimereon didn't like us..."

"Which is exactly the point." Wolfram huffed. "Why did they invite themselves? Why only the two of them--"

"To make peace, probably." Yuuri smiled. "What if the Prince isn't as unfriendly as his parents and is coming to make--"

"A possibility, I'm sure," Wolfram growled through clenched teeth and gave Yuuri the "You Stupid Wimp" look. "Other possibilities include attempts on your life. That being said, we need to double the guards and put all sorts of creative, subtle safety measures in place. Subtle only on the off chance your theory is correct."

"So we'll appear friendly to make them feel secure, but at the same time we'll be prepared if anything goes wrong."

Wolfram nodded. "You figured it out. That was fast for a wimp."

"Stop calling me that!" Yuuri growled, leaning in to make his point.

"Stop being a wimp..." Wolfram cocked his head to the side and Yuuri only noticed his breath had been teasing his lips when the tilt of Wolfram's head moved it to his cheek.

Yuuri could feel his face get hot. Why was he making everything weird? Yuuri had to be thinking about it too much... Trying not to let Wolfram know how he had spent all day worrying about the state of their Completely Platonic Relationship. And now Yuuri had gone and done something weird. He cursed his nerves and backed away just enough to get a reasonable distance between them again without jumping ten feet in the other direction and drawing attention to himself.

Of course Wolfram had noticed something weird and was studying his face with an intensity that did little to lessen his blush.

"So--" Yuuri stammered, desperate to draw attention away from whatever just happened. "You never finished explaining the sudden need for blue fire."

"Ohh that!" His friend smiled, whatever tension that had existed between them forgotten. "Well, since blue is part of the color scheme I thought we could have blue flames on top of decorative poles around the ballroom. Each fire would be controlled by one of my men, and if they noticed anything suspicious they could either extinguish or change the color of the flame."

"Wow! Wolfram, that's really smart!"

"Of course it is." Wolfram smirked, clearly quite proud of himself.
Yuuri couldn't help but wonder if this was a good time to bring up Marques. Wolfram was in a good mood...

"Speaking of my brilliant idea, I should go find Gwendal and tell him about it before his meeting this evening..." He trailed off, eyes sparkling just like Anissina's when she had a new invention. "I'll see you at dinner, Yuuri." And then he hurried off in search of his older brother.

Yuuri stared at the spot at the wall where Wolfram used to be and blinked. Was his friend actually avoiding him? Wolfram knew he had free time, normally the other boy would have latched onto him and insisted they go pull Greta from her lessons to have a snack together before dinner...

And where had Wolfram been last night?

That question, more than any other, was the one that clouded Yuuri's mind all afternoon, made him brood through dinner, and had given him the beginnings of a headache by the time he'd gotten out of his bath. And he still didn't really know why it bothered him so much. Sure, he'd come up with the whole possessive friendship theory, but if that was the case his subconscious should have left him alone by now.

Right?

When he entered his bedroom, Yuuri was greeted with the sight of Wolfram propped up in bed attempting to read a book. Attempting only because his eyes were almost closed and his head was doing the adorable bobbing dance of someone actually sleeping through every other paragraph. Yuuri felt deflated. Why did Wolfram have to choose now to look so... when Yuuri had worked so hard planning out their impending conversation. Maybe it could wait until tomorrow after all.

"Yuuri." Wolfram slipped in a mark and closed the book on his lap, looking across the room at him with tired eyes. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

He blinked, feeling a bit uncomfortable with only a towel around his waist. "Sure... Just let me get changed." When he turned to get his pajamas out the drawer he could have sworn he saw Wolfram pout dramatically out of the corner of his eye.

And then it hit him.

What if it wasn't anything... innocent that had driven Marques and Wolfram apart? After all Wolfram was... Wolfram. The prettiest boy Yuuri had laid eyes on. And being gay wasn't exactly rare in Shin Makoku... Yuuri felt his nails dig into his palms, only now realizing he had balled his hands into fists. Of course Wolfram must have drawn a lot of attention... Must still draw a lot of attention.

Yuuri finished changing in a daze and walked over to the bed, not quite sure what to think, but glad Wolfram was about to distract him by telling him something.

"Are you alright?" Wolfram peered at him.

Yuuri had to look away. "I'm fine. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I meant to tell you earlier, but got too excited about showing Gwendal-- Anyway, it's just something you should know about, and I'm guessing Gunter forgot to mention it. It's about Caloria."

"Caloria? I suppose that makes sense... Most of what I had to sign today was about Caloria."
Wolfram balked at him. "You've been reading everything you sign these days?"

"Of course. Why do you think it still takes me so long? I'm not that incompetent."

"I wonder if Gwendal knows," Wolfram mused, mouth in a half smile.

Yuuri blushed. "Well, I'm not reading everything. I just sort of notice if the same word pops up a lot... But what's going on in Caloria?"

Wolfram's smile faded. "There's a great sickness. We've sent over aid, and even Gisela went to do what she could. But sometimes things like this happen, and they're completely outside our control."

The urge to go out to see for himself rose up within him and he started making preparations in his head. Finally! A chance to get out of the castle--

"YUURI! Stop thinking this instant!" Wolfram growled. "Do you understand what this is? It's not something you can help!"

He pouted. "I've cured many fevers and--"

"Ohh I'm sure! But think, you wimp!" Wolfram had thrown off his covers in anger and was now sitting up on his knees, bringing himself to eye-level with Yuuri, who was still standing by the bed. "THINK! This isn't something we can protect you from! If you run off to help, you're not just risking yourself to the invisible menace we cannot fight, you're risking the lives of everyone sworn to protect you-- you're risking the future of the kingdom! We cannot fight this. YOU cannot fight this with your power. It's nature, Yuuri. Please be reasonable." His eyes were so firm, but at the same time soft, pleading.

His heart sank. Wolfram was right. But there had to be something he could do. Yuuri sat down on the bed and studied the floor, putting his back to Wolfram. Gwendal seemed to have already ordered all the things he could think of to help the people... Sending Gisela and others to help, but, Yuuri thought hopefully, maybe he could convince him to send more people, more food, anything to help. "How bad is it?"

A hand pressed lightly against his shoulder and Yuuri could hear Wolfram's voice soften, trying to lessen the impact of his words. "I haven't seen it myself, but humans are certainly dying. It's just the beginning of it so we can't know now how big it will become. And since it is the beginning it's good we've done all we can so early. We should be able to help them."

"This is why Flurin was so strange at the party, isn't it?"

Wolfram shifted behind him and Yuuri took his silence as a yes. "You're not going to run away are you?" Wolfram asked, sounding a little afraid of the answer.

"No." As much as he wanted to, Wolfram was right. It just didn't make sense.

Yuuri could feel Wolfram let out a breath against his back. "You promise?"

He turned to see Wolfram's big green eyes begging him. "Yes." Yuuri couldn't help but nod.

Wolfram looked so relieved. "Thank the gods!" He flopped back onto the bed. "I've been worried you were going to be a wimp about this all day."

Yuuri couldn't help but frown. "All day? When did you hear about it? Why am I always the last one to know about anything important?"
"Probably because everyone has to panic about how to tell you things in such a way that won't make you run off on a ridiculous quest to fix everything yourself. Everyone was up half the night worrying about it."

"So that's where you were!" Yuuri still wasn't completely sure he should feel so relieved. "I was worried, since you were gone most of the night."

Wolfram snorted. "There's no reason for you to be worried. I'm not a wimp." Then he smirked up at him. "What were you so worried about?"

Yuuri's throat tightened and he slid into bed. This way he could look up at the ceiling, away from Wolfram. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Wolfram's head popped into his line of sight. "Do you doubt my ability to protect--" Wolfram stopped, studying him. "No..." The smirk returned, much more frightening this time. Wolfram leaned in closer, supporting himself with an arm placed on the pillows next to Yuuri's head. His face was so close.

"'No' what?" Yuuri licked his lips, suddenly dry.

Wolfram's green eyes were dark, almost predatory. "Do you need me to remind you that it is you and not me who is the cheater?"

He could barely breathe-- there was something in the air between them, it made his thoughts thicken and his skin tingle. "No..." He managed, out of breath but afraid to gasp for air.

"Good." It was almost a whisper. So soft that Yuuri wasn't sure he even heard it, his heart was pounding so loud.

When he had control over himself again, he rolled over, expecting to see Wolfram already asleep, but was greeted with wide eyes watching him. Yuuri spoke without thinking. "Why aren't you and Marques friends anymore?"

The silence stretched. And with every second Yuuri wished he could take it back. "Wolfr--"

"A lot of reasons," His voice was cold, face white. "Mostly his personality."

"Oh," said Yuuri, and he knew better than to push further. "Well, it's late. Will you turn off the lights?"

The candles flickered out.

"Thank--"

"It's something that's over, Yuuri. More than a decade over. We aren't old friend who fell out of favor because of a disagreement. I made a stupid decision when I was young, but it was hardly the end of the world. You can't fix it. I'm sorry if it's not what you want to hear, or not some detailed story. It's just an unfortunate memory, one I'd like to stay buried." Wolfram's voice was steady the whole time, detached from whatever emotions his words carried. "We've been on reasonable terms. You've met him. He was one of the men I took with us when we went to check on the village, the day you decided to take responsibility for Shin Makoku."

Yuuri remembered that day well. How happy he was to go and see the village, see Conrad again. How annoyed he had been at Wolfram's bratty attitude. It was almost surreal to think how differently he thought of Wolfram back in those days. Both of them had changed so much since
Wolfram continued. "After you went to Earth, in the time after Shinou, Marques was stationed in the south, near Caloria, but he deserted. Broke rank and disappeared into the countryside. I didn't give him a second thought until he turned up night before last."

"Why did he come back?"

"I can't be sure, but he wanted to deliver a letter to Gwendal. He did a good job of vanishing after he handed it over, too." Wolfram showed some annoyance but generally had relaxed a bit now that his Marques story had come to a close.

"What was in the letter?"

"Nothing we didn't already have." Wolfram sighed. "Sorry, I've been quibbling. There is a theory that there's a connection between the sickness in Caloria and Shou Shimeron... Gwendal didn't want me to--"

"What do you mean?" Yuuri's head was starting to spin. There seemed to be so many stories going on at once.

"Shou Shimeron is hinting they're behind it. But, it's infinitely more likely that they're just claiming to be behind a natural phenomenon. To make us fear them. They've almost no military power--"

"Wait... What about pony tail guy? That string thing was a little scary." Yuuri pictured an entire army of them and shuddered.

"If you'll remember, you took care of a lot of them the first time a box opened. After one look at your power, most of them deserted."

"But why would they want us to fear them?" Yuuri wondered aloud. "Is it because they want something? But what would they want? Are they worried we'll attack them? But we've done nothing to--"

"All good questions," Wolfram interrupted. "But it doesn't look like we'll get any answers until after the Formal." The covers rustled. "You'll still keep your promise, right? No running off?"

Yuuri sighed. It wasn't like the situation had changed much. This world was like old Earth in many ways and there was no such thing as biological warfare during the time this world resembled. Well, nothing more sophisticated than putting infected people in catapults and hurling them over siege walls... But Wolfram was probably right. It was much more likely that Shou Shimeron was taking credit for nature's fury. And Yuuri couldn't fight nature. "No running off. I promise."

"That's a good wimp." Wolfram seemed pleased and not far from sleep. Yuuri imagined he must be exhausted. "One last thing. The Sage wants to visit Earth, to pick up things to help, possible cures for what's going on in Caloria. Can you be back at least two weeks before the Winter Formal?"

Yuuri nodded. "I think so. I'm getting better at controlling the time thing."

"Well, you better be back in time. I can only imagine the complications if you--"

"I'll be there!" He paused. "Why a whole two weeks before, though?"

"Your dancing," Wolfram sighed. "I'm taking over your lessons. I won't let you put on another dismal performance--" Wolfram was cut off by a pillow forced against his face.
"If you'll remember, someone was even worse!"

"WORSE?!!" Wolfram growled, shoving the pillow away. "I was practically leading the entire time! You nearly stepped on me twice! I'll have you know I'm one of the best dancers at court!" He was nearly out of breath in his fury.

"Okay okay, Wolfram, don't get so worked up over it. I'll let you teach me." As soon as the words left his mouth Yuuri didn't know how to feel about them. What was he getting himself into?

"Fine. Now time for sleep..." Wolfram practically purred, foot pressing against Yuuri's calf as he stretched out.

Yuuri only grunted in response. There were so many thoughts in his head he didn't know if he'd ever get to sleep.

"What's wrong now?" Wolfram mumbled, a slight teasing quality to his tone Yuuri couldn't place.

"Can't sleep." He grumbled, annoyed by his own noisy mind.

"Does someone need a goodnight kiss?" His friend teased.

Yuuri tensed and he felt his whole face go hot. This could work! If Wolfram kissed him again he was sure to notice how terrible it was. Not that he had any reason to feel insecure, but if Wolfram did it... he was sure it would make himself feel better. "Okay..." he whispered, screwing his eyes shut and preparing for the blatant horror about to befall him.

Yuuri felt the mattress shift, the covers drag against his skin, warm flesh soft against his cheek, pressing just hard enough for him to feel it.

And it burned. All the way down to his toes.

His mind screamed in frustration and he almost pulled Wolfram closer. If he did it like that then how was Yuuri supposed to tell how much he hated it? He could hardly feel it.

Seconds later he could hear Wolfram's light snoring, his friend apparently having fallen asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Yuuri wanted to yell, hit something, do anything. This was all so wrong! What was wrong with him? He was just a teenager...

HA! That was it! Hormones. He'd been so deprived, anything would feel good. Especially when his body couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. Yes. His body had no idea it was Wolfram kissing him. A boy.

There was nothing to worry about. He was going to Earth tomorrow. Plenty of time to sort himself out there.

Yuuri was too busy falling asleep with part of Wolfram's leg on him, his friend's little snores pulling him into calm, into dreams, to notice that the thought of Earth didn't cheer him up nearly as much as it used to.

********

********

* * *
Shibuya Yuuri, Maou of Shin Makoku,

My dear king of a far-away place, it has been much too long since our two countries have been united. This absence is as a putrescence contaminating my heart. If only the two of us could truly become one I feel that this painful sickness of the soul would cease; and even people beyond our borders would rejoice, given new life by our alliance.

If I am not too bold I would love to make your acquaintance through a dance at the annual winter event I’ve heard so much about.

Desperately awaiting your pleasurable response,

Prince Saralegui, Shou Shimeron.
Blood Pledge Castle, Shin Makoku.
Late December.

Classical music croaked feebly out of the water-damaged CD player as two pairs of semi-coordinated footsteps echoed loudly in the cavernous room. Decorations already covered the walls. White drapes billowed elegantly up to the ceiling, waiting to take on the blue hue of the flames that Wolfram’s soldiers would produce. More than twenty tall silver pedestals had been arranged throughout the ballroom, casting crossed shadows along the floor with the light that poured in from the line of high windows along the western wall. Everything seemed to be ready for the Winter Formal tomorrow.

Everything except for him.

Yuuri tried to lead Wolfram into a turn, but stepped too far and ended up with half his weight sinking into the point of his friend’s boot. He groaned. Yuuri thought for sure he’d gotten over the ‘stepping on people’ phase. It had to be his nerves. Wolfram had been making him practice every day since he’d recovered from his return to Shin Makoku. Two weeks of awkward… confusing… heart pounding lessons that left him mysteriously frustrated for hours on end.

Wolfram had to be doing this to him on purpose. Yuuri had never been so flustered in all his life... it just wasn't natural to feel this way.

It was this dilemma that been absorbing Yuuri's thoughts ever since he and Murata packed some dusty books in air-tight boxes and headed to Earth. Or that was what he liked to tell himself. The truth was the issue had been attacking the small corner of his mind it had been forced into ever since Wolfram tried to kiss him on Elizabeth's wedding night.

The tension had been growing, persisting to an itch that sat stubbornly in the pit of his stomach, occasionally rising up to choke him whenever Wolfram looked at him just so. It had gotten to the point where just a subtle brush of shoulders would make him jump, the static tension of his withheld thoughts crackling between them.

Of course Wolfram didn't notice a thing.

Or at least he did a good job not showing anything. Acting like everything was normal. That it was right for to boys to dance together at all, let alone spend an hour a day in each other's arms. That it was normal for Wolfram to keep kissing his cheek each night, lips grazing his skin too briefly for him to come to the reassuring decision that he hated it. That it was disgusting, perverse, amoral, and wrong.

But even that fact, that truth about how the world worked seemed broken. Wolfram liked men, seemed to like him sometimes. But Wolfram wasn't disgusting. He was beautiful.

Sure, he was bratty at times, selfish and loud and clingy. But how he cared for Greta, the way he glowed when she was near him. Yuuri could remember Wolfram from the beginning, he had watched his friend change, watched his heart grow and become as beautiful as his eyes.
The eyes that somehow only saw him no matter what was happening around them.

And then another thought, another worry to add to the storm in his mind: Why did such a boy, a man, a soldier, a noble with the face of an angel, tarnish everything... the reputation he had spent a lifetime achieving, all for him? An awkward seventeen-year-old foreigner who had never even had a single girlfriend. But that was how he was on Earth. In Shin Makoku he was a King.

Alone, in his bed on Earth, recovering from the physical and psychological drain of escorting Murata between worlds, it was the thought that Wolfram might only indulge him because of his position that haunted his mind. A dark thought that was all to easy to forget when Wolfram's eyes found his during dinner, or when his friend's palm pressed gently into Yuuri's shoulder when they danced.

If only this frustration wasn't so distracting! Yuuri was acutely aware that he should be more worried about Caloria. About the innocent people suffering miles and miles away. But the more he tried to do something, to read some of the books Murata had left in his room while Murata went off to talk to Dr. Rodregas and search for a possible solution, to stumble into his brother's old bedroom and search the net for information, he just couldn't. He had been too drained by the most profound exhaustion he had ever experienced. It felt like torture, being too tired to even leave his bed, trapped in a place between dreams, feeling helpless and incapable of anything but worrying over this ill-timed hormonal crisis.

No wonder Shinou hadn't allowed him to pop back and forth between worlds whenever the mood struck him. The journey itself was one thing, but the hardest part was keeping time from running by too quickly in Shin Makoku. The only thing that kept him going was the vivid mental image of an enraged Wolfram.

Still, the feeling of helplessness consumed him. And knowing how much he hated this feeling was the only thing that kept him from sneaking into the stables and making the journey to Caloria alone. If he was there he might be able to be of some help, to Flurin, to the people, to someone. But of course he could never go alone. Conrad and Wolfram would inevitably follow, and then they would be the ones left feeling helpless, unable to protect their king from the "invisible menace".

It was all just so complicated! Yuuri was always, always thinking about something unfortunate lately. He could just feel something inside himself about to snap. Hopefully it wouldn't happen during the formal...

Yuuri shut his eyes as a headache started to pound beneath his forehead. And there was THAT, the whole Prince Saralegui visit political situation of impending awkward.

Why did everything have to happen at once?!

When Yuuri opened his eyes, Wolfram's face was only inches away, eyebrows arched in concern. "Yuuri--?"

"Sorry Wolfram, I just have a headache." Yuuri tried to sound reassuring, but he could hear the revealing snap to his voice.

Wolfram smirked at him, ignoring the shortness of Yuuri's tone. "Well, I don't know what you do about headaches on Earth, but I can't imagine it involves standing on people--"

"Sorry! Ah- Why didn't you tell me?" Yuuri jumped.

"I didn't want to distract you." Wolfram crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head to the
side. "Maybe if you figure out what's been bothering you you'll be able to pay attention to your
lessons and won't spend the entire formal staring into space."

Yuuri could feel his face go hot. "We've practiced and practiced already! I won't embarrass you, or
at least not any worse than last time. I've been reviewing international politics with Gunter every
morning-- don't even make me start about all the Shou Shimeron history and customs Gwendal
insists I memorize-- what he can find for me to memorize at least-- And do you THINK he would
kill me if I spent the entire night staring at the wall!" Yuuri sucked in a breath, only now noticing
how much his voice had raised during his little speech.

Wolfram seemed completely un-phased and stepped toward him.

"Wolfr--?"

"Shh," his friend hushed. "This should help."

There was almost no space between them, and Wolfram's fingers were so warm where they came
to rest on both side of his face. Yuuri could feel his heart begin to race, the soft pressure of live air
brushing against his lips, pushed rhythmically from his friend's lungs.

Was Wolfram going to try to kiss him again?

Yuuri shuddered, but for all the wrong reasons. As good as it felt, it was only a result of his
inexperienced hormonal confusion. When Wolfram kissed him, really kissed him, it would be
wrong. It would be wrong and Yuuri could go back to how he was before.

Afraid of the intensity of Wolfram's gaze, Yuuri let his eyes close.

"Hold still," Wolfram ordered, and without thinking Yuuri let his tongue slip out to wet his own
dried lips.

The fingers near his cheeks moved up, pressing gently into the dip of his temples. Through his
eyelids Yuuri could see a soft light begin to glow.

Yuuri's headache vanished almost at once and Yuuri could feel calm slide over him in waves. He
moved closer to the source of this wonderful feeling, barely able to keep his knees from going out.
A small noise of contentment escaped his throat, but he was feeling much too comfortable to care.
His head fell forward into Wolfram's shoulder and he rubbed his face sleepily against his friend's
neck, breathing deep. One of the hands on his head moved down, cradling his neck as the rush of
calm came to a halt and he collapsed into Wolfram.

"What was that?" Yuuri managed, knees still shaking. At some point he must have grabbed onto
Wolfram's shoulders for support because his fingers were still digging into the soft leather of his
epaulettes.

"Just a bit of healing maryoku. Sorry if it wasn't very good, I've never put this particular theory to
use before."

Yuuri moved a step back as soon as the buzz of calming power left his mind and smiled. "Don't
apologize, that was amazing! How come you've never done that before?"

"Because you didn't deserve it." Wolfram looked pleased. "You've been remarkably un-wimpy
lately-- moody, yes-- but everyone's been impressed by how well you've been handling the current
situation."
Yuuri blinked. "Really?" To him it seemed like he had been failing miserably.

"Really." Wolfram nodded. "So consider it a reward for not acting like your usual self and running off into the middle of things without thinking."

Yuuri pouted and Wolfram replied with one of his best smirks.

"Now," Wolfram snapped, holding out a hand. "Back to the lesson."

Shaking his head in amused defeat, Yuuri complied, and they spent another half-hour dancing without Yuuri making a single mistake, the afterglow of Wolfram's magic making the rest of their time together eerily pleasant.

When they were finished, Wolfram hurried off to make sure all of his guards were able to produce the blue signal fires for a suitable amount of time, leaving Yuuri alone in the room with only his old CD player for company. He walked over and turned it off. Yuuri had heard enough of the leisurely music for today. It was sounding worse every hour as the batteries slowly ran out. Yuuri had decided to bring it at the last minute, after deciding that the only thing worse than failing miserably at dancing with Wolfram was failing miserably at dancing with Wolfram in front of an audience. They needed music to practice, and Yuuri didn't like the idea of half an orchestra watching him step all over his fiancé. The old CD player had seemed like a reasonable solution.

Since it had been so last-minute, he hadn't had time to pack it properly. There had been so much to take back. Murata had specially ordered a solar-powered battery charger for his laptop (thankfully, he'd managed to get it to the temple before Anissina had discovered it) as well as even more books to add to the piles they were bringing back to Shin Makoku.

His mother had insisted on sending along some of her curry, in addition to another brand new dress for Greta, and had been overjoyed when he'd asked her if she had a letter for Wolfram. Apparently Murata had been the one accommodating the little mail service until now, and so even though his mother agreed to send the letter with him, he was placed under the strictest instructions not to open it.

Of course, when he'd taken everything back to Shin Makoku he'd barely arrived conscious and slept for three solid days. Wolfram had been there when he'd woken up, putting down his book with a relieved sigh and calling one of the maids to bring him a platter of food. Murata assured him that everything was normal, and that he was just getting used to controlling his new power. His friend insisted he was doing remarkably well considering Yuuri essentially had to control a power that didn't consider him its master yet. The time before this Yuuri had been asleep even longer... In fact, the only time he'd been able to travel between worlds without suffering such extreme exhaustion since he came into Shinou's power was the first time, but then it had been Murata who'd collapsed later at the temple, only up and running the next day as a result of Ulrike's emergency aid. According to Murata, it was best if Yuuri learned to recover himself. After all, it wasn't like letting him sleep for a bit was the end of the world.

Yuuri had only discovered Murata's difficulty afterward... He discovered most things well after they happened. It was a disturbing trend he hoped to remedy as soon as he could. How was he supposed to be a good king, a good friend, if no one ever told him anything?

That was one of his favorite things about Wolfram. His friend would tell him anything about politics if he asked the right questions, and usually Wolfram would hint extravagantly until Yuuri figured out there was something he should be asking. Yuuri wondered when Gwendal would have told him about the possible connection between Caloria's sickness and Shou Shimeron. Probably not until the older man had decided what was going to be done about it. Too late for Yuuri to try to
help or come to a decision on his own. Yuuri appreciated Gwendal, and he knew everything good in Shin Makoku would have ended long ago without his leadership, but how was he supposed to be a good king if...

Yuuri sighed.

He hadn't exactly been the most reassuring king-in-training... It made sense that Gwendal would try to protect him. But it was just so awful to always be the one who needed protecting.

********

********

Wolfram groaned and let his head fall back against the stone wall. Controlling himself was always a challenge when he was with the wimp. But today... Wolfram whimpered and dug the heel of his hand into his crotch, a futile attempt to ease the painful throb of his seemingly constant erection. It just wasn't fair! How was he supposed to control himself when Yuuri did things like that, looking so ready to be kissed, practically keening into his shoulder. The soft sound had instantly burrowed its way into his mind, waiting to be re-played at all the wrong moments.

Moments like now...

He bit his lip and glanced at the wooden door of the storeroom he had slipped into. Since it was dark Wolfram could see the reassuring silhouette of the bolt connecting in a solid line to the stone door frame.

Wolfram shivered and slid down the wall. It was cold in the old storeroom, and he could only hope the low temperature would help cool his deviant body. There was no way his men would be as oblivious to his condition as his fiancé, and he was leading a final training session with them in less than an hour. With the skill those lack-wits were displaying, Wolfram would be surprised if more than seven or so were able to sustain a blue flame for a suitable amount of time. As it was, he was going to be lighting half the ballroom by default.

The buckle popped audibly from the leather hole and Wolfram hissed, the source of his frustration no longer strapped flat against his stomach. He closed his eyes and clenched both his fists into his hair, leaning forward to rest his head against his knees. Trying for a moment to will away the inevitable.

After all this time, it still felt wrong to think of Yuuri while he touched himself. Fiancé or no, his obliviously sexy wimp would probably disown him if he were ever discovered. The physical evidence of Wolfram's need for his wimpy king would likely disgust him enough to end all thoughts of experimentation.

It was clear that something had changed in Yuuri's recent outlook on his own sexuality, but Wolfram couldn't be sure what exactly it was. Yuuri could be starting to return his long-harbored feelings, but more likely he was just experimenting. After all, Wolfram was the one closest to him... willing... convenient... For all he knew, Yuuri was just waiting to close his pretty black eyes and pretend Wolfram was a woman. He rubbed his face into his knees. Not that Yuuri would have to imagine very hard if he just wore a dress-- he would only have to close his eyes once it was off.

But hadn't that been the point of stealing one of Mother's nightgowns? Maybe he should have known then that he was embarking on a futile love cruise of his own. He sighed and clenched his toes. It was all because he was getting greedy. Yuuri was showing interest, and immediately Wolfram wanted more.
Everything Wolfram wanted, should want, had become confused. Yuuri had just come into his life and permanently addled his mind. But the high Yuuri gave him, the little blinks of bliss that only his wimp could produce, made it impossible to do anything but swallow his pride and keep on loving him.

And if everything happened... If miracles happened and Yuuri loved him back one day, the allure of that possible future happiness, everlasting, was just too good for Wolfram to turn away from.

Yuuri's experimentation, or even consideration of Wolfram's careful advances, presented opportunities for Yuuri to take the next step, was the best thing to happen to their relationship since Weller lied and pretended to betray them all. Wolfram couldn't afford to make a single mistake. Yuuri would make the first move this time, no chance for his pity over Wolfram's one-sided feelings to get in the way.

Thinking about all the possibilities, possibilities that seemed surreally feasible given Yuuri's recent lingering touches and blushing glances, made him twitch against the stiff fabric of his pants. A hand trembled down between his legs, pressing lightly against the heat there. He shuddered. This wouldn't take long.

It never did when Yuuri was around. Since Wolfram gave up the privacy of his own room for one side of the king's bed he couldn't afford to take his time. Besides, all his fantasies were bitter-sweet, and a leisurely pace that allowed for rational thoughts only led to more emptiness when it was over.

And Wolfram had been feeling so tired lately, it hardly seemed worth the effort. The staggering increase of Giddy Yuuri Feelings that had been tormenting his mind was very distracting and Wolfram knew he really should be worried about a million other things.

Things like the hollow pull in his gut that still hadn't disappeared since he had helped Yuuri with his headache. He must have actually stressed his summoning stamina with all his recent use. Wolfram was sure most of the damage was due to Anissina's blasted meddling, but if the trinket actually worked it would be well worth a little exhaustion now.

Wolfram couldn't help but smile when he thought about giving it to Yuuri during the Formal tomorrow.

Gwendal would be ashamed of him, wasting time on emotional drivel when there was so much to do. So much to worry about with Prince Pervert from Shou Shimeron on the way, that now it hardly seemed the time for daydreams. But it really was so much nicer to fantasize about ravishing Yuuri against the curtains in the ballroom than ponder whatever cryptic messages letters contained.

Again he mentally cursed Shinou's "gift". It had been so much easier to keep the perversions of his mind at bay without the detailed images and phantom sensations of flesh on flesh cruelly fueling his imagination. If only the pervert Sage would stop reminding him at every chance... Still, it gave a shadow of heat to the imagined curve of his fiancé's neck as he thought of pressing their bodies together, tongue sliding against his wimp's throat as he teased out that delicious sound...

Wolfram brought his free hand to his mouth, biting down on his fist to stifle a groan of his own, and let his worries fade, if only for a moment.

*******

*******
Conrad Weller could feel the tiny ice crystals beginning to form on his eyebrows. The hot air escaping his nose and mouth made whisking trails against his face and up into the darkness of the branches that crossed above him along the path. His horse snorted, shaking its head to scatter the snowflakes trapped in its mane.

The outskirts of the city were always quiet in the evenings, but the layer of fresh snow covering the ground muffled every sound, blanketing the sparse woods between the city and the farthest wall with an almost eerie silence. Shin Makoku had many walls, each one newer, stronger, and farther from Blood Pledge Castle than the last. Most of the oldest walls had merged with the city, made into sides of houses or torn down in places to make way for new roads.

The farthest wall was visible through the trees now. Strong and dark, cracked and rebuilt, a testament to the strength of their nation. This wall, more than any of the landmarks Sir Weller passed along his way, evoked tumultuous feelings. It was this wall that was built more than twenty years ago in preparation for the most recent war against the humans, this wall that first greeted him when he and Yozak had returned, bloody and victorious, to face the tragic death of innocence.

This place was the landmark of beginnings and of endings. It would outlive him and everyone he knew.

Conrad was so absorbed with his thoughts that he was almost surprised when Sir Franklin emerged from the brush to salute. The young Sergent was a half blood, but too young to have accompanied him and his troops on their "death march" to Ruttenburgh, a fact Sir Franklin was still green enough to resent. The young man reminded him of Wolfram in that respect, still thinking that the battlefield was the only place one's worth lay.

The man's broad shoulders and strawberry hair, however, reminded Conrad of someone else. As good a man as Sir Franklin was, Conrad missed having the support of someone who had fought beside him, saved his life more than once, serving as his second in command. He hadn't realized what a luxury it was, not to worry about being betrayed in the midst of any campaign, but with anyone besides Yozak the seed of doubt was there, dark and seeping in the crevices of his mind. If it was Yozak, at least Conrad knew his back wouldn't be turned.

"Captain."

The brisk word snapped Conrad's focus back to the task at hand and he nodded down at the man in greeting, his horse shifting to find a comfortable hold on the rocky path. "Report."

"We've got men covering the perimeter, here and at the castle, and two dozen at the main gate. Just enough to hold off any surprises long enough for back-up to arrive if we need it."

Conrad nodded again. "Don't worry about tracking up the snow, Sir Christ will send someone down before dawn to remove any footprints. I've been informed that the guests will be arriving around midday tomorrow. If nothing happens you'll receive new instructions in two days. Is everyone supplied?"

Sir Franklin smiled up at him. "Supplied well enough, but if nothing happens we'll have some rowdy boys in those bushes come two days. Nothing suspicious from the ones farther out?"

Conrad shook his head. "Which is only more suspicious-- But I'd rather deal with some bored soldiers. Watch our men, too. A wall is more likely to crack from the inside."

"Yes, Sir!" Sir Franklin saluted.
Conrad echoed the gesture before dismissing the Sergent and nudging his horse into a turn. It was a half-hour's trot back to the castle and Conrad hoped to return before dark. Checking up on the men himself hadn't been strictly necessary, but the ride was calming after all the preparations that had weighed heavily on his mind for months.

The cold air gave him focus, seeping into his skin as the wind whipped through his uniform. There were far too many possibilities for what lay ahead. Too many things that could go wrong. Too little known about their opponent.

Shou Shimeron had been politically isolated for nearly six hundred years, and even before that the territory itself was estranged within the previously united Shimeron. There just wasn't much there for anyone to want. Some decent farmland, sure, but all the choice areas had gone to Dai Shimeron. The smaller country tended to stay out of world affairs and was practically self-sufficient when it came to trade. It had been surprising enough when they made an attempt to go after the boxes, but now this?

Conrad's knuckles whitened where he gripped the reigns. He was no closer now than he'd ever been to figuring out the other country's motives. Or were they even dealing with Shou Shimeron? Was it possible that Prince Saralegui was acting on his own, that their intentions really were peaceful? Conrad sincerely doubted that. If there was anything he'd learned in life it was that nothing ever goes the way you want it to.

At least now Conrad had something specific to worry about. These past months all he could do was watch the wrinkles dig their way into Gwendal's forehead. Worrying about Yuuri was easier than everything else, almost a second nature. And at least if Conrad failed he wouldn't be alive to lament.

While Conrad was concerned about not being at the wall if there was an attack, he wouldn't give up his position as Yuuri's shadow for anything. If anyone tried anything at the formal they would be bleeding before they knew they had been seen.

Anything happening at the formal was, however, highly unlikely. Every possible precaution had been taken by himself and others to ensure their king's absolute safety. Conrad had actually been impressed with Wolfram's contributions. The blue flame was a wonderfully subtle addition to their surveillance measures, as even Wolfram's men looked more like decorations than soldiers. They would be watching the hall from their positions along the perimeter, ready to signal if anything seemed suspicious.

Conrad would have some of his more trusted men along the entrances to the ballroom as well as the surrounding corridors. In addition, several of Gwendal's soldiers were posing as dignitaries in case anything happened during the formal itself. Even though the chances of it were slim to none, with the level of uncertainty surrounding the situation, it put everyone's mind at ease to have a plan in place.

The light had almost gone from the sky by the time Conrad entered the final gate and handed off his horse to Baodomero's boy. He couldn't help but smile down at the youth who spent almost all his time when not helping his father being pestered by Greta. If the girl wasn't careful she was going to end up just like Wolfram. Wilfrido's eyes barely flicked up to meet his, though, lip worried between his teeth, before leading Conrad's stallion back to its place.

Even at this late hour the courtyard hummed with activity. Servants and soldiers criss-crossed along the grounds, arms full of flowers, packages, or swords. It was chaotic to say the least and Conrad couldn't help but miss Gisela's imposing organizational prowess. Dorcas was having almost no luck directing the ebb and flow of urgent shuffling and his squeaking voice could just barely be
heard over the roar of the crowd.

Conrad took the steps two at a time on his way to Gwendal's office, dodging out of Sangria's path just in time as the maid practically flew down the stairs with an armful of laundry. Her frantic "Excuse me" echoed up the stone of the stairwell a few seconds later.

When he reached the door to the office Conrad was surprised to hear Gewndal's raised voice through the wooden frame.

"...not a matter of the heart it's a matter of politics!"

Deciding not to eavesdrop Conrad knocked and reached for the door handle. Before his fingers touched the brass the door swung open, revealing a rather flushed Sir Christ.

"If that selfish loafer burns down the formal linens..." His old teacher mumbled under his breath, hardly looking at Conrad as he passed. Gwendal's instructions for the man to get some rest followed Gunter out the door and Conrad was left facing Gwendal.

"What was--" Conrad started, pulling the door closed.

"Politics." Gwendal's lips were set into a thin line and his dark eyes held a glare that signaled the conversation's end. "Have all the arrangements been made at the wall?"

"Yes. How about the arrival tomorrow?"

"I'll be seeing to it personally," Gwendal grumbled, shuffling some papers on his desk. "All of the usual guests will be staying in the East Wing. Those two will have the North suite."

The North suite was the only room in the wing that was fit for esteemed visitors. The rest of the rooms in the area were soldiers quarters. Conrad nodded. It was definitely the safest place for them. "Is there anything else you want me to take care of?"

Gwendal paused, eyes searing up at him. "At the formal-- Spare an eye for our brother."

********

********

The temple courtyard was nearly black with night, the only light flickering softly from the Sage's lantern. Murata should have left for the castle much earlier, but it had been obscenely difficult to tear himself away from his reading. Still, all his research seemed useless without access to the pathogen.

His nerves were strung, humming in anticipation for the following night's events. There were so many suspicions he longed to confirm, so many he wished would be wrong. As he mounted his horse and waited for the escort from Sir Voltaire to arrive, there was only one thing of which Murata was absolutely certain.

There would be no attack by the army of Shou Shimeron.

All the military preparations were pointless, if anything a pathetic demonstration of their own predictability. It was good of Gwendal to put the kingdom's uneasy minds at rest with a little display of arms, but at the same time Murata wished more focus could be put on their Little Problem. The more biological threats from Shou Shimeron were worrisome indeed and he was anxious to talk to Lord Wincott and hear his responses to the coded letter he had sent before this last visit to Earth. The entire family had been so gifted when it came to healing--
"Your Grace!" The priestess huffed, clearly out of breath.

The Sage looked down at her in alarm only to have her shove a scroll up at him.

"Ulrike summons Sir Belefield to the shrine at once!"

Murata pushed his concern behind a familiar mask. "Hn, I guess I'll never get out of doing the chores..."

The priestess glared at him. "You're going there, aren't you?"

"Yes yes, but don't you think I deserve a reward for my efforts?" Murata flashed his most winning smile. "What's this about?"

"A summons," she articulated, lips pursed with disdain. "For Sir Belefield."

Murata pouted dramatically and watched her walk back toward the temple door, the beam of light from the inside vanishing with a bang as the priestess closed the door behind her.

"Well, Sir Belefield, aren't we popular..." Murata murmured to himself. As if he didn't have enough to think about.

********

Yuuri mashed his cold toes into the rug while he sat fidgeting on the end of his bed. Wolfram was standing with his back to him, brushing his hair at the vanity while Yuuri was decidedly not paying attention to the cute way the curls poofed. Nor did he even notice the way the other boy's nightgown hung off his shoulders, only barely rising half way down his body to suggest the curve of his rear. Yuuri sighed, closed his eyes, and decided this was what going mad felt like.

"You'll be fine." Wolfram murmured from across the room.

Yuuri opened his eyes in time to see Wolfram turn to face him. His eyes were cast down and he was worrying his lip as he pulled a few black hairs from the hairbrush. The motion made the pink lace at the bottom of his nightgown swirl distractingly around his calves.

Yuuri looked away. "Sorry about using it..."

Wolfram seemed confused for a moment before snapping out one of his usual retorts. "Why would I mind if you use it? Don't be so wimpy."

"Sorry," Yuuri sighed, flopping back onto the bed. "I'm just so worried I'll make a mistake tomorrow. I feel like I'm already starting to forget all the things I learned a week ago..."

"What sort of things?" Wolfram put his hands on his hips. "Besides, I'll be there tomorrow to remind you of any customs--"

"It's not the customs... It's... I don't know why some things are." Yuuri put his arms behind his head and forced himself to look up at the ceiling. He actually did have pertinent questions and looking at Wolfram wasn't helping him think straight at the moment. "For instance, why don't I have to greet representatives from all ten of the Demon Kingdoms? I mean, I suppose you would count as the one from Belefield--"

"Not exactly," Wolfram interrupted, voice dark. "But the other country you'd be thinking of is
Gael.

Yuuri turned his head to look at him, surprised by the shortness of his friend's tone.

Talking about Gael seemed to cool Wolfram's earlier irritation and he flowed right into explanation mode. "Gael doesn't need to send representatives to Shin Makoku because it is essentially a part of Shin Makoku, even more so than the other Demon Nations. For instance, there is no Lord in Gael. They are under our direct rule where as in Spitzburg, for instance, Stoffel is the Lord and if we want something done there's all sorts of politics involved.

"Gael is the oldest Demon Kingdom. As you should have learned, Shinou was born there, and over time, various wars have split the territory. The largest part is an island to the West, beyond Frankshire, but there is a small bit, often called 'Landlocked' Gael, to the South by Cabalcade--"

"That's where Mr. Shiny-- Hristo Cruyff is from right?"

Wolfram nodded.

"But that doesn't explain why they don't--"

"Gael swore allegiance and sovereignty centuries ago. The religion there is old... very superstitious. They're content to be ruled by Shin Makoku until their 'True King' comes."

Why was everything here so confusing? "What do they mean by True King?"

Wolfram sighed. "In Gael there is a prophecy that there will be a king strong enough to unite the world... There's more to it. A lot of rubbish about being 'twice born' and creating 'peaceful mist'. In all likelihood, if there was a prophecy, it was talking about Shinou. But it doesn't matter much. They're pretty peaceful and the island territory supports a good trade."

Yuuri let his head turn to look at him and tried not to seem confused.

"Don't think too hard, we don't want you hurting yourself." Wolfram's lips turned up in a wry smile.

There was just something about that look... Yuuri could feel his heart start to beat faster. It was time for bed, almost time for that to happen. Maybe Wolfram wouldn't do it tonight. His stomach did an uncomfortable flip. If Wolfram didn't do it his chances to be reassured by its unpleasantness would vanish!

He couldn't keep living this way! He hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep since it started. This had to stop...

"You're thinking too hard."

Yuuri jumped. When had Wolfram gotten so close? All he could do was stare up at Wolfram, who was peering down at him from the foot of the bed. He moved even closer and Yuuri could feel the brush of fabric on his pajama-covered knees.

"Why don't you tell me what's distracting you?" Wolfram was smirking at him, as if he somehow knew how frustrating he was being. Then he crawled up onto the bed, putting his knee between Yuuri's legs and one hand on either side of his shoulders.

Yuuri swallowed. "Erm..." He replied eloquently, watching the way Wolfram's bangs brushed his cheekbones. Yuuri could feel his cheeks get hot and he licked his lips.
Any second now.

Any second now, Wolfram was going to kiss him on the cheek and say goodnight, and then the other boy would move away like nothing had happened and crawl beneath the covers. Yuuri would be left here on the end of the bed, eyes still screwed shut, desperately trying to feel the disgusting truth of the kiss. It was going to happen. Just the same as it always did.

Yuuri was pulled out of himself by the flutter of eyelashes against his cheek. Wolfram always closed his eyes right before it happened.

And then something inside him broke.

Before he realized what he was doing, Yuuri had both his hands clenched in Wolfram's hair. He was breathing hard, and he could hear Wolfram's quick breaths by his ear as the other boy froze. This had to end. Yuuri had to make this terrible feeling stop and if this was the only way then so be it. Without giving himself time to reconsider, Yuuri pulled Wolfram's head to the side and pushed his mouth against parted lips. He felt Wolfram's breath hitch.

These lips were soft, unmoving against his own as Yuuri realized he had no idea how to do this. He pushed out his lips and relaxed again, waiting for something to happen. Something disgusting, anything beside the electric humming of his nerves that seemed to spread out and focus at every point they touched. How could these lips be so soft, so supple, when his seemed so dry? How was he suddenly so aware of every little tremble those soft lips made, so shocking amidst so much still?

Because those lips didn't move. They remained slightly parted, waiting for anything Yuuri would take. But that wasn't what Yuuri wanted. If they didn't move, it was too easy to feel the soft strands of blond that wove between his fingers. Too easy to lose himself in every feminine curl. It was simple to let one hand slide down, against soft flesh that almost burned his fingertips through silk, and let his thumb rest on a hipbone.

This wasn't what Yuuri wanted at all.

Yuuri wanted those lips to move, to touch him and make him feel wrong. He pulled at the top lip, and then the bottom with his own, more frustrated than he'd been in his life that Wolfram was making this so difficult for him. As an experiment, he pushed his tongue out a little, running the tip just along the inside edge of that trembling mouth.

Wolfram moaned, or keened, or made some kind of disturbingly delicious sound and something must have broken inside him too, because all of a sudden those lips were kissing him. Wolfram's mouth was hot and demanding, and the world seemed to fall away. The yearning pressure against his lips was altogether so desperately necessary that every nerve ending that wasn't part of this earth shattering moment screamed in agony. His clothes were too rough against his skin, his feet too cold on the floor.

It did feel wrong. So good it was wrong. So wrong he never wanted to stop because then he would start to think, and once he did this wonderful thing would never happen again.

It was so good. Something about the way these lips melded against his made Yuuri feel at the same time powerful and desperate. The way Wolfram seemed to cling to each of his feeble attempts at whatever this was, as if he needed him. The way Yuuri thought he might fall apart if these lips stopped tugging so perfectly at his. He needed more.

Yuuri never imagined, could never have imagined. This heat, it needed to be closer, and so he pulled. At first Wolfram wouldn't move, unyielding to his desperate tugging from below. Yuuri
arched his back, anchored completely by his too-tight hold on hair and hip, until the heat in his
groin connected wonderfully with Wolfram's thigh. He groaned and rubbed himself against it,
keeping more, needing anything, until there was a choked sound above him and something solid
crashed partially down on him, bodies crushing together for an all too brief moment before
Wolfram was able to brace himself on his elbows instead, hands grasping at whatever part of him
they could touch.

But it wasn't enough. Wolfram's thigh had moved to a strange angle and Yuuri couldn't quite--
Yuuri finally, finally, pulled him all the way down, forced to relinquish his claim on lips to cry out
and gasp at air. Wolfram didn't stop kissing him though, just moved to a place below his ear that
Yuuri didn't even know could feel so much and made needy sounds of his own between stolen
breaths. It all just felt so good

Then he felt it. Something his body could never pretend was part of a girl.

He shouted and shoved so hard with every part of himself that he was surprised when Wolfram
was suddenly off the bed, curled into a cursing ball on the floor while a loud Thunk still echoed in
his ears.

"DAMN IT!" Wolfram sputtered. "WIMP!"

"I--" Yuuri started, too shocked to finish. Too busy watching his friend struggle to stand and pull a
robe from the back of a chair, still slightly hunched in his agony.

"SHUT UP!" Wolfram screamed at him, shaking. "WIMP you... YOU.... ARG!"

This was so wrong. "Wolfram, I'm so SORRY, I never wanted--"

"You will NOT finish that sentence!" his friend seethed, and the candles around the room crackled
impossibly. "I'm leaving." Wolfram stood up straight, pride punishing him for his efforts as he let a
pained hiss from his teeth.

Yuuri's eyes widened in shock and he leapt from the bed. "You're not serious?" Wolfram couldn't
leave... not just because of one mistake... one moment where some stupid teenage hormonal
terrible-- "Wolfram..." Yuuri reached out to him, letting his fingers trail down his arm to touch the
back of his friend's hand, afraid to hold it lest he do more damage. "You can't ... leave."

Wolfram just watched him, eyes still terrifyingly hard.

"Wolfram..." His voice quivered. Where would Wolfram even go? Back to Belefield? What would
he do without Wolfram? "Please..." He could feel his eyes starting to water and out of habit he
bowed as low as he could while standing. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I--"

"Stop that." Wolfram snapped, jerking him upright again. "I'm going to the bathroom." He did his
best to smile reassuringly but it still came out as more of a grimace. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Ohh," Yuuri managed, feeling stupid. "Well-- Erm..."

Some of the light had made it back into Wolfram's eyes. "Just try to get some sleep tonight."

Yuuri nodded. It was all he could do really. Everything that had happened was starting to come
back in a rush and he didn't think his skin could turn more red.

Before Wolfram turned to leave he paused, green eyes piercing him, and Yuuri wondered what his
friend must think of him now. He didn't even know what to think of himself. Everything... It was
so hazy, like being sucked into something bigger than himself. It was like the tug in his gut that pulled him between worlds, guiding him even with all the water rushing through his ears. But it was still him. Something he had made.

His mistake.

Once the door had opened and shut, leaving him alone in the room, Yuuri sat down where he stood, hardly aware of the placement of his limbs any more than to notice he probably bruised something in his hasty decent. He covered his face in his hands and curled into himself, suddenly aware that despite his mortification he was still somewhat hard. What did this mean? What had he done? What was he thinking?

Was this... Did this make him gay? Even in his mind the word sounded terrible. Yuuri could feel terror spread through his veins and bile start to rise in his throat. But Wolfram was so much like a girl, really, and it wasn't like he had access to a real one. When Wolfram brushed his hair, when the fabric moved against his porcelain skin, when his breath hitched and their bodies were close... It was only because he couldn't tell the difference. It was just a physical reaction.

But what if it wasn't just a physical reaction for Wolfram? His friend had always hinted... But was that only because his position as the king's fiancé required it? But... As much as Yuuri wished it were true, he couldn't see Wolfram being motivated by anything other than his own heart. And what had he done? Would Wolfram hate him now? Would Wolfram expect more? If he didn't get it, would he leave?

The questions were so big it was all he could do to repeat them, let alone come up with any answers. After the shaking had stopped and parts of his body had calmed, Yuuri noticed how cold he was and crawled over to the bed, sliding up under the covers from the foot. His face was sticky from tears he hadn't noticed falling and he could only breathe through one side of his nose.

It was dark under the covers. Safe.

What was he going to do? What if anyone found out? What if Conrad... or Gwendal? Yuuri moaned. He was doomed. Yuuri was sure neither of them would appreciate what had just happened any more than he did. No one could ever know... Maybe Wolfram would agree to pretend like nothing ever happened?

Stupid ideas. He was so stupid! How could his body have betrayed him like this?

It was getting hot and hard to breathe, so Yuuri was forced to make his way to the top of the bed and poke his head out. The cold air in the room struck his cheeks and he tried not to let any of the warm air escape from under the covers. The candles were still lit. Yuuri wondered if Wolfram was going to come back soon or if he should go blow them out.

His thoughts were so depressing, so exhausting, and his body was feeling oddly relaxed as if to spite him. Yuuri fell asleep without meaning to, lost in dark thoughts, and the candles burned themselves down to their holders.

He woke up once before dawn, eyes surprised to find the room dark. In a moment of panic, Yuuri sat up in bed, relieved as the sudden motion and flash of chill made Wolfram roll in his direction, light snores accented with the occasional murmur of dreams. Yuuri watched him sleep for a while, until the he noticed Wolfram was starting to shiver. Bursting with questions he was too afraid to face, Yuuri drew the covers up again and fell back into a restless sleep.

They were woken early. Gunter listing off the day's events and Wolfram rushing off to see to his
own duties. Yuuri felt lost. He was terrified that everyone who looked at him would know, would see it in his eyes.

*What had he done?*

********

********

The room was tastefully decorated. Soft-colored napkins and tapestries brought out the vibrant hues of the food that more than covered the long table. Although no one was as formally dressed as they would be for the evening’s events, silk from beyond Suberela and Voltarian Chiffon in more colors than Gwendal was comfortable with littered the room.

He was always amazed by how many people Gunter could fit comfortably in the formal dining room. Even though many had come to decide what to do about the situation in Caloria, the Formal was traditionally a happy occasion and the mood of the guests reflected it. Since there were so many guests, it had been easier to serve the brunch in more of a buffet style. The more casual setting allowed those attending to cluster off into smaller groups, old friends reuniting and circles of women laughing about trivial matters. Of course, the largest of these groups was the one surrounding the young Maou.

Stoffle was in that group, making a nuisance of himself while the Maou politely ignored him, trying instead to maintain a conversation with the recently wed Lady Critenden. Gwendal had always been fond of the girl, she had been a good playmate for Wolfram when he was younger. Her dress wasn't as tight as her usual tastes and her husband kept a possessive hand on her back throughout the conversation. Gunter was there too, paying attention to the conversation but also letting his eyes wander over to the buffet table now and again, ready to harass the wait staff if any of the plates started to run low.

Mother had arrived early this morning and was currently greeting everyone in her usual way. She had only made it past Gunter to latch onto the King for a moment before Wolfram finally arrived, Greta in tow. The girl ran off, likely in search of her little friend from Calbacade, and Wolfram made his way toward His Majesty. Refreshingly, instead of making a fuss, he stood by, waiting his turn, and hardly seemed surprised when Mother broke into tears and latched onto him instead.

She still blamed herself.

On the other side of the room, the Sage was talking to Sir Wincott, gesturing adamantly despite his hushed tones. He had only looked away for a moment when Wolfram walked in.

Flurin had been unable to attend, still overwhelmed with her country's suffering. According to her coded letters, the spread had not slowed with the onset of winter, but they would be returning Gisela in a few weeks. Her report would be invaluable. There was nothing he could do until then, and he was therefore satisfied by worrying about the problems he could solve now.

Gwendal finished his tea and stood, taking one last look at Wolfram. His brother seemed much more focused than usual, and for that matter so did His Majesty. They were both refraining from their usual displays of childishness, and Gwendal could only hope it was because Wolfram had understood his warnings and that they were both prepared for the worst.

Still, it was possible he was just being paranoid. Gwendal wouldn't be able to confirm his suspicions until this evening, but he was anxious to greet their special guests none the less. His scouts had reported their punctual arrival at the border, and a small group of carriages and mounted soldiers had become one carriage with two occupants.
The other guests had been informed of Prince Saralegui and his guard’s attendance at the Formal and the whispers had already started to move throughout the castle and city, rumors seeming to seep from the very walls. As the doors to the dining room closed behind him, Gwendal let all the trivial worries fade from his mind. This meeting was about observations, and if he went in with preconceptions he could miss something important.

Gwendal didn't have to wait long once he arrived in the courtyard for the carriage to pull up to the gate. He nodded to the driver, one of his best men, and waited for him to climb down from the seat and open the door.

The guard exited first. Reyes. He had to lower his head in order to climb through the carriage door, and when he stood he was a good three inches taller then Gwendal. His hair was dark, tied in a ponytail that fell low on his back. The taller man looked down at him, eyes piercing over high cheekbones, before turning to the side and letting his hand hover near the carriage door.

A pale hand emerged to cover it, only using it for the barest support. For every bit that Reyes was tall and dark, the Prince was small and light. His hair was almost white and fell unrestrained over his narrow shoulders. When he stepped onto the ground his glasses slipped down his nose, but the Prince was too busy taking in the sparse activity of the courtyard with wide eyes to fix them.

"Welcome to Shin Makoku, Your Majesty," Gwendal spoke, nodding slightly and making eye-contact with each in turn.

Gwendal was about to introduce himself when the Prince smiled up at him. "You're too formal, Sir Voltaire, but thank you for the warm welcome."

"You'll be staying in the North Suite." Gwendal tried not to let his voice harden. "I'll have my men deliver your things to the room immediately." It was then that he noticed the trunks, tied in a large stack to the top of the carriage.

This did not bode well.

********

********

Anissina had never been fond of parties. Of course she could appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the whole affair. The boy Wolf's fire was absolutely gorgeous and gave the entire ballroom a soft blue hue by reflecting off the myriad of hanging silken drapes. But the fact that this beautiful room was filled with hypocrisy and lies was revolting.

She took a sip of her bubbly drink and recrossed her arms, the mostly-empty glass dangling by the rim from the tips of her gloved fingers. The dance floor was empty. Now that His Majesty had taken an "interest" in Wolfram, by dancing with him at the last ball, the precedent of the Maou and his partner starting the Formal off could officially continue. Her Little Loafer must be so pleased.

Anissina smiled to herself. She had to give the boy Wolf credit, he was finally starting to grow into a fine young man. It had been rather pleasant getting to know him better over the last two years, though his taste in men was pitifully tragic. It figured, that all the decent men in her life would end up with a penchant for other men. In Wolfram's case however, her concern was much more maternal, and she hated that His Majesty would cause him so much suffering. The poor boy had been through more than enough already.

A flash of motion caught her eye and she peered through the crowd. Greta and Beatrice were up to mischief as usual, but this time they had captured another participant. The stable boy looked
decidedly out of place in one of Wolfram's old shirts and scuffed shoes, but Greta and Beatrice seemed to be too busy arguing over who got to dance with him first to notice. The boy's long ponytail swished back and forth as the two girls tugged on him. Humans did their growing up too fast. Greta seemed, in Anissina's mind, perpetually young, and it was so odd to see her partake in such adolescent antics.

Across the room, Gwendal was playing the Formal Introductions Game with "His" Majesty from Shou Shimeron. (Really though, she had never seen a more feminine-looking man. It almost made her tempted to "check". For scientific purposes.)

Once she was sure that the Royal Couple had been introduced to the Prince and his bodyguard, she decided it was time for a closer look. While it wasn't strictly appropriate to introduce herself so soon, they all had such interesting facial expressions she couldn't resist. Besides, when had she ever let decorum interfere with her sublime quest for knowledge?

She took her time with her approach, taking in the way the Prince moved with every word he spoke, covering his mouth with his hand as he laughed and made eyes at the young king. Yuuri was oblivious as usual, too busy stealing glances at Wolfram to notice. Conrad and the Bodyguard were still sizing each other up, both too stubborn to speak first.

Gwendal noticed her approach and his eyes hardened, but he made no move to signal her to turn around. Perhaps he'd learned to let her have her way by now. That, or she was just the ingredient he needed to see what happened when the dust went up.

She smiled patently when she arrived at the edge of their little gathering, waiting for Wolfram to subtly brush the back of his fiancé's hand with his, reminding their King that now that he had been introduced to foreign royalty it was is responsibility as the one with the highest rank to introduce her.

"Ah, Anissina." The young king drew himself up into a mask of formality and addressed the Prince. "Prince Saralegui, let me introduce Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff. Lady Anissina, it is my honor to introduce Prince Saralegui of Shou Shimeron."

Anissina curtsied and waited for the Prince to address her.

"His" Majesty smiled with his lips, the corners twitching up on both sides. "Lady Anissina." He nodded slightly.

"The pleasure is mine, Your Majesty." Anissina curtsied again, but while her head was lowered she noticed Wolfram's fists shaking by his sides. Odd. When she was upright again she studied him with her peripheral vision.

"Ara! Such formalities! Gwendal dear, you shouldn't make everything so stringent," Cheri's voice rang out.

Anissina used the distraction to her advantage and studied her Little Loafer. His face was a mask of normalcy, but the tips of his hair were damp, forehead shining slightly in the light. Normally, even when he was trying to walk the line of decorum, the boy Wolf would have said something about the way the foreign Prince batted his lashes at his fiancé. Refreshingly, His Majesty seemed to notice something was wrong and kept trying to be subtle about trying to grab his attention, eyes apologetic.

Maybe they needed some time?
Anissina grinned, and spoke over Cheri's high voice as the other woman went on about the Prince's fine hair. "Gwendal, don't think your stalling is going to work!"

Gwendal's left eye began to twitch and the lines in his forehead deepened.

Before he could say anything she continued, eyes alight. "You've owed me a dance for ages and if His Majesty doesn't start the festivities this is going to be a very boring formal." She stepped forward and pulled lightly at his arm for effect, enjoying the shocked faces of her companions. "I'm sure everyone agrees?"

Surprisingly, it was His Majesty who responded first, grabbing hold of Wolfram and tugging him toward the dance floor. "Great idea, Anissina! We shouldn't keep everyone waiting-- Please excuse us!" And then both of them were gone, weaving their way through the crowd to formally begin this whole affair.

The Prince watched them leave, completely still for the first time. She could have sworn she saw pity in his gray eyes, before that strange amusement bubbled back to the surface.

She felt her eyes narrow in suspicion for half a moment before Sir Weller followed the Royal Couple, the ever-vigilant shadow.

********

********

Wolfram let Yuuri drag him onto the dance floor, relishing in his fiancé's possessive hold on his arm. It was also good because it meant he didn't have to pay attention to where he was going.

There were twelve lights. He could feel them. Fluttering blue extensions of himself scattered throughout the room.

It was never like this. Summoning flame was something he could do without thinking, almost like catching something before you realize you've knocked it off a table. Sure, if he was changing the shape or color there was some concentration required... But it was never like this. His entire body ached as if every inch of muscle was over-used, torn from exertion.

This shouldn't be happening! He had actually practiced, for goodness sake!

Last night after he had stormed out-- After Yuuri-- Wolfram's breath hitched and he could feel his flames flicker for the briefest of moments. He couldn't think about that now. If he did, then the flames would go out and he would humiliate himself in front of everyone, in front of that Pervert Prince who kept making eyes-- Wolfram had to stop thinking about that too.

He let his awareness focus, let the background fade and watched Yuuri's fingers grip his shirt. Last night Wolfram had needed to settle his mind after Certain Incidents and he had crept into the darkened ballroom to calm down, sitting against a wall and letting his power flow, casting the room in blue until a comforting warmth seeped over him. He just couldn't bring himself to go back to that bedroom, to have the conversation where the Wimp begged him to pretend it never happened, that Yuuri hadn't--

Wolfram must have made a noise to betray the sudden stab of agony that spread from deep in his gut to the tips of his toes, because Yuuri stopped and turned to face him with worried eyes. He tensed. This was stupid. He had control over this!

It only took a moment for him to realize it was time for their dance to start. Yuuri held out a practiced hand and Wolfram took it, stepping into their routine with a shuddered exhale of relief.
He could do this. Dancing was easy. Yuuri was warm, and as the music started he let his worries fade, just letting himself enjoy that kernel of hope that last night had been the true beginning of more dances like this. Dances where Yuuri's hand was comforting on his back and Yuuri's dark eyes were on him like Wolfram was the only thing that mattered.

"Are you alright?" Yuuri's breath was at his ear, voice soft and almost lost in the swell of the band.

Wolfram let his thumb rub a lazy circle against his Wimp's shoulder. "I'm fine," he managed, because in that moment it was true.

Yuuri's brow furrowed. "It's-- I'm-- Wolfram-- It's so hard to talk about it, but--"

"Not now..." he breathed, letting his eyes slide shut while Yuuri led him around the dance floor. "We'll have plenty of time tonight."

His Wimp must have given in because he didn't speak again. Wolfram kept his eyes closed. It was easier to focus this way. To make his muscles move despite this ache, and to keep the room awash with blue. Yes. He could do this. The song was long, meant to only be theirs for the first minute before the other couples joined in. Yuuri was solid in his arms and if he could just keep focused for the next few hours he could return to their bedroom and fall into blissful unconsciousness.

Yuuri's step wavered, just a bit, and Wolfram felt a hand fall on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see Yuuri's concerned features looking past him, "Wha--"

"Forgive me, Sir Belefield, but do you mind if I steal him?" Prince Pervert cooed from beside him. Yuuri looked like he was about to refuse, but Wolfram stopped him. It was so difficult, not to give in to that burning desire to draw his sword and mess up that girly face, but Gwendal would never forgive him. Besides, they still didn't know what was going on with Shimeron and the sickness, and it wouldn't due to make an enemy so soon into this little political endeavor. The Prince was much higher rank anyway, so it was Wolfram's place to let him have the dance and-- And if he thought anymore he was sure he was going to pass out.

And if he passed out he wouldn't be able to look after his Wimp.

So he tried to look reassuring and made eye contact with Yuuri before stepping aside.

"You're so accommodating!" The Prince squealed in delight before moving to take his place in Yuuri's arms. Then something cold-- Against his hand. Wolfram stared down at the utensil clutched in his slightly trembling fist.

"Three prongs to represent..."

Blood rushed in his ears, loud and pounding even over the music. By the time he looked up, Yuuri was spinning away from him, awkward and ravishing as ever. The crowd of swirling partners seemed to contract around him, swallowing him up as if he were never there. His heart hummed in his chest and the edges of his vision slid into darkness. This means...

No.

He snapped his eyes back into focus, looking for something familiar in this madness. It was hard to breath. There were twelve lights... Gwendal's face looking at him from the crowd. Pity. Disappointment.

Wolfram cursed himself, harsh words bouncing off the inside of his skull. He was so stupid. There
were warnings. Gwendal had tried to...

Gwendal knew. He let this happen... No. Wolfram stopped himself. This was all his own fault. He had been too absorbed, too blind to see it. And he was FURIOUS.

Anger boiled within him and he almost fell. Vision going into points as his mind seemed to float behind his actions. There were twelve lights.

_Damn it!_

He had to do something, but he couldn't stop it. The Prince was higher rank... it had been over two years... Wolfram almost ran into the buffet table in his hurry to leave the dance floor. The punch swirled dangerously in its container, liquid nearly spilling over the top. Punch bowls. Frogs. Greta...

He had to find her! She couldn't see.... He turned around, bracing himself on the table and ignoring the rude stares his abrupt motion earned him. His daughter was nowhere in sight but there, to his right, just a few steps away... Wolfram drew himself up, forcing each footstep until he was close enough to speak without drawing too much attention to the inevitable shake in his voice. "Anissina..."

Her tight features melted into concern when she saw him and she reached out. "Wolf--"

Wolfram jerked his arm away. Too hot. Can't touch... "Greta. Find her. Take her out. Now." He could tell by her face that she was going to say something, argue, waste time. "Please."

Anissina nodded, comprehension dawning in her worried eyes, and she hurried off into the crowd.

Wolfram let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. There were twelve lights.

The song was almost finished. In a daze Wolfram wandered through the guests, only stopping when he was close enough to watch him. His Wimp. His Yuuri. Soon to be...

"Wolfram." Conrad's voice, coming from behind.

Wolfram didn't turn, couldn't look away. Everything was so empty. Inside him... Lights.

When Conrad put a hand on his shoulder, Wolfram didn't protest. Weller was here. Looking after Yuuri too. Something about that knowledge made him even more tired and he felt like he was only standing by a single thread, taut in his chest and balancing him on locked knees. _Almost familiar..._

Conrad was warm behind him, pity oozing from every unseen motion. "I'm sorry."

Wolfram laughed, but it sounded like a choked sob.

Then Wolfram watched numbly as the Prince's right hand connected with his fiancé's left cheek, the crack of sound ringing in his ears as the wave of whispers spread among the guests. The world fell away, there was the ceiling, strong arms, empty...

Twelve lights went out.
Yuuri glared down at the wood grain lines that covered the desk in front of him and tried to figure out exactly how he had gotten here. Gwendal's office wasn't particularly far from the ballroom, but after what had just happened it seemed like a world away. His heart was pounding in his chest and Yuuri could feel the red still spotting his face. It definitely hadn't been the most... polite time to escape the ballroom, but given the circumstances Yuuri couldn't imagine having done anything else.

His cheek still stung.

When Prince Saralegui slapped him Yuuri had been too worried about the few seconds of dim that followed to consider the implications of the blow. After the lights from the handful of still-blue torches along the far wall spread down and changed to a warm gold, casting the room from winter backwards into autumn, Yuuri had desperately scanned the suddenly-visible crowd surrounding him. Where was Wolfram? Yuuri had no idea what he was supposed to do.

"Did I hurt you? ...Was it too hard?" The prince was standing apprehensively before him, clutching his right hand over his chest and staring up at Yuuri with wide eyes.

Yuuri had opened his mouth but no words had come out.

"Ara!" Came Cheri's familiar squeal before she grabbed the prince and stuffed his face into her chest. "What a surprise! I just love weddings! Have you thought about the color scheme...?"

Her voice was as cheerful as usual, but when Yuuri met her eyes they were hard. Cheri kept the now struggling Prince's face firmly against her bosom and with a slight nod directed Yuuri's attention to Gwendal, who had emerged from the crowd beside him.

Yuuri looked up at his adviser. "Wha-"

Gwendal shook his head. "Now isn't the time." His voice was harsh, just above a whisper.

"Gwendal is right, Your Majesty," came Gunter's voice to the other side of him. "I'm sorry if you find these events... sudden, but you must understand that now is not the best time to--"

"No!" Yuuri growled, turning around so he could face them both. "I want someone to explain what exactly is happening here!"

"Your Majesty!" Gunter sputtered, turning an odd shade of puce.

Gwendal's right eye began to twitch.

Yuuri's head was spinning. The crowd around them seemed to thicken and spread, pressing in on them from all sides. Painted lips whispered and people he didn't recognize pushed in to get a closer look. Wolfram was nowhere in sight. "I'm serious!" he hissed, trying to keep his voice low. It just wasn't right! Why was he the last one to know anything?!

"Shibuya." A hand fell on Yuuri's shoulder. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's a matter that demands your personal attention." His friend grinned.
"What now, Murata?!" Yuuri practically whined. "There's a lot going on at the moment."

Murata moved to the side a little, completing their circle of four. Light from the torches hit his glasses and he pouted dramatically. "But it's a terribly embarrassing personal problem that I have to tell all of you as soon as possible."

"What?" Yuuri started before Murata stepped on his foot. Hard.

Oh.

Yuuri could still hear Cheri's voice running a mile a minute behind them. "Of course, Murata." He managed a nervous laugh. "What are friends for?"

"Sir Voltaire, your office is nearby, would you mind lending us the room for a while?" Murata removed his heel from Yuuri's toes. "It won't take more than a few minutes."

"Of course not." Gwendal glared. "I'll escort you myself."

"Shibuya, you should probably explain to our guests where we're going, we wouldn't want them to get the wrong idea..."

"Oh," Yuuri mumbled. He had been so ready to leave. Clenching his fists by his sides, he took a deep breath and turned.

The Prince's bodyguard appeared to be trying to "save" Saralegui, whose face was still squished between Cheri's breasts. The imposing man seemed unsure of how to "politely" deal with Cheri's personality and only stammered awkwardly when she let the Prince go of her own accord and pressed herself against him instead. "Ara! You have such beautiful hair... You know I'm a strong believer in Free Love..."

"Erm," said Yuuri as he took a step towards the Prince, who was still pink and gasping for air. "I have to go help Murata with something, I probably won't be gone long. Please continue to enjoy the ball in my absence." Yuuri only stayed long enough for Saralegui to nod slightly before turning to make his escape through the main doors, flanked on either side by Gwendal and Gunter.

Yuuri felt a little bad for just leaving the Prince alone in the ballroom, but he had to figure what had just happened. His first thought was that Saralegui just misunderstood their customs. After all, Yuuri was no stranger to situations like that. The prince seemed nice enough, and Yuuri really hoped they could become friends and create alliances to help people, but it wasn't as if he could be engaged to more than one person. It was Gwendal and Gunter's reactions that had bothered him, the way no one had rushed in to correct the prince's error, Wolfram's absence.

The whole thing almost seemed calculated.

Heavy doors clicked shut behind them and the sounds of music and conversation were muffled to a wavering hum. Yuuri was still trying to imagine why everyone had decided to hide things from him this time... decided to lie to him. Was he really doing such a terrible job that he deserved to be so... sheltered? What did they think he would do that would be so inappropriate?

Yuuri could feel his cheeks grow hot. Well, it was possible that he'd make a fuss and inadvertently insult the foreign prince. A mistake that could lead to all sorts of political trouble... But if Saralegui really did just propose to him, then Wolfram was the one more likely to make a scene. Which might explain Wolfram's well-timed absence.

Yuuri did his best to suppress an image of Wolfram being tied up and thrown into a closet
It was hard to imagine his advisers doing something so extreme without a good reason. And though he was sure that Wolfram's disappearance was due to nothing so malicious, a strong sense of betrayal rose in his chest. Yuuri clenched his jaw, refusing to look at any of his companions until the group of footfalls came to a halt in front of Gwendal's office.

Gunter opened the door and the four of them slipped inside. In a matter of seconds, Gwendal was towering over Yuuri's right shoulder as he sat at the older man's desk. Yuuri could practically feel Gwendal's displeasure radiating off him in waves. It certainly wasn't the best time for such a meeting but Yuuri clenched his jaw and tried not to let it bother him, he was far beyond worrying about decorum at this point.

Murata smiled and slid the door shut. "Now about my personal problem-"

"Hardly necessary at this point, Your Grace." Gwendal snapped.

Murata pouted and made a show of staying quiet.

"Why?"

Yuuri didn't realize he had spoken until everyone's eyes were focused on him. Yuuri clenched his fists until he could see his knuckles go white against the tabletop. "Why do you keep lying to me?"

There was a loud crack and Yuuri looked up to see Gunter slumped against the wall, face white and hand grasping above his heart. "Your Majesty!" he gasped. "Forgive me! It was never our intention-- Oh! How should I be punished? My life is no substitute for causing you displeasure, Your Majesty. I have failed my life's mission as your adviser-" A stream of tears began to slide down Gunter's cheeks and Yuuri was unable to sustain his righteous anger.

"Gunter," he sighed. "Just stop, already... Will you just explain what's going on? We should get back so we can explain the custom to Saralegui, he's probably just confused a greeting or something-"

Gwendal coughed.

Yuuri blinked. "You can't think he meant to..."

"It's much more likely the prince knew exactly what he was doing, Shibuya," Murata said with a sad smile. "I had suspected something like this might happen, and I'm sure I wasn't alone in my suspicions, but there was no way to be sure until-"

"What do you mean?! If you all suspected, shouldn't someone have mentioned that I'm already-- It can't be polite to turn him down in front of everyone. I thought we wanted to make peace."

"We couldn't be sure," said Gwendal, voice rough. "We had to be prepared for every option and wait for our opponent to narrow the field. The situation is delicate, and we could not afford to put our faith in any assumption."

Yuuri frowned. "You're talking like Saralegui is already our enemy! He came here to make peace. Why don't you ever trust anyone?"

"Because in this world trust is seldom rewarded." Gwendal bent down to open one of the desk drawers, pulling out a stack of papers and setting them on the smooth surface before him. Each paper in the stack appeared to have been folded several times and on many the edges were worn.
Yuuri noticed that instead of mazoku script, the top paper was covered in an odd series of numbers.

"What are these?" Yuuri asked, flipping through some of the papers only to reveal more lines of numbers.

"Intercepted letters from Shou Shimeron and the surrounding areas," said Gwendal. "It's a code, but we haven't been able to interpret it yet. The more of them we find in an area the more people have died from the disease."

"But what if Shou Shimeron is trying to help people too? Wouldn't it make sense to communicate more in the areas that have been more affected?" Yuuri's eyebrows ached from being pressed together for so long and he was starting to get a headache.

Gunter seemed to have recovered some of his composure and spoke up. "It is a possibility, Your Majesty, but having such a code is highly suspicious. As are the disappearances of so many of our scouts in the area."

"Wait," Yuuri broke in, still confused. "Are we assuming that Shou Shimeron is somehow in control of the disease? How can a country control a disease... in such a world... it seems a little advanced to be worrying about biological warfare."

"We assume nothing," Gwendal snapped. "We're only taking the evidence into consideration."

Murata stopped leaning against the door and took a few steps into the room. "Shibuya, it's not as... impossible as it sounds. It's true that the disease is spreading mostly along trade routes, where more people from different places come in contact with each other, but the origins can be traced back to the borders of Shou Shimeron. And while we first heard of the disease through Caloria, it's been discovered that there have been even more deaths in Dai Shimeron. Belal doesn't wish to appear weaker after we successfully opposed him, and he's been trying to cover it up, but Sir Voltaire's scouts have more than confirmed an epidemic in the region.

"Even more suspicious is the lack of the disease in Shou Shimeron itself. What little information we receive from within their borders confirms nothing outside the day to day. If anything, their economy is thriving by selling crops to people who can no longer provide for themselves because of their illness.

“But the most suspicious things come from the horse’s mouth, as it were,” Murata finished in a half hearted smirk.

“What do you mean?” Yuuri asked, still confused.

Murata sighed. “A letter was sent to you a few months ago, and of course by 'you' in this case…”

“A letter was sent to me a few months ago and I’m only hearing about it now!?” Yuuri stood, slamming his hands down onto the desk. “You all call me ‘King’ but you treat me like I’m incapable-“

“Shibuya. The letter had your name on it but I assure you, you weren’t the primary person it was meant for. No good king can exist without the aid of those who protect and advise him. In many ways, this letter was meant as a warning to those who wish to provide you with such a service, though at its core it is most certainly a threat... Sir Voltaire, I’m sure you still have it, why don’t we all read it together now?”

Gwendal reached into the drawer again and pulled out what must have been the letter in question. With a clear voice he began to read. "My dear king of a far-away place, it has been much too long
since our two countries have been united." Gwendal stopped. "Utter rubbish. Shou Shimeron was never connected to Shin Makoku, not even when all the north was Gael."

"It's true, Your Majesty," Gunter added. "The letter begins with a lie... a sinister tradition not exclusively linked to the culture of Shou Shimeron. It is also a very open lie... meant to insult not only Your Great Majesty's intelligence but-

"But also mine," Gwendal finished, glaring down at the letter. "The next sentence: 'If only the two of us could truly become one I feel that this painful sickness of the soul would cease--'

"Not only is it insulting, it insinuates that Your Majesty--" Gunter had to stop, pulling out a handkerchief to cover his profusely bleeding nose.

"There is more to the letter," Gwendal continued. "They say the 'painful sickness of the soul would cease... even people beyond our borders would rejoice, given new life by our alliance.'

"It is practically an ultimatum, Shibuya," Murata stepped in. "They allude that if we do not form an alliance with them they will continue to spread the disease." Murata was standing almost directly before Gwendal's desk now. "Shibuya, you must see the threat we are being presented with--"

"Is there more to it?" Yuuri asked, still unable to believe that something so seemingly sinister could have come from the sweet prince he had met earlier that evening. "I'm sure the whole letter can't be so..." He trailed off.

Gwendal nodded and finished reading the letter. "'If I am not too bold I would love to make your acquaintance through a dance at the annual winter event I've heard so much about.' Then Gwendal sighed. "This is where the suspicions for tonight's... incident came from. The whole thing is written in a crude--"

"Blatantly sexual, Sir Voltaire means. If I remember, the letter closes with 'desperately awaiting your pleasurable response.'" Murata practically leered, emphasizing the inappropriateness of the phrase. "I think the letter gets such an... interesting tone in case you were the one to read it... perhaps to throw you off the trail of the threat."

Yuuri was confused. "But why would they try to distract me with a sexual tone like that? I mean, he's a... he."

There was a brief pause before Murata answered him. "Shibuya... Along with your good reputation of uniting human and demon nations, being exceptionally kind hearted, and saving the world from destruction by Soushi, there are a few... unfortunate rumors about your character floating around--"

"Rumors like what?!" Yuuri snapped. He was starting to hate rumors of all kinds... just another thing he was always the last to hear about.

"Rumors that you have a thirst for pretty young men that can't be quenched by Sir Belefield alone." Noticing the frozen shock on Yuuri's face, Murata continued. "Now, we know that this isn't true at all... but the nature of this letter... and the fact that Shou Shimeron has essentially sent you a pretty young man, leads us to believe that Shou Shimeron is not as enlightened on your true character as we are, and in some ways this can be seen as--"

"A chance to use this misconception to our advantage." Gwendal finished.

This was just too much. "What do you mean 'use this to our advantage'?! You can't be suggesting that... With Saralegui..." Yuuri couldn't believe it.
Gwendal's voice broke in. "Forgive the personal nature of this question, Your Majesty, but your engagement with my brother, is it a matter of heart?"

Yuuri gasped and a few ill-timed images of the night before flew through his mind. "Of course not!" he shouted, face instantly red.

"Then I see no problem changing one political engagement for another." Gwendal's voice was hard. "Shou Shimeron is threatening not only Shin Makoku but our allies with a disease we as of this moment have no way to cure and-

"I understand that!" Yuuri shouted, standing again. "I understand that we need to be careful... but what does this have to do with the engagement?" His voice almost cracked.

"Your Majesty," said Gunter, eyes down. "I'm so sorry that we don't have more information to give you. What we do know... is that His Majesty from Shimeron wants this... and perhaps giving in on this matter... it is a sacrifice that will bring a greater reward in the future."

"Keep your friends close but your enemies closer, eh Shibuya?" Murata put his hands on the desk and leaned closer to him. His next words were low. "Besides, haven't you been complaining about your current engagement since it began? This is the least cruel way... It's out of your hands."

The air froze in Yuuri's lungs. It was a freedom he had wanted for so long. Why did just hearing about it hurt?

Seeing that he had made his point, Murata moved on to another. "You have an uncanny ability with people, Shibuya. If Saralegui really isn't a part of the disease, I'm sure you'll be able to prove it. And if he is, if anyone can change his mind it will be you. Perhaps being close to him really is the best way to help this world."

Yuuri forced down the strange and powerful emotion threatening to choke him and tried to focus on the present. "Murata, do you really believe that Shou Shimeron is causing the sickness?"

There was only a single knock as warning before the door opened.

"Forgive the intrusion," Conrad said with a slight nod, holding the door open for Wolfram.

The blond walked into the room just enough to lean against the far wall, arms crossed over his chest. His face was pale and even though Yuuri tried, Wolfram refused to meet his eyes, glaring intently at the floor.

"I'll be heading back to the ballroom," came Conrad's familiar voice. "Mother is entertaining our guests for the moment, but I'll inform them it will be a few more minutes." With another nod, and a lingering glance in Wolfram's direction, Conrad left, closing the door firmly behind him.

"Wolfram..." Yuuri breathed.

Green eyes snapped up. "You're in a meeting, Wimp. Stay in it."

He could only nod and force his eyes back to Murata.

The Sage continued. "Our 'Little Problem' to the south has some interesting symptoms that we are only now beginning to understand, thanks to Lady Gisela's letters. While the casualty rates are high, they seem to only account for half of those affected. Those who do not die are left with missing limbs and broken minds." Murata tilted his head to the side. "The real thing that worries me is that nowhere in the list of symptoms is a way for the disease to move from one host to
another. There are hardly any respiratory symptoms-- coughing, sneezing, things that would move it from one person to the next. The spread in general is also abnormally slow. If it was something in nature spreading on its own... in all likelihood it would have fallen into a pocket of victims and died out or run wild and killed many more people by now.

"There is no doubt in my mind that there is something strange about this disease, and Shou Shimeron's claims are worrisome. I'm not convinced that Shou Shimeron is the cause, but it is a possibility too great to be ignored."

Yuuri nodded. There was far too much information running through his mind at once. The only good thing about Murata's words was how focusing on them allowed him to ignore how helpless he felt about Wolfram's presence. "But if Shou Shimeron really is causing the disease, then why send Saralegui here? Maybe he knows what's going on and is betraying his parents--"

"But Your Majesty-" Gunter squeaked. "I mentioned in one of your lessons... Ohh perhaps I wasn't clear. I'm sure it's all my fault. Oh I'm such a terrible-"

"Gunter." Yuuri sighed. "Just tell me."

Wiping his tears, Gunter nodded. "You are far too generous, Your Majesty! I must have not been clear before, but Prince Saralegui is the sole sovereign of Shou Shimeron."

"What do you mean?" Yuuri asked.

"In this sense, he is really more of a king, Your Majesty," Gunter finished.

"What?!" Yuuri shrieked. "If he's the king, then what is he doing here? Shouldn't he have more important things to be doing then going off to other countries and making everything more complicated? What kind of king just goes off on some random..." He stopped. The room had gone unnaturally still.

Gwendal coughed.

"Yuuri," came Wolfram's voice from his place against the far wall. "Calm down."

It was then that Yuuri realized he had been yelling. He had been trying so hard to push everything away, only focus on the present and making sensible decisions as king, that all the anger and confusion he had been suppressing had just jumped out of him of its own accord. "I'm sorry," he managed, looking down at the desk. "It's just... why would he lie about something so simple when he came here to gain our trust?"

"There are a lot of possibilities," Murata answered. "Perhaps it is a warning that he doesn't mean to be trusted after all, a sort of personal joke. Or perhaps he thinks the title of prince makes him sound younger and more appealing. Either way, it's hardly the most important detail at the moment."

"We can talk about this more tomorrow." Gwendal sighed. "You should return to the ballroom as soon as possible."

"But... What are we going to do about... what happened?" said Yuuri, his eyes on Wolfram who was still glaring at the floor.

"There's not really much for you to do, Wimp," Wolfram started, voice cold. "You just have to..." His fingers dug into his arms where they were crossed over his chest and Wolfram forced his eyes up.
Even though Wolfram was looking right at him, Yuuri felt like he was being stared straight through. "Wol-?"

"You have to kiss me," Wolfram blurted, voice raw. He immediately glared back at the floor, pale cheeks turning pink.

"WHAT?!" Yuuri sputtered. How could Wolfram just-- In front of everyone?! "Kiss? But..." His face was red and Yuuri felt like hiding under the desk. The room started to spin.

"Sir Belefield is referring to one of our customs, Your Majesty," Gunter explained, half-red handkerchief pressed against his nose giving his voice a nasal tone. "It is the traditional way to end a royal engagement."

Slapping to propose, kissing to... end. This world was so backwards! "What?" Yuuri managed.

"It's the only decision to make," Wolfram muttered, still refusing to look at him. "His Highness from Shimeron proposed to you, King Yuuri. That alone nullifies an engagement to someone without a proper title, especially an engagement that has passed two years and legally expired." As he spoke, Wolfram's voice grew stronger, but more detached. "And as much as I'd enjoy defeating Prince Pervert in a duel for you, Gwendal would never forgive me for the amount of paperwork."

He finally looked up. "Right, Brother?"

Yuuri couldn't help turning to look at Gwendal. The expression his adviser wore was different than anything Yuuri had ever seen on the man's usually serious and calculating face. For nearly a second a whirl of emotions was visible, deep in the eyes and soft on the brow. Though Yuuri had no way of naming them all, the most prominent of them seemed to be painful. Yuuri blinked and they were gone.

"Not to mention, Wimp, potential war," Wolfram finished.

Yuuri looked back at Wolfram in disbelief. Wolfram was the one who was supposed to say that what Saralegui had done was pointless. Wolfram was supposed to protest and make it so the engagement dragged on for a undefined period of time. Time that he could use to sort himself out. Why wasn't Wolfram complaining? Why wasn't anything inappropriately on fire? Was it possible that Wolfram really had been acting... the way he had... out of duty?

"I think war is a bit excessive so soon in the game... but not impossible," Murata mused, still across from him.

"But what about the room situation, surely we cannot allow His Highness from Shimeron-"

Gunter's sentences was lost in a wave of sputters.

"An unfortunate precedent," Gwendal growled. "But one we can do our best to hide... Rumors of this sort can easily be denied. We'll have someone move all of Wolfram's things at once. His Highness from Shimeron and his guard will stay in one of the Royal Suites--"

"No," said Yuuri, still focused on Wolfram's unexpected behavior. "I haven't agreed to this. I don't-"

"Stop," Wolfram snapped, still not looking at him. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Don't be too scared, Wimp. I'll still be around to protect you whenever you get yourself in trouble."

This was just too... Wolfram was the one who always said what was on his mind, never lied to him. But now... His friend wouldn't even look at him.
And then Yuuri realized. "OUT!" he shouted, surprising even himself. "Everyone out!"

"Your Majesty!" Gunter pleaded. "What-"

"All of you out of here! I'm going to talk to Wolfram about this. ALONE." Yuuri stood. "This is an order! Nothing has been decided yet... not until we talk."

After a pause, Murata smirked and headed for the door, followed by Gunter.

"You have ten minutes," Gwendal growled, before walking across the room. Before he left, he paused by Wolfram, who was still so close to the door, and placed his hand on his brother's hair.

Wolfram tilted his head out of Gwendal's grasp and the older man left the room, door closing with a crack.

Silence stretched and Wolfram still didn't look at him. Yuuri curled his toes where he stood and stared down at the desk. The solid chunk of wood sat as a barrier between them so Yuuri decided to move around it, counting the steps it took and wondering what to say.

********
********

Wolfram shifted his weight higher against the wall and tried not to shiver. Gwendal's office was absolutely freezing. He was almost surprised he couldn't see his breath. The only part of his body that wasn't numb with cold was the tiny circle of metal pressed snugly against his thigh. Though, it probably only felt like that because a small corner of his mind was acutely focused on its presence. His gift for Yuuri.

Now the whole thing seemed pointless. Stupid.

Wolfram wanted to be more angry, just because it would have felt normal. But the emotion slipped away every time he got close. He should have been furious, but instead he was numb.

Everything he had said to Yuuri had been the truth. Every logical, painful syllable. And Wolfram hated it.

How had he been too blind to see it coming? In retrospect it was all too clear. Gwendal's warnings, the perverted letter... He really had been blind, absorbed in Giddy Feelings that only ever succumbed to more pain.

Losing Yuuri. Losing his wimp and having to forever stand by his side. Too close to touch. Wolfram had always been preparing himself for this moment. Only recently had he begun to hope, to play with thoughts of being wanted in return.

Yuuri was experimenting... had kissed him. And even though Wolfram had known it was wrong to kiss him back, had held back for so long in fear of taking advantage, his body had betrayed him and he had given in to soft and warm and wanting. It had been so good. Yuuri was completely inexperienced, eager, and it was so easy to disguise curiosity for want, juvenile hunger for need. It had been too easy to close his eyes and get lost in it all.

He shouldn't have pushed him. Teased him with goodnight kisses. Of course that wimp would close his eyes and think of some woman.

But then, in the midst of it all, Wolfram had lost himself completely. Yuuri had been hard, rubbing against his thigh, and Wolfram had been so high on that power. The knowledge that his fiance
wanted him. Even if it was just a fantasy, the parts of his body that could be imagined into a
time: lips and hair, cloth-covered skin-- But Yuuri had pulled him close, pressed his body
against flesh until there was no denying his own desire. One second of blind acceptance before the
terrified wimp had pushed him away with a knee to the groin, sending him to the floor with the
shameful mixture lingering arousal and agony filling his nerves.

Of course, the wimp didn't mean to do it. Yuuri would never knowingly hurt anyone... But that sort
of logic was dangerous. It led to all sorts of hopes... Hopes that maybe his wimp really did feel
more for him than that overarching and infuriatingly equal friendship. Yuuri must know, on some
level, how much he...

Yuuri wouldn't use him. Of that Wolfram was absolutely sure. But that knowledge didn't make
anything hurt less.

But this pain, maybe it was the proper punishment for feeling such things in the first place. Maybe
this was for the best. Now that he could no longer hope for Yuuri he could find himself again. Stop
being such a disgraceful fool.

His entire life, Wolfram had wanted to find something. Something to keep him from being forever
written off as the pretty third son. He had always seen his appearance as a hindrance. Just one more
reason for no one to take him seriously. Features that shadowed the greatest king their country had
ever known at best, and at worst a male version of his mother whom everyone assumed would
have a similar moral code.

After he had lost his inheritance from Belefield as a child, his mother's position as Maou was the
only thing giving him a place at the higher court. And thanks to his overprotective brothers, court
was the only world he was allowed to know for years. How he hated not being allowed to
participate in the war. How useless it was to know seven waltzes when people he had known his
entire life were dying on the field.

And just when he was finally free of the title of prince, free to hope to make a name for himself
outside of his family... Yuuri had come. The disrespectful and naive child whom the same "god"
who had cursed him with his features had deemed worthy of their entire nation. Yuuri had known
nothing of their world, their sacrifices, their customs.

When Yuuri had proposed, Wolfram had been furious. He had hoped to humiliate this impostor
Maou in return for the humiliation that had been brought upon him, not only as a result of the
accidental proposal, but the vehement disgust that had followed. How dare this boy look at him
like that when Wolfram could have had half the court if he wanted.

...It had started as admiration, respect for the power of the Maou within this wimpy child. But
somehow he had fallen victim, as everyone had, to Yuuri's charm. His incredibly dopey charisma
that sprouted from a deep love for everyone around him.

It hadn't been long before Wolfram was glad of the mistake that bound them together. Made Yuuri
his more than anyone else's. Not long at all for him to hate that one smile that was only for Weller.
Hate how much Yuuri had tried to run from him in the beginning.

And slowly everything had changed. He had changed. Slowly, Yuuri had become the point around
which everything rotated in his life. He had started to let his feelings for Yuuri absorb him, define
him. Even gone so far as to subject himself to being Anissina's lab rat for months to make the silly
Earth engagement present. The Old Maid had been very enthusiastic and the little silver ring he had
picked out worked perfectly. Or at least, Anissina claimed it did. He had been skeptical of her
"modifications" at first, but quickly warmed to the idea of having a part of himself with Yuuri at all
times.

The whole Earth tradition seemed to be centered around a simple worn reminder. At least, as much as he had gotten out of the Sage. But that pervert had started acting like his usual self and Wolfram had been left with no choice but to escape without hearing the end of his explanation.

He had thought that if their engagement was re-affirmed through an Earth tradition then maybe... Nothing like this would have ever happened.

"Wolfram?" Yuuri's voice was much too close.

He snapped his eyes open. Had he fallen asleep? But he was so cold there was no way he could have drifted off. One sudden and embarrassing loss of consciousness was more than enough for one night. If Weller ever said a word to anyone...

"Wolfram?" Yuuri had moved away from the desk and now stood no more than two feet in front of him.

"What, Wimp?" He growled, refusing to look at his face. Yuuri was only making this more difficult.

"I hate this." There was a tremor to his voice.

Wolfram made the mistake of looking up, and his hopes of accepting the inevitable, doing the respectable thing, making Gwendal proud and just walking away, slipped from his mind. The wimp's eyes were shining with unshed tears and his bottom lip was pink and swollen from being worried between his teeth.

"This can't be-- I mean... you don't like it either, right? Or are you still mad? Because of last night...? Because I've been trying to apologize all day but there was never time-- and now you're supporting this... and you won't even really look at me, so..." Yuuri trailed off, his eyes searching Wolfram's face for a reaction.

"I hate it, too," he managed, ashamed of the emotions that laced his words. "But we don't have another option at the moment."

"So..." Yuuri's eyes filled with hope. "You're not angry at me?"

Wolfram shook his head.

"Thank goodness!" Yuuri grinned and stepped forward, hugging him for half a second before he froze and obviously thought better of the action. He stepped back with a deep blush covering most of his face. "Um... sorry." Yuuri put his right hand behind his head and gave a nervous laugh.

Then there was a kind of hope that couldn't exist purely in his imagination. "Don't apologize." Wolfram uncrossed his arms and reached for Yuuri's left hand. Even if he would never admit its original purpose, which was so inappropriate now, there was a similar custom... "You're missing something."

Yuuri gave him a questioning look but didn't pull his hand away.

With his other hand Wolfram reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring. He kept his eyes down on his task as he slid it on Yuuri's first finger, hoping his bangs would cover the blush he felt spreading over his cheeks. "You decided to be our King, spend the majority of your time here. I know your family gave you a hard time about not finishing your Earth school. But you still don't
have a King's Ring. *It's a symbol of your responsibility to the kingdom.* Wolfram realized he had been holding Yuuri's hand this whole time, spinning the band on his knuckle. Yuuri's hand was so warm. Wolfram tried to let go as casually as possible and crossed his arms again. Then he chanced a look up at Yuuri's face.

The wimp was still looking down at his hand. "It's... warm..."

"The ring is... special. It has some of my magic. Anissina was experimenting in the area anyway, and Greta plays in her lab so often... Anyway... You didn't have one before and now you do. Maybe it will help to remind you you're a king whenever you get wimpy."

Yuuri looked up at him, blush still strong on his cheeks. "You've been calling me a wimp too much tonight." He half-pouted. "But I'll forgive you since you gave me something so nice." And then Yuuri smiled one of the rare and special smiles that made him melt inside. "Thank you, Wolfram."

"You're welcome," was all he could say, smiling back despite himself for a moment and trying to memorize the shining face across from him.

"But..." The smile faded. "What are we going to do about-?"

"There's nothing much we can do. You're going to have to talk to him, see if you can figure out exactly what threat we're under... and if there is no threat, well, you're the king and so if you order it the engagement would be removed easily enough."

"But that never worked before-" Yuuri blurted. Then, "Not that... I mean..."

"I know, Wimp." Wolfram patted Yuuri's head. "You never really wanted it removed before."

Instead of denying it, Yuuri looked away as his blush deepened.

Wolfram removed his hand. "Yuuri, if I thought that this would end in your marriage to that Prince Pervert... there's no way I would support it."

"But we shouldn't... I just... we don't know he's bad."

Wolfram sighed. "Do you know why Saralegui is so young a king?"

Yuuri shook his head.

"To rise to succession in either Shimeron, you can't have any older relatives, no one more deserving of the throne. It was just a coincidence, they say, that he came to power so suddenly. After both his healthy parents-"

"What are you saying?!" Yuuri almost shouted, appalled.

"I'm saying, Wimp, that you should be careful. That you shouldn't be so trusting. I won't be able to protect you as easily... It would hardly be proper for me to stay at your side openly. Weller will be there to protect you, but don't leave his sight!"

Yuuri looked down at the floor. "I hate this."

"I do too." Then Wolfram put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder, resisting the urge to slide it up his neck and onto his cheek. "Let's get this over with."

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded.
Anissina put one last pastry on her plate and moved away from the dessert table. Despite being full of delicious chocolate items, the table was currently besieged by an unfortunate array of gossiping women. As she took a bite out of a sweet and made her way through the crowd, she pondered her chances of *altering* the chocolate before the next ball. Perhaps devising something that made it impossible for these women to lie to each other about how pretty their dresses were. She grinned. It would serve them right for saying such rude things about the Boy Wolf's personal life. She wondered how much she should charge for tickets to the epic cat fight. There was sure to be a lot of interest in the event.

Speaking of interested parties... "Good evening Lady Elizabeth, Sir Critenden," she said, walking up to stand on Elizabeth's right side. "Are you enjoying the courtly intrigue-"

"I wouldn't say *enjoying* is the right word... If that bitch Francesca doesn't start to watch her mouth I'll-"

"Darling, it only encourages her," Sir Critenden broke in, tightening his grip on her waist.

"I know," Elizabeth pouted, stepping closer to her husband. "Where is that spunky princess, Lady Anissina? Maybe I can find her another frog... or perhaps a snake...?"

Anissina smirked. "As much as I'm sure Greta would love to help she's been sent to bed for the evening."

"I suppose it's for the best," said Elizabeth, voice darkening. "I'm worried about him... both of them, actually."

"They're both big boys, they'll be fine," Anissina did her best to believe her own words.

"Don't worry too much," Sir Critenden murmured into the lady's hair.

"Oh don't be jealous," Elizabeth cooed, glowing under the attention.

Anissina sighed and had to avert her eyes. *Newlyweds.*

Then the music stopped and a hushed murmur spread across the crowd.

The Maou had returned to the ballroom, followed closely by his advisers and Wolfram. Gwendal stayed back, however, close to the door. Anissina narrowed her eyes.

The Royal party made their way to the slightly raised platform on one end of the room. Several ornate chairs sat upon the platform: It was where the Royal Family would sit, along with their advisers, when they were being addressed by foreign dignitaries or they simply tired of dancing and wished to observe the festivities. When they reached the platform, Gunter and the Sage stopped and only Wolfram and Yuuri stepped up onto the raised space.

Anissina moved closer with everyone else. To the other side of the platform she could see Conrad, keeping close watch on Reyes and his Prince.

No words were spoken. Wolfram knelt, and that was enough to silence the room. Even Anissina was surprised. The Kiss was so public. Humiliating. There were other ways.

From her place so near the podium she could see the hesitation in the Maou's eyes. Wolfram's lips
moved in profile but it was too quiet for her to hear, then he raised his hand. Surprisingly, instead of taking the offered palm, **Yuuri misunderstood the custom completely, as usual, and leaned down, kissing his no-longer fiancé right on the mouth.** Two pairs of eyelashes fluttered shut for a moment as a gasp of shock rippled through the crowd. After their moment passed and they parted, Wolfram realized himself and hissed something under his breath before shoving his hand at the Maou's now-red face. Yuuri sputtered something she couldn't hear but knew to be an embarrassed apology and completed the ceremony by kissing Wolfram's palm.

As soon as it was over Wolfram stood, turned on his heel, and made for the door at a steady pace with his head held high. The sound of his boots clicking against the stone cut through the room.

Anissina smiled sadly. At least the boy got a proper kiss.

Instead of watching Wolfram's military-style exit, she let her eyes find the foreign prince. His face was perfectly guarded, calculating, for a moment, but morphed into something guilt-ridden and childish mere seconds before the Maou turned in his direction. She frowned. This was a dangerous game.

A brush of air to her side distracted her attention, and she turned in time to see Elizabeth dash through the crowd. The lady made it to the door a few seconds after it closed behind the Boy Wolf but was stopped by Gwendal. The two of them started to argue about the same time that the room erupted into sound, everyone talking at once about what they had seen.

To her left, Sir Critenden let out an impressive sigh.

"Oh stop that," Anissina snapped. "You have nothing to be worried about."

********

The hallway was dim compared to the painful brightness of the ballroom. Torches were the only thing that lit his path along the long stone corridors, but instead of drawing comfort from the small offerings of fire as he always had been able to before, these flames made him feel like a stranger.

Wolfram felt like a shadow in his own skin, in his own place in the castle. He had gotten so used to sharing Yuuri's room, his bed, and even though he was completely exhausted and freezing Wolfram was hesitant to return to his new room in the North Wing. As tired as he was, Wolfram was sure once he got into bed he would be up for hours worrying about the wimp anyway.

His cheeks heated, and he remembered their inappropriate display on the podium. What had the wimp been thinking? In front of so many people! His brothers... Wolfram growled aloud in frustration and kicked a bit of protruding stone near his foot. As far as he knew the custom had never been... manipulated in such a way before. Perhaps after this instance receiving The Kiss on the lips would symbolize a fake disengagement for the sake of tricking a Perverted Prince. Wolfram let the corners of his mouth twitch up. That Yuuri would even make such a mistake created all sorts of dangerously encouraging thoughts.

Of all the times for them to be sleeping in different rooms!

It was so frustrating not to be allowed to stay for the remainder of the ball and keep an eye on that sneaky prince. He had already told Gwendal that he didn't care what those... people said about him. Weller better not let Yuuri out of his sight! Wolfram would never forgive himself if anything happened when he wasn't there to protect the wimp.
A guard's presence against the wall to his right startled him and he tightened his hands into fists. Not that he would be useful at all without at least some sleep. His mind was starting to slow.

In a few more turns Wolfram found himself in front of a familiar doorway. Greta. He probably shouldn't wake her, should explain in the morning when he was more capable of putting two thoughts together. But... he wanted to see her, and it would be terrible if she woke up early and discovered everything herself without being told the truths of the situation.

Wolfram turned the doorknob slowly and eased the door open, trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to startle his daughter awake. He slipped inside and closed the door behind him, effectively removing all light from the room. Normally he would have simply lit the old lamp on the bedside table from here, but the moment he even thought of using his maryoku a great pain split his chest and his blood froze with an inexplicable terror. He brought a hand over his heart, searching for a knife. But there was no wound, nothing sticky and warm and slipping through his fingers. The dark room spun and he fell to his knees on the rug, hitting something in his descent that clattered to the floor.

A light went on. Wolfram could see the rug under his palms, and a toppled rocking chair out of the corner of his eye. His knees stung from the impact of his fall and his vision blurred at the edges, everything starting to go green then brown, everything seeping towards a spinning, colorful darkness.

"Papa!" Greta shouted, jumping out of bed and running to him. She must have knelt beside him. A small hand on his back. Warm.

He turned his head to look at her, and the second he drew in her worried features all other thoughts flew from his mind. The pain vanished. Wolfram took a deep breath of much-needed air and sat up. "Sorry for scaring you. I must have eaten something that disagreed with me at dinner. I'm fine," Wolfram said, trying to convince himself. That had certainly been... unsettling.

"No you're not! You look really sick!" She reached out to touch his forehead. "You're freezing!"

Wolfram pushed the lingering pain away and did his best to reassure her. She would have too many worries before he left as it was. "That's because I haven't been asleep in a warm bed for the past few hours. Come on. Back to bed." Wolfram forced himself standing and ignored the wobbly feeling in his knees. "I have something important to discuss with you." He smiled as reassuringly as he could.

Greta eyed him suspiciously but complied, getting back into bed and pulling the blanket up under her chin. "Well?" she prodded.

Wolfram walked over and sat on her bed. "Greta, you know I'll always love you no matter what, but-

"I'm sorry about sneaking in Wilfrido!" Greta blurted. "Gunter already told me it wasn't appropriate, and then Anissina sent me to bed so suddenly! Please don't punish me!"

Wolfram blinked. "No, not that. I mean... why did you do that? You're much too young... just..." He sighed. "Greta, we'll talk about that later alright?"

Greta nodded.

"Good. Now... some things have happened, and neither Yuuri nor I wanted them to... but sometimes things are out of our control." Wolfram looked down at her confused features and tried to figure
out the best way to tell her. "Greta, Yuuri and I are no longer engaged."

"What? Why?" Greta's eyes were big and starting to water. "We were a good family..."

"We're still a family~"

"But what happened?" She sat up in bed and grabbed his arm with both hands. "We were making progress with Papa Wimp!"

"Yuuri didn't want this either, he loves you very much-- You'll still be his daughter legally~"

"But we were almost a proper family..." She started to cry. "We were so close! I just... I wanted...My real parents left and uncle was terrible no matter how much I tried- And I know you both love me. I know that..."

Wolfram was stunned. He hadn't imagined her getting this upset. Greta had started to yell and so he did his best to hush her, pulling her into a hug. "It's okay! It's political, Greta, hush..." He hated it when she cried. The sound was so painful, and it made him feel helpless and incapable.

"I'm sorry!" She hiccuped and rubbed her nose on his shirt. "I've just been thinking about it a lot lately. The tears slowed but she kept her face against his chest. "I knew our family was strange from the beginning, but I was just so happy... And I didn't really understand why at first... but Yuuri doesn't..." Her fingers dug in tighter where she held him. "I'm scared he'll find someone else... Or that you'll leave because he's... I feel so guilty that I didn't understand before. Those things I said about wanting a mother when I first met Elizabeth. Please don't be mad at me for that!"

"Of course I'm not mad." His mind raced. She was so young, just over a decade. Humans grew up so fast... "It's normal to want a mother."

"But I don't want a mother anymore! Anissina's much more fun... I really just want you and Yuuri."

"And you have us~"

"But I want you to have each other too! Like Hube and Nicola. You try... I know you do, but Yuuri~"

"Greta." He interrupted. "Yuuri and I... It's complicated."

"But what if he~"

"Even if he does I won't leave you- either of you, alright? Don't worry about things like this. You're supposed to be young while you still can."

She looked up at him and gave a weak nod.

Wolfram took a deep breath. "Now, are you ready to listen to what's happened?"

"I guess." Greta flopped back onto the bed and crossed her arms.

"Well," Wolfram started, realizing how real explaining it made it feel. "You know the foreign prince~"

"The one that looks like a girl?"

Wolfram let out a smirk. "Yes, that one. He proposed to Yuuri at the ball tonight."
Greta frowned. "Why didn't Yuuri just turn him down?"

"Sometimes when you're king you have to do things you don't want to do in order to help the kingdom. It would have been very rude-"

"Why don't you challenge him?!" Greta sat up, excited. "I'm sure you'd win!"

"Even so, that would be... rude as well."

"Well why can't we be rude? Yuuri was engaged to you Papa. That prince was rude first, proposing like that." She pouted.

Wolfram patted her head. "Very true. But Gwendal and the Sage... and a lot more people... believe that Shou Shimeron is threatening Shin Makoku, and until we know how to defeat them, it's best to be safe and appease them with this. Yuuri isn't going to actually marry that prince, this is only temporary."

"That's stupid." Greta frowned. "Shin Makoku is the strongest! I'm sure it can beat up Shou Shimeron. Even Dai Shimeron is afraid of us! And if the prince is dangerous shouldn't we keep him away?"

"This isn't a perfect plan... But Yuuri will be best protected here. Much safer than dealing with the Shimeron threat at the source." He sighed. "We think there's something in Shou Shimeron making people sick, something we can't protect Yuuri from if he were to go there. For now it's safer for everyone to stay here. I'm not telling you this to scare you, but I wanted you to understand what's going on. But let's keep it a secret, okay? Promise?"

"Yes," Greta mumbled, forehead still creased in concern. "I don't like it, though."

"I know." He stood up and rearranged the blankets over her, tucking her back into the bed. "I don't like it either." Wolfram kissed her on the forehead and made sure there was a clear path to the door before switching out the oil lamp. "Goodnight."

As soon as he opened the door, letting a trail of light into the room, a small voice whispered, "Goodnight, Papa Wolf."

He smiled. His little human always seemed to know just what to say.

********

********

Murata sighed and ran his hand along the old volumes stacked haphazardly on the shelves. The room wasn't very large, standard military size for someone of Sir Belefield's rank- a one-man bed against the wall, a desk, and a few shelves. There was also a small closet, in which hung the soldier's uniforms and formal wear, as well as a few drawers for folded items.

Even though a few things had been put away, it was clear that the move from the Royal Suite had been made in haste by whoever had been given the task. Probably one of Gwendal's men rather than a gossiping maid. Murata sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for the top book from a teetering pile on the desk. *History of Three Worlds: politics and religious theory in the days of pre-civilization*

His mouth quirked into a sad smile. Not your average military text.

The door opened.
"I'm tired, Sage. I don't care why you're here- leave," Wolfram growled. The tips of his hair were dark, sticking to his neck in damp curls and there was a coal-like darkness beneath his green eyes.

Murata pouted and put down the book. "But we finally have some time to ourselves. I thought maybe you'd be more interested now that-"

"Out!" Wolfram snapped, clutching the door frame with one hand.

"Sir Belefield," he started again, all business. "You have been summoned to the shrine by the high priestess Ulrike herself. You can sleep in the carriage." Then he pulled out the scroll and held it in the air between them, expecting Wolfram to take it.

CRASH. The door slammed on its hinges, knocking a few books from the shelves. Wolfram remained inside, but he had turned, back now to Murata. He kicked the innocent wood. Twice. "Damn it, Sage! ENOUGH! Can't this wait? You-- and the politics... enough." His breath hitched and his knuckles had gone white where they pushed against the door in fists. "This better be worth it... All of this..."

Murata stood and walked over to him. He would have put a hand on the other boy's shoulder, but given the circumstances he didn't want to push his luck. He never had been fond of the smell of burnt flesh. "The carriage is ready. You can sleep there."

"Fine," he hissed. "Let's just go." Wolfram opened the door again, leaving the room and walking down the hallway with the controlled steps of someone concentrating too hard on their footwork.

"You're not going to open your summons?" Murata asked, falling into step by his side.

"If it doesn't say this is just some cruel joke and I can go back to bed I'm not interested," he snapped.

Murata hummed and pursed his lips. Then he broke the seal on the scroll. "I'll just open it for you, then."

Wolfram von Belefield,
You are summoned to the Temple of Shinou no later than the end of the day.
It is a matter of life and death, please be prompt!
~High Priestess Ulrike

In a vain hope, Murata flipped to the back, just to be sure. "Well, nothing new there."

"Why do you need to know more about it, anyway? You're supposed to know everything about matters like this. Why don't you tell me what this is about so I can go tomorrow-"

"Sorry, it has to be tonight." Murata rolled up the scroll and put what would fit in his pocket. "And I don't know why you're being summoned. My... expertise in such matters is currently limited."

Wolfram snorted.

"I may have had an advantage in the past. And I have more experience than most, but this is different. I'm doing what I can without the aid of a certain little bird." They had reached the innermost gate and Murata turned, leading them to the carriage. He held the door open for his companion, who glared at him before sliding into one side. Wolfram sat sideways with one leg along the bench and his head resting against the side of the compartment. Murata sighed and sat on the bench across from him. "Things are not so clear this time."
Wolfram shifted a bit and looked around until he spotted the folded blankets on the shelf over Murata's head. "If you wouldn't mind-"

Murata reached up and tossed the blanket at him before taking the other for himself. It was decently cold, and a few new flakes had started to fall, making the night seem even more quiet.

"Thank you," he muttered and unfolded it, settling back into place and closing his eyes as the horses settled into a gentle trot.

Murata studied his face. "You wouldn't have an idea why you were summoned? No... memories from a little bird that might be useful?"

"No," Wolfram slurred, eyes dragging opening for a moment before closing again.

He frowned. Even though Murata had managed to inform Sir Wincott of the current situation with their Little Problem, the man hadn't suggested anything solid enough to put his mind at ease. It would have been convenient if Sir Belefield... Murata looked again at the face across the carriage. With his eyes closed, it was too easy for Murata to lose himself in another life. He knew he should let go and focus on the present, where he had to figure everything out alone.

Besides, Sir Belefield was interesting to look at by his own merits- Shibuya was luckier than he knew. Murata felt a little bad encouraging their current separation. "I noticed a ring on Shibuya's finger."

No reaction.

Murata sat forward on the bench. "It wasn't anything... personal, you know." He remembered the book in the soldier's room. "You were a great second to him... Will be a great second."

Wolfram must have fallen asleep already. That, or he was being ignored.

"What could you have done to deserve a summons?" Murata pushed aside his worries and theories about the sickness for a moment and focused on his recent memories of Sir Belefield. The other boy had come up with the pretty blue fire, which from a magical perspective was a truly impressive stunt. He'd been more... actively pursuing his fiancé of late... putting up with Anissina's experiments had to be draining. No wonder he was so tired-

*a matter of life and death*

Murata sucked in a breath and forgot to exhale. Why hadn't he seen this? "Sir Belefield, wake up!"

He reached out and shook his leg. "WAKE UP!"

The other boy's lips were an unsettling blue and his cheeks were dark. He didn't move.

Murata tore off the blanket and grasped for one of Wolfram's wrists, relieved to find a slow pulse under freezing skin. He let out a shaky breath and pushed some of his own maryoku out, into the cold body beside him. Not a permanent cure, but sharing was his specialty. "Driver!" he shouted, banging on the roof with a free hand. "Hurry up! I want us there in less than ten minutes!"

"But the horses!" came a muffled reply.

"I don't care if a beast loses a shoe! GO!"

The carriage lurched forward and Wolfram nearly spilled out of the bench. Murata pushed him back up, his body going numb with relief as green eyes dragged open.
"Why are you touching me?" Wolfram mumbled, barely able to will his lips to move, let alone push Murata away.

"Fool!" Murata shouted, and forced more magic into him. "Didn't you listen to the warnings? Your body must have... You overspent!" An image of Sir Belefield feinting into Sir Weller's arms before the room went dark came into focus. "I should have realized too... Damn!"

"What?" Wolfram managed, still dazed.

"I delayed giving you the summons... I thought I could let you have a few more hours together... so stupid." Murata put his free hand on the other boy's forehead, waiting to feel some warmth return to frozen flesh.

*******
*******

In the ballroom the festivities were dragging to a close. The orange flames still supported by Wolfram's tired soldiers had begun to dim, encouraging the guests to return to their rooms for early journeys home. Nearly half of those attending had retired already, but unfortunately Lady Elizabeth was not among them and was still glaring at him occasionally over her husband's shoulder as they danced.

Gwendal looked away, the little voice in the back of his mind was already making him feel bad enough, and sipped his drink. It was for the best in the long term, really. Solving multiple problems at once. The young king himself had put any doubts to rest on that matter. In truth, Gwendal was relieved. Matters of the heart always ended in miserable complications, and the current situation was much too delicate to risk any more complications.

Even if those complications were the interference of his adorably possessive youngest brother. Wolfram had been maturing quite admirably of late, despite his distraction with the king... The nagging feeling jumped up again for a moment, but he quickly pushed it back down. Gwendal was sure any present inconvenience would be forgotten in time.

The same could be said for the king. He too had been improving his childish tendencies, and just in time. The only hindrance to the Maou's development was the crutch presented by Wolfram's constant presence.

Now the king would finally be forced to rely on himself.

The night's events had gone unexpectedly well, considering the variables. There had been no attack, no whimpering, and only moderate whining accompanied by the occasional glare. The king's cultural faux-pas had been mildly nightmare-inducing, but once Wolfram was sent to bed the king had done an admirable job trying to engage the suspiciously quiet sovereign in conversation.

The two rulers, personal guards, himself and his mother were currently all seated upon the royal platform. Gunter, too, had been present until recently when he left to make sure no more food was being sent out to the tables. Currently, his mother had managed to maneuver herself into Reyes' lap, giving their king time to make friends with the tight-lipped 'prince' sitting to his left. Conrad stood behind the king, ever ready as always.

Saralegui said something to the Maou and the latter pulled at Conrad's sleeve. Something was whispered between them, and after a frown from Conrad and some big eyes from the king, Conrad stepped to the king's other side, closer to Gwendal.
Before he could ask, Conrad leaned over to tell him in low tones, "Apparently His Majesty thinks he can get more information without my 'hovering.'"

"Fine. But I'm sure I don't have to remind you stay ready for anything," he growled back, watching the pair in question from the corner of his eye.

Relying on the king's ability to win the trust of others was hardly Gwendal's favorite activity, but for the moment it was their best avenue of exploration. He started to sigh, but stopped. A familiar smell had come in, mixing with the wine and food and dancing bodies. He couldn't help looking over his shoulder. She couldn't be here. The crazy woman had gone to bed a half-hour ago-- And she didn't wear that perfume anymore. It had been years...

Satisfied that Anissina was nowhere nearby, ready to spring at him with some new invention, Gwendal finished his sigh and wondered if stress was finally driving him mad.

********

********

The Shrine had never been one of Wolfram's favorite places.

Even before he had banged on the gate, back when Yuuri had vanished and all that was left of his brother was and arm and a button. Before he had been too weak, trapped in the shadow of a god, to fight his body away from betrayal. Before he died here. For a while he used to wake during the night with sweaty sheets and the feeling of phantom fingers sliding through his chest and nails ripping at his heart.

Before everything, the Shrine was too open and too closed. Wet. Full of fog and echoes and things outside his control.

Of all the places for it all to end.

"Watch your hand, Sage," he tried to snap, but it came out as more of a mumble. Damn.

The Sage had been the only one available to help him to the Inner Chamber. Apparently the maidens even had rules about touching men. Wolfram hated having to accept help from anyone, but he would much prefer the help of the priestesses over the Sage and his wandering hands. And currently Wolfram had no other option than to take whatever help was offered.

Even with the constant trickle of the Sage's magic, his entire body felt frozen. Legs stiff, like his veins had hardened into ice and every movement shattered them, digging tiny shards inside.

Not that the pain could stop him from walking mostly on his own. He allowed the Sage one of his arms, to help keep some weight off, but he was going to walk to this. Whatever it was.

The ornate doors to the chamber swung open and Ulrike rushed out, nearly in tears.

"Don't you listen? Don't either of you listen?" The tiny priestess shouted. "I receive warning from Ethne herself and it takes you more than twelve hours to get here!"

"Well," the Sage started, shifting Wolfram higher on his shoulder. "You didn't exactly say it was that important anywhere on the summons--"

"Oh, don't you start!" she huffed, and looked at Wolfram worriedly. "Please hurry, I want you in the water as quickly as possible."
Water. His eyes snapped over her shoulder... the falls. "No." Something inside him screamed Bad Idea, and Wolfram pushed the Sage away, nearly falling but catching himself on a nearby pillar. The touch of smooth stone seemed to tear his palms and he gasped, forced to take a moment and absorb all the unpleasant sensations. Everything got worse at once and he fell to his knees. "No," he gasped again, before melting into the feeling of warm power where the sage grabbed his hand.

"Suicidal fool!" The Sage's voice above him. "If you keep this up I'll let you die and take Shibuya off your hands. You know, we've always been rather close, I'm sure I could persuade my dear friend into a little experimentation--"

"What?!" He tried to yell, tried to throttle the Sage, but it just ended in more inadvertent touching. "I'll kill you!" The pain was dizzying but at least now he had a proper focus.

"STOP THIS!" Ulrike screamed. "Your Grace, I don't care if you have to throw him in."

"My pleasure."

Wolfram could hear the sage grin. Why couldn't he see him? He tried with all his might to force his eyes open but he just... couldn't.

Then the Sage picked him up. Just like some sort of doll.

He could feel each step, each jerk that stabbed at his nerves. Especially in his stomach, which must have been supporting most of his weight on the Sage's shoulder. Then, somewhere between where he had been and the sound of rushing water he noticed he wasn't breathing.

A moment of panic. A heartbeat. A heartbeat.

Yuuri

Cold. Wet! A gasp of air. "I'll kill you!" Everything spun into focus again. "How dare you!"

Though he could hear his words in his mind, his ears didn't echo the recognition.

"Just be glad she wouldn't let me strip you first." The Sage smirked.

All Wolfram could do was glare at him from his place just beneath the falls. His back was propped against something hard, and a stray stream of water trailed over his forehead and between his eyes. This whole lack-of-proper-motor-function thing was getting very old.

"Don't look so ungrateful, Sir Belefield. His Grace just saved your life."

"Ah! The wonderful feeling of a debt being repaid. Maybe I'll finally be able to get some decent sleep..." The Sage's playful tone melted into something a little darker. "But in all seriousness, you've cheated death more times than anyone should. You've been very lucky so far in life, Sir Belefield. I suggest you stop pushing it."

"Wh..." Wolfram started but couldn't finish, so instead he just stayed in his half-propped position and tried to radiate confusion. He could feel magic seeping into him with every drop that shattered against him. It was altogether reassuring and wrong.

"You'll live, thanks to this water... as well as the combined power of His Grace and myself", Ulrike informed him, but her eyes were still worried. "But after tonight you should begin your journey to reaffirm immediately. Your situation is extremely delicate. If you use your maryoku again..."

"No," he managed thickly. "Won't leave... Yuuri."
"Shibuya has plenty of protection here-"

"Sir Belefield!" Ulrike interrupted. "Ethne herself felt your light go out. Her concern is an honor unbestowed upon anyone during all my years of service. She demands an audience."

**Ethne.** The lady of the flame. He still remembered her touch, as well as the journey he had taken to receive it all those decades ago. Still, his loyalty to Yuuri burned brighter than the memory.

"I'll go," he started, pausing as a look of relief spread over both their faces. "But not until I'm sure that the situation here is stable. A week. Two. No more than a month." His voice grew more steady, fueled by the healing maryoku running down his spine. "My duty is first to my King and Country."

"Fool!" Ulrike glared. "If you so much as think to light a candle-"

"I won't." He caught her eyes, pleadingly. "Let me do this. I can't leave now."

"You know, if either of your brothers find out, you'll be heading to Lesser Gael in a crate," The Sage mused.

"Please." He shut his eyes. They couldn't do this! This couldn't happen! "He can't do this alone... If you're right about your theories, Sage, my death will be lost among thousands if we fail."

"But Ethne-"

"It's alright, Ulrike," the Sage interrupted. "She's several thousand years old, she won't notice a few weeks."

"You're supporting this?!" She gasped. "Shinou help us... the world's gone mad--"

"Sir Belefield has a point, morbid as it may be," the Sage interrupted. "We have to find a cure... and I'm sure I don't need to remind you that Shinou is most definitely not being helpful at the moment."

"Thank you," Wolfram breathed, relief flowing through him. "I promise I'll leave as soon as the wimp learns how to play the game."

Ulrike's face was red as she alternated her glaring between the two of them. "No more than two weeks. Even that is a stupid risk," she snapped. "I can't believe this... First you participate in Lady Karbelenikoff's deviations into forbidden magic and now you ignore the warnings of a god! I had thought you were growing up, acting wiser. This is a fool's risk, Sir Belefield."

"He needs me, Ulrike," Wolfram soothed. "That's worth any risk."

********
********

The next morning at breakfast, Yuuri was convinced he'd chewed every bite a hundred times trying to think of ways to break the incredibly awkward silence that spread across the table. Gunter had run out of food to describe and Conrad and Saralegui's guard seemed to be having a staring contest. To his left, Gwendal's bottom eyelid was twitching.

During the ball, Yuuri had managed to get on a first name basis with Saralegui, or Sara as he preferred, but had learned nothing about what was going on in Shou Shimeron. Not that he'd had the courage to just come out and ask him yet... He didn't want Sara to think that it was the only
reason he wanted to be his friend.

Yuuri had also discovered that Sara had a strange fear of Conrad as a result of his reputation as the Hero of Ruttenburgh, but he was sure those feelings would end once Sara got to know how great Conrad really was. But what little talking they had managed to do at the formal felt superficial and formal. *Lovely party, lovely ballroom, lovely guests.* Nothing useful.

He sighed, and his eyes wandered to the empty seat on his right. Yuuri knew Wolfram couldn't come to meals like this anymore... but he had no idea of where to even start without him. And Greta... He hoped she was only sleeping in after the party, and not too upset with him. Wolfram had said he would talk to her last night, but he still felt guilty about not going himself. It had been very late before he had gone back to his empty room.

Last night Yuuri hadn't had the courage to examine the slightly ajar armoire... let alone open any of the probably now-empty drawers. He had simply crawled under the covers, barely pausing to take off his shoes, and fallen into a dreamless sleep. There were some things... that he just didn't want to think about.

There was a sound behind him, and Sara, who was sitting directly across from him, looked up.

"Sorry I'm late." His daughter's voice was quiet.

Yuuri turned, grinning. "Don't worry about it, Greta! It was a late night, come and have some breakfast."

Greta was wearing one of the dresses his mother had sent last time, one that to Yuuri looked a bit pink and cake-like. She had seemed excited about the gift at the time, but now she looked miserable, clutching a layer of ruffles in both fists by her sides.

"Ah! What a pretty dress, Princess," Gunter praised, filling the silence. "Your Majesty's mother has such excellent taste."

"Thank you." She curtsied, still looking down, and started to walk toward the table.

When she reached his side, Yuuri put a hand on her head. "Are you alright?"

She nodded.

"Your daughter is lovely, Your Majesty," Saralegui purred from across the table.

"Thank you. But I thought we agreed not to be so formal, Sara." Yuuri smiled, encouraging the other boy to speak.

The prince looked down and smiled. "Forgive me, Yuuri."

Greta's head rose under his palm, so he removed his hand. "You..." She started, cheeks red.

Saralegui looked up at her, still smiling. "I know it's all very sudden, but I hope we can become friends. I've heard so much about you-"

"YOU RUINED MY FAMILY!" Greta screamed at him, before turning on her heel and bolting from the dining room, pink lace flowing behind. The door slammed loudly and all Yuuri could do was blink.

Gunter dropped his spork, which clattered abruptly against his plate. "Oh my!" he squeaked.
"I'm sorry..." Yuuri whispered, still looking at the door. Blood rushed in his ears and his throat tightened... How was this the right thing to do?

"It's not your fault, Your Majesty," Conrad tried to reassure him. "Greta is young. Change can be hard on a child."

Yuuri turned. Saralegui was looking down at plate with red cheeks. Now he felt even worse. "No... She's my daughter, I should apologize. Please forgive her behavior, Sara."

The other boy nodded, but didn't look up. "It's alright, Yuuri."

Gwendal caught his eye, the sort of thing Wolfram would have done. Yuuri forced a frown. "No, she shouldn't have yelled at you. I'll have to talk to her later. It's just... she was... is very attached to Wolfram and-"

"I understand." Saralegui looked up. "I wouldn't think to hinder their connection... Besides-" The other boy smiled. "This way we can have more time to get to know each other."

Yuuri nodded and tried to smile, before taking another bite of his now-cold breakfast.

* * *

More than twelve hours later, Yuuri sighed in relief as the door to his bedroom clicked shut. He had ended up spending the entire day with Saralegui and his guard Reyes, who had been even more difficult to interact with than his king. Thank goodness Conrad had been there too. Without him, Yuuri was sure he would have lost his mind in the strangeness of it all.

Even though there had been plenty of time to talk to Saralegui, Yuuri still hadn't managed to broach any subjects of actual importance. It all seemed so forced, like everyone was pretending to be something they weren't. He was trying so hard to just get this over with, find something out that would help everyone in Caloria so that he could tell Sara the truth and stop pretending. Yuuri tried so hard to focus, to do what he was supposed to, but everything in his mind kept coming back to Wolfram. He could even smell the other boy sometimes, though he hadn't seen him all day.

He wondered if today had seemed strange for Wolfram, too... Yuuri hadn't been able to sneak a look at the training grounds, but he could easily picture Wolfram taking out any frustration on his poor soldiers. He hadn't smelled any smoke, but it was possible for the wind to carry such things away, and the day had been windy as well as bitterly cold.

Yuuri hoped that Wolfram had managed to talk to Greta today too. Ever since her scene at breakfast he had been feeling immeasurably guilty.

"You ruined my family."

Even though his daughter had been talking to Sara... Yuuri felt like it was his fault, and he couldn't help but wonder if he had been the one to break the engagement, like he had tried to so many times before, if Greta would have said those words to him.

That thought had made Yuuri realize that keeping up his relationship with Wolfram was more important than simply making his friend happy. It was part of his duties as Greta's father as well.

Yuuri shut his eyes hard and tried not to remember... touching. His cheeks burned, and when he opened his eyes he had to turn away from the bed in shame.

It was like he didn't even know himself anymore. He slammed a palm on the nearby dresser,
rattling the drawers and causing a hollow thud to echo around the room. Against his better judgement, Yuuri slid open the drawer closest to him.

Empty.

But maybe it was better this way. Just pretend like nothing ever happened... No evidence, no crime. Yuuri stared at the empty drawer, holding the handle until his knuckles whitened and the ivory handle dug into his hand. But that would be wrong.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Yuuri knew he was being irrational, starting to panic. But it didn't stop him from opening the rest of the drawers, some of them with such force that they slid off their bearings and clattered against the rug. More than half the dresser empty, every drawer but the three to one side he used... Wolfram had always had more things, but he had lived here his whole life-- it was only natural... Even the bottom drawer, the one that used to be stuck with disuse and filled with hats and letters from his mother. Empty.

He went for the armoire next, the door cracked on its hinge, revealing huge gaps of empty, gaping between hanging black fabric. No blue. No color... just the glaringly white Shin Makoku team uniform that Conrad had given him.

No canvases in the corner covered by cloth. No jars of smelly paint sitting on the balcony, only the little dents where snow had fallen over empty spaces. No swords leaning against the dresser. No more hairbrush next to the wash basin and pitcher of water. No slippers under the bed. Nothing.

Yuuri sat down on the bed and sighed, twirling the ring on his finger absently. His heartbeat was still ringing in his ears and his foot tapped restlessly against the floor. Then he saw it, sitting unassuming by the door: the laundry hamper.

He shouted in triumph as he upended it over the floor, a flutter of pink falling amongst his own clothes. Yuuri picked up the nightgown. The silk was cold against his fingers, and somehow, just by holding it, that familiar smell slipped into his mind.

Mistakes... Politics... Everything else aside, Wolfram was his friend first and he missed him.

A knock on the door made him jump, and he hurried to put the scattered clothing back in the bin before opening the door.

"Is everything all right, Your Majesty? I heard a shout," asked the guard. He was wearing Wolfram's colors.

Where had he seen him before?

Yuuri stepped forward a bit, into the open crack of the door in an attempt to hide his disheveled room from sight. "Everything's fine, just... cleaning up a bit." He let out a nervous laugh. "So you're on watch duty tonight?"

The blond man nodded and stood up a little straighter. "Yes, Your Majesty. By orders of Sir Belefield."

Yuuri gripped the door a little harder. "I know you... Lucien?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." He beamed.

An impulsive idea started to gnaw at the corners of his mind, and Yuuri couldn't help but smile. "Are you the only one on duty tonight?"
"Of course not, Your Majesty, your protection is paramount and--"

"What about right now?" Yuuri pressed, waving a dismissive hand to silence the guard. "Are you the only one in this hall right now?"

Lucien was silent for a moment. "For the next hour. But with my most sincere apologies, Your Majesty, you will not be leaving your room tonight."

_Caught!_ He tried to smile anyway. "But... I have to return something."

The guard raised an eyebrow.

"Wolfram left something here... I want to give it back. I'll bet you know where he's staying now, right? Will you take me there? I'm sure one of Wolfram's prized soldiers will be able to protect me on my way." Yuuri grinned.

"Goodnight, Your Majesty." Lucien reached for the doorknob.

"Wait!" Yuuri managed. "What about the thing I need to give him?"

"I would be more than happy to deliver the item after my shift."

"Wait!" He said again, this time with more force. "I am your king! You have to follow orders."

Lucien's jaw clenched.

"I'm going to clean something up. You're going to stay here until I come out again and then you will take me to Wolfram's room... Without detection... And you won't tell anyone either! I order you as king!"

_Ha!_ The benefits of the job...

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Yuuri and Lucien were standing in front of a door, just like all the other doors, in a hallway in the North Wing. It had taken them an abnormally long time to get to this part of the castle as a result of all the times Lucien made him duck into closets and get behind corners. The other man had been mostly silent the whole way, but grumbled occasionally about what a terrible idea this was. This hardly bothered Yuuri, who grinned so much along the way that his cheeks started to hurt.

Once Lucien nodded that it was alright, Yuuri knocked twice softly on the door. A few seconds of silence followed and Yuuri shifted his weight anxiously. He switched the bag that contained the nightgown to his other hand.

The door swung open. Wolfram was wearing his sword over a pair of plain pajamas and looked both disheveled and angry. "What are you doing here?"

"Well--" Yuuri started.

"Corporal! Explain yourself!" he hissed.

"I was under orders, Lieutenant! He ordered me as king, there was nothing I could do!" Lucien spoke just above a whisper, looking pale.

"I don't care what he told you!" Wolfram seethed. "Take him back to his room at once!"

"I'm right here!" said Yuuri. "Wolfram, I just came to give you something..."
"Then give it and get out!" Wolfram glanced down the hallway. "You shouldn't be here."

"Let me talk to you!" Yuuri pleaded. "Just... let's talk, alright?"

Wolfram glared at him. "You're not going to leave until then, are you?-- Lucien, get back to your post. Tell no one. I'll return him later."

Lucien looked uncomfortable but saluted and headed off.

Then Wolfram grabbed Yuuri's arm and yanked him inside the room. "Are you trying to ruin everything?" He closed the door.

"What?" Yuuri balked. "Of course not... Wolfram--"

"Then what are you doing here?" Wolfram snapped, and started to unbuckle his sword harness. "You should stay in your room. It's safer there."

Yuuri clutched the bag in his hands. "But... Shouldn't I be safer with you?"

"You..." Wolfram growled, then sighed. "Of course you're safe with me... but it's better to have more people protecting you right now." He ran a hand through his hair. "Look, Yuuri... you have to act like a proper king now, alright? You can't keep sneaking out of your room and using your authority for inappropriate things..."

"You're not going to give Lucien a hard time are you? It was my fault."

"Of course I am. He let himself be tricked by a wimp. Hardly appropriate behavior for one of my colors." Wolfram huffed and crossed his arms.

Yuuri grinned, comforted by the familiar mannerism. "Wolfram... You're so difficult sometimes."

"Why are you smiling like that? This isn't a game. You're supposed to be getting information out of that sneaky prince--"

"Sara's not sneaky!" Yuuri pouted. "You don't even know him."

Wolfram narrowed his eyes. "Stop being stupid. You've been lucky so far... but not everyone has good in them, wimp. If your not careful..." He paused. "Just be careful, alright?"

Yuuri nodded.

"Now, what are you doing here?"

Yuuri remembered the bag in his hands and his face heated. It really hadn't been the most... convincing reason. "You left something... but I can already tell you found another one..." He studied Wolfram's "normal" pajamas again. They were almost like his, but a lighter blue... almost white. The button under Wolfram's neck was undone, revealing a thin triangle of skin on his chest. Yuuri swallowed. Why did this make him even more uncomfortable than the frilly pink garment in his bag? "Here." Yuuri blushed, holding the bag in Wolfram's direction.

Wolfram walked forward to take it, but when he reached out to grab the bag he grabbed Yuuri's hand instead. "You're still wearing it."

He blinked. "Oh... Of course." When Wolfram touched the ring it heated noticeably against his finger. Yuuri had almost forgotten. The ring had certainly been a surprise, and during the first few hours he was always conscious of its weight and warmth on his hand. He wondered how had he
gotten so used to it so quickly. "You gave it to me."

Wolfram smiled a bit and spun the band on Yuuri's finger, then he slid it gently up to the first knuckle. "Do you mind if I take it off for a moment..."

Yuuri nodded, but felt a little disappointed. When Wolfram tried to take the ring all the way off, Yuuri jumped and dropped the bag. "Ow!" He jerked his hand away. The band hovered at the tip of his finger, almost red and too hot to touch. Yuuri shook his hand around, expecting the ring to fly off, but it stayed where it was.

Wolfram's eyes were as wide as his. "Maybe... Hold still." He breathed and grabbed Yuuri's hand with both of his. The ring cooled and slid back onto his finger.

"What happened?" Yuuri breathed, a little dizzy with confusion.

Wolfram's voice was low but Yuuri could feel his breath on his hand, which was still trapped between Wolfram's interlocking fingers. "I'm not sure. Old Maid and her tricks... So stupid..." He looked down, expression darkening.

Yuuri tilted his head. "I don't think it's stupid..."

Wolfram looked up again. "No. Not that... never mind. I'm glad you like it." He let go of Yuuri's hand and reached for the bag.

"It was in the laundry..." Yuuri mumbled, feeling stupid. "I thought you might need it."

His friend glanced in the bag. "I don't need that here." Then Wolfram looked up, catching his eye. Yuuri swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable. "Oh, well um..."

"Is that all?" Wolfram crossed his arms again. "I'll take you back to your room."

Yuuri blinked. Why was Wolfram acting so cold? They both knew that the engagement to Sara wasn't real... Wolfram had given him a present... But why did he even care? He shouldn't feel this confused... this disappointed. Wolfram was just doing his job. "But..." he started, unable to finish.

Wolfram got tired of waiting. "The whole point is for you to win his trust. You can't just go sneaking into other people's rooms at night--"

"But you're not other people. I never get to see you anymore..." Yuuri shoved his hands into his pockets and looked at the stone floor.

"It's only been one day. If I had known that you were going to be this much of a wimp--"

"Don't call me a wimp!" Yuuri snapped, looking up to see Wolfram's smirk. So familiar. Yuuri had to bite his lip to keep from smiling.

Wolfram walked over and sat in the chair by his desk. Then he sighed and ran a hand through his hair again. "Look. Yuuri, I don't like this either, but unless you do something like appoint me 'royal consort'--"

"I can do that!" Yuuri grinned. "I'm king, right?"

Wolfram stared at him. "Do you know what that means? ...I was joking, Gwendal would have a fit!" Wolfram's face was a little red.
Yuuri frowned. "What does it mean?"

Instead of answering, his friend stood and crossed the small room in a few quick steps. He stopped directly in front of him, and Yuuri's cheeks heated as Wolfram leaned in close. "It means, wimp, that you'd be an official cheater," he whispered, hot air sliding against Yuuri's lips. "A royal consort only has one purpose, after all..."

"Um..." Yuuri whimpered, and took his hands out of his pockets. Opting to clench them at his sides instead. "Oh."

"So that plan won't work." Wolfram started to move away.

Yuuri reached out and caught his arm. "Wait... I mean..." Then he realized what it sounded like he was saying, and his face got even hotter. "Not that... But... What about like this... Lucien could sneak me here at night. We could still see each other... Talk."

"Talk," Wolfram scoffed, shaking his hand away and heading back for his chair. "You shouldn't be here." He sat. "We can talk once the crisis is over."

"I'm doing the best I can about that! I hate not being completely honest with Sara... But I'm doing what Gwendal and Gunter and Murata and you want me to. Because apparently it's the only thing we can do to help right now!" Yuuri did his best not to shout, but it was difficult. "But everything changed so fast. Everyone's acting like... nothing ever even happened. Greta is upset... And you don't even seem to want to be in the same room as me!" Yuuri glared, eyes starting to water. "I just want something to be the same."

Wolfram studied him for a while. "Fine." Then he stood and headed over to the small drawers in the corner, walking past Yuuri with hardly a second glance.

Yuuri felt deflated. "What? Fine... what? He watched Wolfram rummage through his things. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not going anywhere-- You are so..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "You're still wearing your uniform. It won't be comfortable to sleep in." Wolfram kept his back to him. "I'm getting you something else to wear."

"What?" He gaped, distracted by the joy spreading up his toes. Wolfram was going to let him stay! "Unless you want to sleep in the thing you brought--"

"No!" Yuuri blushed, eyeing the crumpled pink fabric now lying on the floor. "I'll borrow something else." He fidgeted, and let his eyes wander. The bed was really small. Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all.

Wolfram walked over, and shoved a bundle of cloth in his direction. "Here."

"Thank you." He took the pajamas. They were the same as the ones Wolfram had on. Yuuri clutched them and stared at Wolfram, who just looked back at him. Why did it feel so strange? They were both boys... changing in front of each other shouldn't be so uncomfortable.

But it was.

"Um..." Yuuri mumbled, looking away. "I have to change."
"Of course you do," Wolfram growled.

Yuuri could hear Wolfram walk over to the bed. The covers rustled, and Yuuri looked over to see Wolfram already under the blankets, facing away from him. While he was changing, Yuuri noticed how cold it was in Wolfram's room and shivered. "Why is it so much colder in here?" he wondered aloud.

"Several reasons..." Wolfram's voice was muffled from the sheets. "Mostly because, unlike the royal chambers, there isn't a furnace under the floors."

"There's a furnace under the floor?"

Wolfram grunted in response.

Yuuri finished changing and walked over to the bed, bare toes almost sticking to the stone with cold.

"Turn off the lamp," The other boy mumbled.

Strange. Wolfram always turned off the light. "Why don't you?"

"Are you really such a lazy king? It's right next to you!" he snapped.

"Okay, okay." Yuuri turned off the oil lamp next to the bed, drowning the room in darkness. He blinked, and put a hand out in front of him to find the bed. Instead he found part of Wolfram. "Ack!" Yuuri jumped, removing his hand from the unidentified cloth-covered body part and focusing on finding the edge of the sheets. "Sorry."

"I can still take you back to your room," Wolfram sighed, scooting as far to the other side of the bed as he could.

Yuuri swallowed loudly and forced himself to slide in next his friend. "No." He laid his head against the cold pillow and stared at the darkness above his head. The left side of his body hummed, enjoying the body heat that seeped over from Wolfram's side of the bed. "I'm fine here."

And he was.

He was fine. He could live like this, if he had too. Lying next to Wolfram wasn't completely terrible... As long as he didn't have any more instances of spontaneous insanity involving kissing and... rubbing. Yuuri blushed. Yes, as long as he remained sane he could do this. Nothing like what had happened the other night would ever happen again. Nothing that would almost ruin everything. He wouldn't let it.

Yuuri sighed.

"What's bothering you now?" Wolfram grumbled. "Do you need me to read you a story before you can get to sleep?"

"No." Yuuri pouted. "You're not asleep yet, either." Then he remembered, face growing hot all over again, how Wolfram used to "help him get to sleep". Silence followed, and Yuuri shifted uncomfortably in the bed. What if Wolfram tried it again? What if he was too upset with him about what happened last time to try it again...? Yuuri growled and stopped that train of thought.

That thing with the rubbing had been his fault... Yuuri had tortured himself over The Incident enough to know that. What if Wolfram was actually mad but not saying anything?
Yuuri shifted, unconsciously moving toward the heat at his side.

"Just spit it out," Wolfram sighed, rolling over to face him. His breath brushing against Yuuri's forehead.

*I'm sorry.*

"I'm cold," Yuuri whispered.

"Wimp," Wolfram breathed and scooted closer before putting an arm over him. "Better?"

Yuuri nodded into Wolfram's chest and the grip around him tightened. It was so warm, so familiar, so safe. Wolfram smelled like he always did, only now the could clearly sense his soap over everything. Yuuri's arms were tucked up, between them, and the backs of his hands brushed against the fabric of Wolfram's pajamas. He shouldn't be enjoying this...

It wasn't right... Leading him on like this. Yuuri forced himself to speak up again. "About... a lot of things... I'm so--"

Wolfram hushed him. "It's time for sleep. Don't--"

"I have to!" Yuuri clutched the pajamas so near his hands for emphasis and looked at where Wolfram's face must be through darkness. "This is all so..." He couldn't make himself finish. If he told Wolfram how terrible it was... He was sure to hurt him.

Maybe it was worth it?

It was like a light went off in his mind and Yuuri felt himself grinning like an idiot. He could never marry a woman now, anyway... He would feel too guilty about hurting Wolfram, hurting their family. So if he could never be properly happy anyway, what was to keep him from doing everything he could to make up for the pain he had caused his friend? All the times he had hurt him without meaning to and led him on without realizing. Yes! And since it would make him feel terrible too... it was a proper repentance. It all made so much sense!

Even if he had to pretend to be gay for the rest of his life... He would be making Wolfram happy, and that was enough.

"Wolfram," Yuuri started again, voice clear. "Goodnight." Then he leaned forward and kissed the first skin he touched. From the sound of Wolfram's short gasp so close to his ear it was probably the other boy's cheek. Yuuri scooted closer, giving in to more contact now that his fate had been decided.

His friend breathed his name into his hair, and he felt himself be pulled snug against Wolfram's chest. And Yuuri was sure he could do this. Being so wrapped up in strong and warm...

He could do this, no matter how *wrong* it was.

********

It took Wolfram hours to fall asleep. He was too afraid he'd wake up and Yuuri would be gone, or even just out of his arms. Wolfram knew that the wimp would wake up and change his mind... regret whatever decisions had ended them so close. But for now... Yuuri was *his*. Wanted to be his.

Yuuri's hair tickled his cheek with every breath and Wolfram told himself again that he was
staying because Yuuri needed him. That he wasn't just being selfish and taking advantage of the
wimp's obvious confusion. He pulled Yuuri closer, reveling in every contact.

Wolfram blamed the Old Maid and her confounded tinkering for his current dilemma. If it hadn't
been for her, he wouldn't have to worry about leaving in the middle of everything. Wouldn't be
without his magic. How was he supposed to know her modifications to his ring would have such a
dramatic effect?

Blasted Woman! It was all her fault.

Though... it was hard to be angry about anything with his arms full of Yuuri. He was also
completely exhausted. Not as tired as he had been yesterday, when his life had tried to slip out of
him, but tired none the less. Wolfram took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the scent of his
wimp, and let sleep take him.

* * *

The next morning, Wolfram was shocked awake by the sounds of persistent banging on his door
accompanied by Gunter's familiar screeching.

"Ohh! It's terrible!" More thumping. "Open the door!"

Wolfram groaned and tried to roll over, but was stopped by the bundle of worried-looking Yuuri
still in his arms. "Shh..." he hissed, and forced himself out of bed. Then he noticed the wimp had
left his clothes on the floor. Wolfram growled and picked up the black uniform before turning.
"Get in the closet!" he whispered, as forcefully as possible.

Yuuri nodded with tired eyes and stumbled out of bed to do as he was told. He caught the bundle of
black clothing Wolfram threw at him before closing himself in the closet.

Wolfram glanced around the room one more time, took a breath, and opened the door. "What."

"His Majesty is missing!" Gunter squeaked, trying to keep his voice down. "I went to wake him for
his lessons and he wasn't in his room! Conrad has already talked to the guards on watch-- none of
them saw His Majesty leave-- but he isn't in his room!"

"What!" Wolfram growled. "I leave for one day and you lose the wimp! I never should have
agreed to this scheme--"

"So you haven't seen him either?! I had thought perhaps--" A trickle of blood slid out of one side of
his nose. "Oh! This is no time for such thoughts! I must find him!" Gunter sped off down the hall,
squeaking about "His Majesty" as he went.

Wolfram shook his head before closing the door. "Well, I should join the hunt. Otherwise they'll
get suspicious..."

Yuuri stumbled out of the closet, one leg into his uniform pants. "I feel bad for making him worry,
though... Poor Gunter. And Conrad has even more work to do now..."

Wolfram raised and eyebrow at the display.

Yuuri blushed and finished putting on his pants.

"No good." Wolfram couldn't suppress his smirk. "You can't wear the same clothes you had on
yesterday."
"What do you mean?" Yuuri's face was still red. "I wear the same uniform every day!"

"Someone's sure to notice, and then the rumors will start."

Yuuri frowned. "What do you want me to do? Wear one of your uniforms? I think that would be a little more noticeable!"

"Of course that wouldn't work." Wolfram took a step towards him. "I have a much better plan."

The wimp took a step back. "What?"

Wolfram moved closer. "Strip."

"What!?" Yuuri moved farther away, face burning. "How-- what?" Since the room was so small, a few more steps landed him against the wall. "Wo-Wolfram, I don't think--"

"Don't think what..." Wolfram positioned himself directly in front of Yuuri, feeling a little cruel, but at the same time completely mad with Giddy Feelings. The wimp was so fun to tease. And he was all his to tease! Something about waking up so snug... or the way Yuuri had still been there. Still choosing him over everyone else when the sun came up. "It's simple. You strip and take a towel. Say you were in the bath."

Yuuri's mouth hung open for a moment. "Oh."

Wolfram leaned closer. "Are you disappointed?"

A nervous laugh. "No-- I mean-- Not 'no'-- I mean-- Not that I--" Yuuri bit his lip and looked at the floor. Then he managed to mumble, "That might work."

"I'm sure it will." And then he turned and went to examine the book shelf in order to give the wimp his precious "privacy".

After more shuffling than Wolfram thought was strictly proper, given the kindness of his current personal restraint, Yuuri informed him that he could turn round again. He pouted. "You found a towel."

Even Yuuri's neck and shoulders were turning red, not the mention the tips of his ears. "Yeah." He shuffled and gripped the towel around his waist. His waist. Strong stomach. Tempting hip bones peeking above the towel. Nipples hard from the frigid air...

The wimp really was too appealing for his own good.

Wolfram allowed himself a moment to drink in the sight. Then he closed his eyes, and forced himself to remember that the wimp was also too kind for his own good. Confused. Young. Too eager to please those he cared about, and caring for everyone the same. If he touched him, he risked losing him. Scaring him away for good. "Well, you should go." He opened his eyes again, immediately lost in Yuuri's concerned features.

Yuuri smiled, oblivious to Wolfram's torment. "Fine. But I have an idea to help, too." He walked over to the pitcher of water and picked it up. "No good coming back from the bath dry," he chatted, with his back to Wolfram. Then he poured a bit on his head, letting go of the towel with one hand to evenly distribute the water in his hair. He then started to jump, alternating his feet. "Ah! Cold. cold. cold." Little rivers of water disappeared beneath the towel.

Dear gods.
"Out!" He shouted, surprising them both. "Hurry." Wolfram rushed to the door, opening it and sticking his head out to make sure no one was about. "Go now," he growled. "Before you lose your chance."

"Right." Yuuri grinned, like a child enjoying a game of hide and seek. "I'll see you later, alright? I'm sure Conrad will help--"

"Fine," Wolfram snapped, shoving him out the door. "Be careful."

Yuuri nodded and was gone.

Wolfram sighed, leaning against the door to close it, and stared at his empty little room. Then he growled and kicked the shelves. Oblivious Wimp! At this rate he was going to end up more twitchy and deprived than his brothers.

********
********

The Demon Nation of Gael, Landlocked Quarter, Capital Ring.
Same Day:

********

Tai kept his hand over the tiny candle as he made his way through the hanging forest of prophetic rope within the temple. Each rope was woven of many threads, some threads originating in parts of other ropes, some unique to their own. Most of the ropes were tied together with others, forming elaborate knots that covered the walls and ceiling, creating winding paths through the temple in their gaps. Some were already black, charred with completion or frayed with impossibility.

The future was in this room. Every prophecy they had ever woven.

After several minutes of walking, Tai arrived in the center of the chamber. The small clearing was lit by a single torch upon a pedestal and the flame fluttered with the wind of his approach. His Frith was sitting on the floor, skin slick with the sweat of visions and red hair fanning out where the ends met the ground. Her fingers flashed in their quick movements as she tied the little knots. After many nights of work, she was finally close to completing the ominous prophecy she had spoken.

He moved to stand by her side, looking over her work. There was a great deal of pressure from the elders for a further interpretation, as it involved the True King. But when he got closer to her, it was hard to ignore the burns on her arms. A reminder of his failure to save her from the fire.

Tai had guided several Diviners over his years as Master Taibhsear, and each one was unique, beautiful, and a tragedy to watch fade. Humans were so brief. Brief but brilliant.

Of course, not every human could be taken into the fold. Tai had felt her closeness to the Cycle the moment he'd first seen her as an infant. She was still pure, still beautiful. Even for a human, fourteen years wasn't enough to change that. He lowered a hand to wipe her brow and she leaned into his touch.

He smiled to himself and looked down at her prophecy, running the words in his mind as his eyes ran along every thread.
Our king, He gives it away
The king will take it
The king will order it done
The king must die-- To save our king

So many contradictions. So many puzzles and possibilities. All things that could be narrowed once connected to the existing prophecies. He looked at the small pile of already completed knots and rope next to her, all waiting to be connected and re-hung once she finished her present work. Tai wasn't surprised to see the Original Prophecy among them. The one that first spoke of their king's power. "Tuwa bær frō æscegeswáp... Tuwa úp ãbregdan frō wæter..." He murmured to himself in the old tongue. The words were so familiar... To think he could be lucky enough to see their meaning in his lifetime.

What Tai didn't expect to see among the pile of existing ropes, however, was a particularly elaborate knot that was one of the most actively connected he had ever encountered. Perhaps this confirmed-- Without thinking, Tai reached down to touch it, feeling the tingle of its power through the tips of his fingers. There was a popular theory among the villagers, that the new king in Shin Makoku was the one of their legend. Perhaps this young king Yuuri...

But what of the other king?

The one that must die?

********

********
Recipient,
This is becoming tedious. Luckily most of our obstacles are breathing, something quite easy to remedy.
Still nothing.
~Sender

Sender,
I am, as ever, in awe of your brilliance and patience.
It is disappointing I cannot be there to take care of your obstacles personally.
~Recipient

Anissina frowned. The makeshift cooking station that her lab had become at approximately three that morning had turned out to be less than effective. After several hours of attempted confectionery perfection she was no closer to producing anything up to her standards. Or anyone else's, for that matter. Something always seemed to go inexplicably awry. The dough would have lumps, or rise too high out of its pan. The taste wouldn't be right or the sugar would stick in clumps. After the first two attempts, she had started to keep a notebook, recording the exact proportions of ingredients she had included, as well as how many times she stirred and in which direction. But no matter how many times she did everything perfectly, something always went wrong.

She sighed and sat, the motion sending a small poof of flour into the air around her. Her eyes were fixed on the tiny glass window of her spontaneously constructed oven, almost daring the tiny cake inside to make a wrong move.

Anissina was a scientist, for gods' sakes! How could something as simple as a dessert be so troublesome?

She imagined things would be easier if she were using a proper kitchen, but Anissina couldn't stand the idea of overhearing any more of the staff's useless gossip. The castle's occupants were still abuzz over the Maou's engagement to the young sovereign Saralegui, and the Winter Formal was nearly two weeks past.

Since then, even the most mundane functions of daily life were smothered with an unbearable facade. Everything and everyone seemed to fall into step with an eerie acceptance of the engagement. As if it were perfectly common for foreign royalty to invite themselves to formal events and propose marriage without even a second thought. Especially when the foreign "prince" in question was of a nation suspected of numerous threats on the kingdom, the very least of which being his own now constant close proximity to their Maou. Of course the best thing to do was to play stupid political games just to prove who was the "smartest" in some stupid male pissing contest!

Anissina huffed and glared even harder at the unassuming pastry.

Men's games! Men's politics! It was all so stupid! Needlessly dangerous and full of pride. It seemed
like no one was even bothering to look at things from different angles to try and discover a new solution that might not put everyone in such needless threat. Might not cause perfectly decent people needless hurt.

Even though Anissina had always known the Boy Wolf's hopes were doomed, the blond had been behaving the most unexpectedly of them all. She knew the emotions he must be hiding were fierce, but he covered them with a thick skin and a dedication to his training that had him resembling Gwendal more and more each day. Anissina knew the depth of his devotion to his oldest brother, knew this was no more than a child's attempt to make his idol proud. But it was so unnecessary in her eyes. Exhausting to watch.

That was why she was making cake. Some spice cake and a good cry, just to accept the pain, pick yourself up and move on. She still couldn't eat the stuff herself, even the smell was making her chest ache at memories of a night long ago, spent alone on the kitchen floor. Three spice cakes eaten, washed down by tears and mucus. But after that she had picked herself up, really started living instead of those months where she just pretended everything was alright. Wolfram was pretending now. And the least she could do after he own part in his suffering was make him the best damn spice cake in the kingdom!

That was of course if she could actually give it to him. The boy had been avoiding her more than Gwendal lately, hardly looking at her even when they were in the same room. As if she'd meant for it to happen. As if she'd known her brilliant original research and ideas were near copies of ancient banned magical experimentation.

As much as she knew she hadn't meant for it to happen, the thought that she did almost kill him still made her blood run a little cold. The Sage's lecture too, was fresh in her mind and Anissina still bristled at the memory.

It was the day after the proposal. Anissina had been up late working on the prototype for her latest invention when a hard double knock at the door to her laboratory had jolted her from her thoughts. No sooner had she looked up to frown at the sound that dared interrupt her brilliance, than the door opened without so much as an invitation and the Great Sage walked in, looking disheveled and suspiciously damp. The Sage had always been one of very few expressions, most of them hidden in the glare of his lenses, and this was the first time Anissina had seen him wearing a face of such loosely contained dissatisfaction.

Anissina stood up a bit straighter and raised an eyebrow.

"Lady Anissina von Karbelnikoff," he began, voice dangerously smooth. "I am here under the authority of the high Priestess Ulrike to ask you a few simple questions. I assure you it is in your best interest to answer as honestly as you are able."

She put down the tool she had been holding and smiled. "Of course, Your Grace." At the time she could think of nothing she herself had done wrong and was looking forward to hearing any clues about what and who was in such serous trouble.

The Sage closed the door before moving into the room to lean against the adjacent wall. "Miss Anissina, what exactly were your intentions regarding your latest project?"

"I have a lot of recent projects, Your Grace. If you would be so kind as to be the teeniest bit more specific I might be able to help you." She crossed her arms.

The Sage lowered his head to a different angle and the light from her work lamp flashed a well-timed glare along his glasses.
Anissina barely managed not to roll her eyes. Did this boy always move strategically across from available light fixtures when he felt the need to be dramatic? Really, that trick was getting too old.

"The ring Sir Belefield gave His Majesty recently." The Sage clarified. "He tells me the two of you spent a good deal of time working on it together."

She grinned, reminded of that little jewel of personal brilliance. "What about it? Ingenious, wasn't it? I'm sure that, given our new allegiances with so many human nations, a variation of the technology will be useful. Can't you just imagine the benefits of a machine-- or anything really-- that doesn't need maryoku in order to function? You know-- something His Majesty said about his little Earth music box gave me the idea for it. Apparently on Earth there are things called 'Bat Trays' that store power--"

"That's it? That's what you were trying to..." The Sage had removed his glasses and was rubbing at his eyes with the thumb and pointer of his right hand. "Gods..." he mumbled before putting his glasses back on.

"What do you mean 'that's it'? My idea is genius!"

"Genius!" The sage snapped, clearly unimpressed. "Dangerous! Illegal! Banned over seven centuries ago!" As he spoke his voice rose and he walked toward her from the wall. "You nearly KILLED him! You and your own idiotic overuse these past few months... but you and your demon BATTERY--" The Sage stopped himself and took a breath, continuing with a calmer voice. "If Ulrike and I and the healing properties of the holy water in the shrine hadn't all been available, I would be here to arrest you for the murder of Sir Belefield."

For once Anissina had been speechless.

"As it is... you seem to be completely ignorant of your attempt on his life--"

"Of course," she breathed, mind still at a halt. "I would never want to--"

"I know."

"Is there anything I can do?"

The Sage shook his head. "No more than you already have... I assume I don't have to tell you to discontinue that particular track of brilliant research." The he turned and headed for the door. "Burn your notes."

Before he could leave she had to make sure-- "He's going to be alright? Tell me--"

"He'll live, for now. Sir Belefield wants to stay at Shibuya's side for the moment, to help him with Saralegui before going to Lesser Gael to reaffirm his bond with Ethne. If he even thinks to use his magic he will burn out. Perhaps you have been lucky enough not to see the fate of warriors chosen by fire who overspend their power? Let me assure you-- it is not the peaceful slip into sleep of healers. He might have gone quieter tonight... too drained by your tinkering even for that... But now that your ring is no longer actively draining his power--"

"Why doesn't he just go! I never thought he would be this great a fool--"

"Sir Belefield may be a fool in regard to his own health, but I do think Shibuya needs him. If he were to leave, Shibuya would be too distracted... He needs time to find himself in his new capacity, in this new situation. Sir Belefield's current danger is useful in that regard-- though I personally wish it wasn't so."
Anissina could feel her face get hot and she clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. "If he dies now-- After I almost-- This will be your fault! You and anyone else who encourages him in this fool's task!"

"You and I are the only ones in the castle who know of this, besides Sir Belefield himself. This is his decision. It is best to honor it. I'm merely accepting that his desires are not altogether dishonorable in regards to helping the greater good of the Kingdom. I don't wish him ill. In a few weeks I'll send him off to Lesser Gale myself if I have to."

"This is ridiculous! If everyone keeps tiptoeing around His Majesty he'll never learn anything! Maybe he'll realize the seriousness of the situation if the Boy Wolf isn't there for him walk over! And if you think His Majesty is incapable without him, than what if he stays and the worst happens?! How will your friend feel if he discovers what a needless sacrifice you let Wolfram make! I've half a mind to tell His Majesty myself--"

"I'm under full authority to take you to the shrine under charges of attempted murder. You'll be--"

"Don't you threaten me!" She seethed. "I won't tell him, but only because I believe that this is Wolfram's decision and that if he wanted to go now you would let him. He is a man capable of making his own stupid mistakes, as much as I may loath them."

"I hoped as much. Now-- It's been a long day-- Goodnight Miss Anissina. I hope you'll respect Sir Belefield's wishes in keeping his decision a secret. There are those who would not be as... respectful of his wants."

"I wouldn't dream if it." She glared, watching the door close behind him.

She had stayed that way for a long time, just looking at the door. There were too many thoughts running through her mind, most shrouded and distracted by guilt. The furrow of the Boy Wolf's eyebrows, and the sweat on his brow as he sat, hand pressed firmly against the transferal device. If what the Sage said was true... It must have been so painful. Why didn't he bother to say anything? Why did he insist on fueling those stupid gratuitous torches?!

Questions like those haunted her even now, and so many nights had passed. Anissina let her eyes leave the cake for a moment to study the cloth-covered device in the corner. She should burn that too. It's only usefulness now was as a painful reminder of her own mistake.

But she couldn't help but wonder if the old research hadn't been banned and condemned to obscurity all those centuries ago... If she had been given access to the restricted books tucked away at the shrine, would she have made the same mistake? She certainly wouldn't have been tempted to try anything like she had with Wolfram if she had known the unfortunate history of those who tinkered within such arts. Sure, Morgif seemed happy now in his life as a sword, and he certainly had been useful over the years, but it had been his own foolish quest for immortality that had led him to such an end, his own choices that sent him on such a path.

Though, history had shown that knowing the possible consequences of such research hadn't kept those mazoku after Morgif from tempting their own fate. Half of the magical artifacts in the treasury were the result of similar experimentation. More than a dozen rings of various powers and properties collecting dust on their shelves. Anissina was thankful for the first time in her career that one of her experiments had failed so miserably. There were a million different variables... So many ways she could have killed him.

Magic was something given by the gods, and only the gods. It wasn't to be moved by the will of mere demons.
A lesson she thought she'd learned a more than a century ago. At that time, even the allegiances within the Ten Demon Kingdoms had been unstable as a result of Cecilie's marriage to Lord Weller. Some of the more conservative nations were unhappy with their new "king's" dirty blood. Anissina had been sent to Shin Makoku in her late thirties as a ward in exchange for another young aristocrat from Spitzburg. She had been nervous in her new environment at first, but had quickly buried herself in her studies, spending long hours in the library and quickly excelling to the head of her class. Or rather, "on par" with another equally devout study.

Anissina smiled, remembering how stubborn and utterly... Gwendal her first friend had been even as a child. They had only started getting along a few weeks before Gwendal had received his formal call from Danu. How worried she had been when he went on his journey to the northern mountains in Christ. She, to the shame of her parents, had never shown any leanings to an element as a child, and though she dismissed such talents even then as tools for needless destruction, at the time she had wished for a call of her own so that she could join Gwendal in his extra tutelage.

In the end, she had never received a call. And even though Anissina could use her maryoku for healing and other "womanly" crafts, her exceptional brilliance hadn't lain in magic, and thusly she had put all her energy toward more productive goals.

On most days she didn't give her lack of spontaneous destructive ability a second thought, but there were times, like the present, where it would be practical to have a means to destroy certain remnants of one's mistakes. Anissina narrowed her eyes at the cloth-covered device and huffed. Perhaps she could invent something interesting to do the job for her instead? A giant wooden thing... with seven mouths... Eat it all up fast-kun... She grinned. But just tearing it up wouldn't be enough... perhaps she could soak it in oil first and then--

Knock Knock Knock

The sound at the door snapped her attention away. Really! If people kept coming in at all hours she was going to have to move her lab to an even more secluded part of the castle!

"Come in," she snapped, standing up to greet whoever it was.

The door opened and--

"Gisela!" Anissina smiled, a tension she had almost forgotten as constant slipping out of her shoulders. "When did you get back? What have you--"

The other woman hushed her. "There will be plenty time for questions in two hours. Sir Voltaire is arranging for the meeting in his office. I just stopped by to inform you myself since I'm sure your machines will be useful for whatever analysis the Sage wants." Gisela looked exhausted, dirty, and noticeably thinner than when she had left, but her voice was still strong, her eyes somewhat hopeful.

"Of course, I'm sorry for barraging you with questions. Take some time to rest before the meeting if you can."

Gisela's lips turned up in a tired smile. "If I can-- Miss Anissina... is something burning?"

The cake!

"Ohh damn it all!" she fumed before smacking the entire oven off the counter. It clattered loudly to the ground, burned spice cake falling out the door and bouncing to the floor in all its black and crispy glory.
"I never knew you cooked," Gisela commented, edging toward the door.

"Apparently I don't cook!" she growled. "Stupid cake! Stupid oven! Stupid MEN!" Anissina sat down at her work bench, defeated.

Gisela sighed. "Not the best days are they?"

"No," Anissina muttered. "Not for anyone."

The sun was just beginning to rise, leaving an orange glow on the layer of ice that now covered most of the grounds. The snow would warm during the day but freeze again at night, creating large sprawling blobs of ice that crept back over places that had already been cleared.

Gwendal glared at the ice outside for a moment before returning his attention to the new pile of reports on his desk. He had more than enough to worry about as it was without a dozen slip-related injuries putting the work staff in short supply.

But this morning Gwendal was feeling at least marginally better than usual. Gisela's return brought the prospect of other options besides their current charade, and Gwendal was looking very forward to getting rid of that suspicious Prince and his guard, as well as finding a cure for the people not just in Caloria, but most of the southern portion of the continent. Rumors of fatalities as far north as Habaloug were creeping their way into the city and there was a definite unease brewing on the streets. And still, they had yet to offer anything to their people regarding plans to prevent the spread of the disease, only announcing that they were sending support to those countries and people in need. He would have to write a statement for His Majesty to sign on the subject and distribute to the town criers within the week.

Winter was keeping the stream of outsiders seeking refuge from the mystery illness relatively low, but Gwendal knew the city would be overrun come spring. Increased population would only make the spread more swift and catastrophic if it did reach their streets... And worse, if those running were already infected...

Gisela had better have good news.

It was a quarter past seven and the crisp air stuck to his cheeks as Conrad made his way across the gardens. He could have gone around, through the East Wing and out of the cold, but there were only a few weeks left in winter and there was no reason to waste a morning so refreshingly brisk.

A cold breeze carried the clangs and shouts from the training grounds and Conrad smiled a little to hear Wolfram's voice above them all, calling out orders to his men. Conrad was proud to see his little brother putting so much emphasis on his swordsmanship of late. Wolfram always relied too heavily on his magic, since it was an area in which he so naturally excelled. The practical sword, on the other hand, had been particularly difficult for the boy to master. Drills were fine, and he was an excellent fencer, but anything that challenged him-- any time he lost or made a mistake-- just clouded his mind with useless rage. And in a real battle, where there were no rules and everyone was fighting for survival over pride, that kind of rage, that kind of surrender to one's emotions, would get you killed.
Wolfram had yet to discover the type of rage that only brought focus, the type that struck a killing blow over an injury to save time when there were only seconds until the next fatal strike was needed. Wolfram was still too focused on the person, on his own pride, to see his enemy clearly. To kill without a thought.

As a brother, Conrad hoped Wolfram would never need such a terrible skill. For now just having the extra practice, the extra discipline, was good for him. Physical labor was probably the most productive outlet for his brother's recent frustration over the situation with Saralegui.

These days Conrad missed having the luxury of unlimited time for such physical venting. In his position as chaperon he was left with a clear view of that Royal Snake's attempts to get close to his king with no way to deal with his frustration but clench his jaw and smile.

But Yuuri was-- as ever-- innocent to the darkness in the hearts of others, and continued to speak only the best of Sara.

Sometimes Conrad wished the two outsiders would play their hand-- attempt whatever ominous task they had in mind so he could split them and be done with it, end their constant threat to his king once and for all. But the darker part of his own heart was glad of anything that assigned him as a constant presence to Yuuri, even though he had no right to be by his side.

Time had passed him quickly in thought and Conrad soon found himself in front of His Majesty's room. He nodded at the guard-- Wolfram's Lucien again-- and the shorter man jumped slightly before saluting, just a moment late to look at his face. Conrad felt his shoulders stiffen before knocking on the door.

"Your Majesty, it's time to--"

"It's Yuuri, Conrad," came Yuuri's voice through the door before it opened. His Majesty was still wearing his pajamas and his eyes were heavy with sleep.

"Another early bath this morning?"

Yuuri turned red. "It's not right to suddenly never see--"

"Yes, but you have to remember your position and your duties. If this is going to threaten your health--"

"What would threaten my health more than ignoring Wolfram? Conrad, I'm awake I swear! Don't tell Gwendal!" Yuuri pleaded, eyes wide and hands tugging at Conrad's sleeve.

He felt himself give in almost immediately and smiled. Pleasing Yuuri just felt too good, and besides he couldn't see much harm in Wolfram helping Yuuri with a few of Gunter's homework assignments at night. Yuuri seemed to be enjoying his studies more and it was probably a good review for Wolfram. Gunter had been very disappointed to hear of anything that took His Majesty's time away from him, but had eventually given in. Yuuri was very good at persuading people and on top of his usual charms had mentioned how little time he had to himself and while he knew the importance of learning their history, especially now, he just needed more of his own time to think about what to do with Saraleugi.

Conrad had noticed how much care Yuuri had put in to not exactly lying to his teacher. Apparently His Majesty was using "his own time" to do his studies and strategize as well as placate a potentially hazardous situation of a different sort. For the most part, it seemed to be working. Wolfram's men were a bit more sore than usual, but Conrad hadn't seen any new scorch marks
lately.
It was true that Wolfram had been a bit... quieter of late-- growing up--but Conrad was sure there would be trouble if Yuuri wasn't giving him a little extra attention.

"I knew I could count on you!" Yuuri grinned before letting go of Conrad's sleeve, undoing the buttons of his own pajamas as he headed back into his room. "Just give me a second to change and we'll be off."

"Of course," Conrad smiled.

Next to him Lucien shifted-- just enough motion to remind Conrad of his presence.

Conrad closed the door, giving His Majesty privacy.

* * *

Five minutes later found the young king dressed and ready for the day and Conrad couldn't help but smile as Yuuri talked animatedly by his side on their way to breakfast. Mother and Gwendal would be meeting them in the casual dining room at eight, while the Princess would likely be in five minutes past. The girl insisted on having her breakfast with Yuuri as His Majesty was forced to spend most of his days with Saralegui, who Greta still quite openly blamed for her family's new "broken" state.

While Greta had been the cause of many a politically uncomfortable conversation in public, Conrad was glad that there was at least someone in the castle with the freedom to speak their mind.

They were nearly to the dining room when Yuuri's story about Greta and the stable boy became somewhat... stilted. Yuuri played more with his hands as he talked, and avoided looking up at his face.

"And we shouldn't be worried, right? She's still too young-- I mean, when I was her age I still ran away from girls..."

Conrad slowed his pace . He had known Yuuri too long not to know when something was troubling him. "As opposed to now? Or have you gotten used to being chased by girls these days?"

Yuuri blushed. "Don't be silly-- Wolfram wouldn't allow anything like it..." He shoved his hands into his pockets and avoided Conrad's gaze.

After too much of a moment spent enjoying his king's blush, Conrad continued. "I'm only teasing, Your Majesty. I've seen them playing together too, but I don't think you have anything to worry about just yet."

"Stop with the Your Majesty thing already! I'm--" Yuuri stopped himself and shook his head. A small silence stretched between them as his king's eyes glazed in thought.

Conrad counted his paces and wondered what could be bothering Yuuri so early.

"Conrad..." Yuuri started before shaking his head.

He waited, knowing that Yuuri would speak when he was ready.

"...do you think we can be a little late for breakfast? There's something I wanted to talk to you about-- before we meet Sara for today..."
Conrad had to stifle his smile at the knowledge that Yuuri still chose him for conversations like this. "Of course. Anything I can do?"

Yuuri shook his head. "Not really... or actually, I just need to talk about it." The young king glanced around, before satisfying himself that there was no one near by, and lowered his voice. "It's a little awkward... um..." He looked at the ground and scrunched his face in concentration.

"Don't worry, you can talk to me about anything," he said seriously, allowing himself to rest a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.

Yuuri looked up at him with grateful eyes, "I know, Conrad... I just don't want you to think less of me..." His king blushed harder and Conrad had to fight the distraction of heat radiating through his palm.

"There's nothing that could make me think less of you, Yuuri. You know that."

"Thanks." Yuuri took a breath. "Conrad, have you ever thought that something was wrong but wanted to do it anyway?"

He did his best to keep the sickening twist of guilt in his gut from showing in his face as he removed his hand from Yuuri's shoulder.

Yuuri continued, still distracted by the effort of pushing his own words out. "Well... It's not like I had a choice about it... not really... I mean everyone wants me to..."

Conrad blinked. Aha! Yuuri must still be bothered about having to lie to Saralegui to gain his trust... They'd had a similar conversation about it a week ago and apparently any reassurance he had managed to give had already worn off. It was true that they needed information from the young sovereign, but Conrad could never support anything that wasn't the best for Yuuri. His king's pure and trusting nature was what had led their kingdom to such a time of peace and wasn't something that should so easily be set aside for a new strategy. "You shouldn't do this just to please others, you should remain true to yourself--"

"But it really would make things easier... make everyone happy." Yuuri looked completely torn, worrying his lip between sentences as a faint color remained on his cheeks.

Yuuri really was so perfectly pure. Flawless. Always putting others first. "Everyone here only wants you to be happy. You are our king--"

"That's not the point," Yuuri interrupted, fistng the hair on both sides of his head as he started to pace. "I feel weird about that enough as it is... It's just... I was so against it. Am so against it. I should be against it, right?" Then the pacing stopped, and those eyes looked up at him again, impossibly wide and begging for an answer.

Conrad's heart ached to see him like this over politics, over anything. "You shouldn't feel guilty about your own feelings. Your intentions are honorable."

"I suppose," Yuuri pouted, hardly seeming convinced. "I guess what's bothering me the most is that I should feel worse about it then I actually do." He let go of his hair, hands still trembling near his head. "What kind of person does this make me?"

What kind of person...

"You're still young, still learning who you are, what kind of king you will become." Conrad rushed to speak, needing to say anything to make Yuuri feel better. Even for his selfless king, this degree
of worry was uncommon and Conrad worried how long it had been building. He would have to talk to Gwendal about the amount of pressure they had been putting on him of late. "Sometimes growing up can mean changing how you think about things you decided when you were a child." Even though he knew he shouldn't, Conrad put an arm around his king's shoulder, desperate to offer him any sort of comfort.

"That makes sense." Yuuri nodded, still shaking a little and leaning into his arm. "It's just... weird to try to get used to... So much of me feels so wrong about the whole thing." He paused again, lost in thought as his shaking slowed and he seemed to regain control of himself. "But I know it's what I should do... and maybe I'm using that as an excuse to make myself feel better about maybe actually wanting it..."

It was odd to hear Yuuri express feelings that it was right to lie, even to someone as sinister as Saralegui, but Conrad imagined the prospect of saving so many lives was a factor. "Yuuri, I'm sorry for any sacrifice you've had to make for this world, but I'm sure that helping the sick is a fine thing for anyone to want. I'm sorry that we haven't been able to provide you with a better option yet--"

"What?" Yuuri interrupted, seeming confused. "Oh... um... Yes... Right. I wish there was something more... substantial I could do to help. With things like this... It makes it all seem far away... Oh, I really am terrible! Conrad, how long until Gisela comes back? Gwendal said soon, but--"

"She actually arrived this morning--"

"But-- Wha-- Why didn't you tell me that sooner!?" Yuuri shouted, removing Conrad's arm so that he could turn to look at him for emphasis. "Did she find anything--"

"Calm down! I don't know much of anything yet. Gwendal was going to tell you about the details during breakfast--"

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!" Yuuri interrupted before dashing down the corridor toward the dining room.

Conrad shook his head before following, questions about what Yuuri had really been talking to him about tickling the back of his mind as he went.

* * *

Four hours later, as he and Yuuri were showing Sara and his Reyes around one of the lower portrait halls, Conrad was still no closer to figuring out what Yuuri had been trying to talk to him about this morning. As soon as they had arrived at the table, His Majesty had been completely involved in the news from Gwendal. Apparently, while Gisela was optimistic, they still didn't have anything strong enough to end their current "game" and were therefore stuck with... present company for the time being.

"It's impressive that all of these are in such good shape... Are they really centuries old?" Prince Saralegui smirked, tossing some of his silver hair out of his face as he looked up at one of the portraits.

Yuuri smiled. "Yes, though they are re-furbished every few decades... right, Conrad?"

Conrad gritted his teeth under his smile and nodded. At least these little tours proved that His Majesty had been paying attention to his studies. Gunter would be so proud.
"The craftsmanship is simply divine," Saralegui purred, leaning into Yuuri as he spoke. "All those... tiny... little... strokes... so... moving don't you think?"

"Really?" Yuuri pondered, oblivious to the painful attempt at innuendo. "I've never been much of an art person... Wolfram is, though! He spends a lot of time painting-- but the paint smells terrible. Did you know it's made from Bearbee--"

"That's so fascinating, Yuuri," the Prince managed, obviously bothered that his attempt had, yet again, gotten him nowhere.

Yuuri made a face. "Well, sort of. I think it's a little gross, actually. But-- Oh! You should see the two a little farther down. They're the oldest by far! And one of them looks a lot like Wolfram--"

"Fascinating."

Conrad tried not to laugh. He glanced at the guard's face for a reaction-- a habit he had started early on-- and was disappointed but not surprised to see none. In the entire time Reyes had been at the castle, Conrad had heard him say a total of two sentences, and that was only by accumulation.

A sudden sound broke the lull in conversation. "Hooooooooooo."

In seconds, Reyes had pulled his sovereign against the wall and stood in protective stance before him. Dark eyes searching the air for a potential threat.

"What is it? Spirits?" Saralegui murmured from behind Reyes, both hands tight in the back of his guard's shirt.

Reyes' face was grim. "Spirits."

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaa," came the noise again, closer this time.

Two sharp and shining threads slid from each of the guard's wrists and he braced them against his fingers. "šÔ ę×ałřř Ďђňź," he hissed, eying the two of them suspiciously.

Conrad pulled Yuuri behind him, hand on his sword in an instant. The situation was obvious, but could become the perfect "misunderstanding" to learn something.

"ę×ałřř Ĥğğ," Saralegui snapped back, eyes narrow.

Yuuri snickered. "Conrad, you know... this is..." He directed his attention at the foreign prince, putting up both his palms in a placating gesture. "Sara, it's okay."

"MouHaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa." Saralegui said nothing, his eyes darting between Conrad and Yuuri.

Yuuri tried to take a step forward, but Conrad stopped him, wanting to keep himself between his king and the twitchy looking Reyes. "Sara, it's my sword. Don't be afraid."

"Your sword is talking to me?" He moved a bit from behind his guard, still looking suspicious but apparently more curious for the moment.

Yuuri smiled. "Yes, he's quite friendly. I'm sure he'll like you."

"Well," Sara started, moving from behind his guard the smallest bit and flipping some of his hair off a shoulder. "I've been trying to get your sword to like me for a while now. I'm sure my sword
will just love you too."

"Um," said Yuuri, clearly confused. "Your sword talks too?"

"MoooorrrrrHooooo," Morgif announced, rounding the corner in the arms of a tired looking Dorcascus. "Hoooro! Hoooooorooooo!" The sword squirmed in joy upon seeing its owner.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty." Dorcascus whimpered, beads of sweat running down his bald head. "We were cleaning out his room and--"

"Mouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu." 

"--and he just wouldn't stop... Sangria said he probably just misses you so we thought--"

"MaaaaHaaaaHaaa." The sword continued to fidget in Yuuri's direction.

"It's okay Dorcascus!" Yuuri sighed, giving both him and the sword a tired look. "It's my fault for not visiting him in so long." He moved forward to take the sword from the nervous man.

"Maaoouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu," Morgif purred, happy to be returned.

Saralegui and his guard hadn't blinked since Morgif made his entrance, and the Sovereign's mouth hung open a bit. "Your sword... talks."

"Yeah." Yuuri answered, still fussing with connecting Morgif to his belt. "Didn't I tell you?" Then he looked up at Reyes. "He's not dangerous now, don't worry. I'm sorry if you were worried." His Majesty gave one of his most placating smiles.

The guard growled and looked at Saralegui who nodded before Reyes put away his string-like weapons.

"Well, that was... informative," Saralegui huffed and straightened his shirt before sliding back on his smile. "Now, why don't you let me show you my sword."

* * *

Saralegui's sword was an ornate silver rapier whose scabbard skimmed just above the ground when it was hung on his hip. Conrad didn't like the idea of the Sovereign being armed in Yuuri's presence, but His Majesty and Sara seemed to be "bonding" over their respective weaponry.

"It's so shiny!" Yuuri smiled. "It really looks elegant and regal, what a king should have."

"Mouuuuuuuuuu!" Morgif whined in protest.

"Don't worry, Morgif... You're... pretty, too."

The sword blushed. "Hwooo. Humm."

The silver rapier had been in one of Saralegui's many trunks, most of which had yet to be completely unpacked into his lavish suite. After the blade had been retrieved, conversation had started on the aesthetics of the swords themselves before moving on to the practice of swordplay and finally onto a discussion of various techniques-- Which had led to Saralegui's insistence that he be given a tour of the training grounds.

Coincidently, the grounds were still primarily occupied by Wolfram and a few of his men, a few tired soldiers too proud to admit defeat to his brother's new training schedule. When their little
group rounded the corner, Wolfram's back was to them, and he was in mid-duel with Lucien. The other soldier was distracted momentarily by their entrance, and it was more than enough of a mistake for Wolfram to knock him to the ground.

"See. Relying too heavily on magic. All of you need more practice." Then he turned, ready to acknowledge the interruption at last.

Conrad had to smile and take a moment while the pride washed over him. Wolfram seemed to be finally addressing his own weaknesses, something that would benefit his men as well, as they were all subject to his own tendencies on the battlefield-- all having learned by his example.

"Wolfram," Yuuri started, and put his hands in his pockets. "Hello... Um. We were just..." Then he realized himself, blushing before pushing out a more appropriate greeting. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty. To what do I own the honor of the visit?" Wolfram slid his sword back into the scabbard at his waist, the hilt connecting with the metal rim of the casing with a sharp *clang*.

Conrad could see the way His Majesty went completely stiff the moment Wolfram addressed him by title. This had been going on since the new engagement, and was seen as necessary when they were in the public eye. Still, Conrad hated seeing Yuuri cringe.

"Ohh that's my fault, Sir Belefield," Saralegui cooed, attaching himself to Yuuri's arm and tilting his head towards His Majesty's shoulder. "We were talking about swordplay and I mentioned how I haven't even gotten to see Shin Makoku's finest in action. *Yuuri* was kind enough to offer me a tour." The foreign king tilted his face in Yuuri's direction, but kept his eyes locked with Wolfram's. "He's so *generous.*"

Lucien and the two other men on the field took a simultaneous step away from their Lieutenant.

Yuuri laughed nervously. "Well, it's a good excuse for a visit in any case," he managed.

"Indeed." Wolfram glared, still focused on Saralegui, before turning abruptly on his heel. "You'll have to forgive me for not being more social, *Your Majesty*. There's still a lot of work to be done here. I'm sure there are better places for a tour." He drew his sword again and Lucien jumped to face him.

Yuuri worried his lip before speaking. "Oh, well don't let us interrupt-- Why don't we go--"

"Ohh *Yuuri*, but it's so nice here and I haven't gotten to be around a training ground in such a long time." Saralegui pouted.

Yuuri shifted his weight onto his other foot. "Um."

Saralegui continued. "It reminds me of my youth-- training like this--though not this *primitive* sparring--"

"I take it by your weapon you are practiced in more *formal* dueling?" Wolfram had turned again, voice hard and a dangerous smirk just showing at the corner of his lips. The sword in his hand caught the light, flashing for a moment as white as the snow still covering parts of the grounds and the castle roof.

The foreign king tilted his head and smiled. "Yes, impossible these days to be well bred and go without it, isn't it?"
"Well, as our most treasured new addition to the royal family I think it's terrible you've had to go so long without enjoying one of your favorite pastimes. I would be honored to help you--"

"Wolfram," Conrad interrupted. "I don't think--"

"Ohhh Sir Weller you worry to much!" Saralegui interrupted. "It is so kind of you to offer, Sir Belefield!" Then he turned to Yuuri. "You don't mind, do you, Yuuri?"

"Wolfram has had eighty three years to practice... I'm not sure it's the... best idea..." Yuuri trailed off, giving Conrad a pleading look.

Saralegui smiled and wedged himself closer to Yuuri. "Ohh you're too sweet, worrying about me!"

"His Majesty is right to offer concern. This kind of duel requires proper blades--"

"Don't worry, Weller." Wolfram moved over to a nearby pillar and leaned his sword against it, picking up a similar blade nearby. "This is the same one I use to train my daughter." As he spoke he rolled up one of his sleeves. "It's completely dull, won't do much damage." He pulled both sides of the blade against his forearm for show. The skin bent beneath the pressure but no blood was drawn. "Also, don't let His Majesty exaggerate, I wasn't dueling at the age of two."

"This will be fun," Saralegui purred, detaching himself from Yuuri and heading for the center of the grounds, all the while focused on his soon-to-be opponent.

Wolfram was equally focused on the foreign prince. And when he spoke, it was through the teeth of a nearly mad grin. "You'll call the duel, won't you Lucien? Good practice."

And Conrad realized in a terrible instant that this duel was going to happen whether it was supervised or not.

"Corporal," he snapped, before the younger man could answer. "I'm taking the job, but first, Your Majesty Saralegui, your sword--"

Even though his back was to him, Conrad could hear the smirk in the boy's voice. "Don't worry, Sir Weller. I haven't used this one in ages. It's not been well kept, I'd be surprised if it could cut butter, let alone skin--"

"Feeling confident." Wolfram smiled, eyes bright and dangerous. "Don't be worried, I'm sure the sharpness of your blade won't be tested."

"Wait..." Yuuri started, trailing off in shock as Saralegui drew his sword.

"Don't worry, Yuuri, I won't let the Wolf bite me."

Already the two of them were standing a few feet apart, swords drawn and air between them thick with loathing. Steam rose from the heat of their breath and skin and it seemed it really was too late to stop this. Hate like this was an inevitable upsurge and at least now it could be supervised. Later... he couldn't be sure either would be so lucky.

"Don't worry," Conrad smiled, patting Yuuri's shoulder in tense comfort before moving to stand between the impending clash. He kept his hand on his sword, ready to intervene in a second if either one made too promising a strike. "Now. This will be a classic match. Wolfram, your sword--"

"I know," he snapped, moving his sword to his right hand and turning more of that side toward his
opponent. There didn't seem to be any stress on his wrist in a position his sword wasn't meant for. Conrad realized that in addition to being dull, his sword must also be lighter, which was good. Saralegui's rapier would be much lighter than Wolfram's sword, a hand-and-a-half that he'd had since his 50's (another decade and he'd be tall enough for a full longsword like the one Conrad wore). Rapiers were meant for thrusting, small movements, jabs. A sword like Wolfram's was versatile enough to be swung like a baseball bat or thrusted, but would take an extra second to move because even one-handed motions had to be sent from the wrist. If Saralegui was well trained he could angle the rapier with just his fingers before thrusting-- faster strikes.

Conrad had never enjoyed classic duels-- they always seemed so impractical. But whether or not he enjoyed them, Wolfram had become a practiced fencer in his younger years, having been forced to spend much of his time in the environment of the court.

Even with his disadvantage, however, Wolfram would have been fencing before this human king was born.

Conrad felt a bit of worry go out of his gut. If Saralegui was the one hurt-- politics-- war-- He smiled. Well, even with extreme consequences aside, it would be fun to watch Sara bleed.

He could see Yuuri shifting nervously from the side of his vision and was aware of Reyes, standing across from him and looking confident enough to make him a little concerned.

Wolfram shook his bangs from his eyes, making the sovereign tense. He licked his lips and grinned. "Well?"

"This will be a match between gentlemen. Only one point to win. Nothing outside the standard range-- collar to toe--" Already, Wolfram and Sara dropped their weight low in preparation, front legs at a right angle and back legs ready to spring. "And I'm sure I don't need to remind you not to kill each other."

A one-point touch to win a duel was uncommon, normally they took the best two of three, but Conrad wasn't going to give them any more chances to do the other harm. Neither were wearing the proper gear-- More worrisome for his brother as even dull (and that was only if Saralegui was being honest about his sword) the force of something so thin could puncture. Part of Conrad wished he could challenge the foreign sovereign's assertions about his blade... but to do so would be to call him a liar. Dangerous grounds. He needed to be the one to protect Yuuri. To stand by his side and keep him safe from this snake of a prince. From everything. He would do nothing to risk being replaced.

Conrad raised his arm and even the cold air around them seemed to stop. And wait. His hand seemed to fall in slow motion, Saralegui springing forward the instant it began a downward sweep. Wolfram caught the thrust in a twist of his cross-guard, rapier sliding loudly against the metal and over his left shoulder before the two of them jumped apart, already poised for the next strike. Saralegui made a sound of disappointment. To his side, Yuuri had taken a step forward. Reyes hadn't moved.

Wolfram feigned a move forward, smirking when Saralegui tilted his sword to defend himself. Then he waited, watching Saralegui get more frustrated by his lack of attack, lack of the expected. It was a trick Conrad had employed on Wolfram many times when he was still learning, often to similar effect. After a few seconds of still, Saralegui lunged again, this time aiming low and to Wolfram's left-- His brother dodged, moving his blade into deflect when Saralegui tried to hit him on his remise.
Twice more--The attacks textbook in their predictability--Twice more--Until the sovereign's face was red and his strikes sloppy.

He knew he was being toyed with.

Finally, Saralegui was too eager-- overextending his footwork on the lunge-- blade deflected-- too slow on the retreat-- stumbled to regain form while Wolfram smiled--and struck. For a moment Conrad was surprised. Wolfram's attack was predictable, straight for his opponents right shoulder-- Saralegui caught him on the bell-guard-- smiled.

Wolfram's blade was deflected over Saralegui's right shoulder-- "Finally." The prince smirked-- tried to riposte.

"Finally," Wolfram echoed-- dodged-- and in an immediate reprise landed a point on his opponent's shoulder.

Conrad raised his hand and opened his mouth to speak but before the word "point" made it to his lips, Saralegui sprung back from his opponent, swinging his sword down in his motion backwards at Wolfram's neck-- Conrad's hand had left his sword-- raised to call the match-- lowered-- he touched the hilt-- Wolfram ducked and dodged to his right-- a few strands of blond spun away-- Saralegui's blade caught the light-- Conrad's sword was drawn-- His eyes on Saralegui who's attention shifted to Conrad-- With a growl Wolfram sprung at him-- Shoulder connecting with the sovereign's gut-- Both of them down-- Threads flashing from the other side-- whistling in air-- Yuuri cried out in warning-- Wolfram had Saralegui pinned beneath him-- their swords forgotten on the ground-- The threads wrapped around Wolfram's neck-- skin bending-- Conrad struck-- string snapped and fluttered to the ground-- locked eyes with Reyes. There was a pause.

"STOP!" Yuuri shouted, now only a few feet away from them. "All of you! Stop!"

Conrad's eyes didn't leave the other guard. "Wolfram. Let His Highness up."

A pause.

"Of course." Wolfram let go of Saralegui's wrists. "My most sincere apologies." Then he stood and moved slowly in the direction of the discarded rapier. "I'll return your sword."

Saralegui sat up, but refused to look at him, hair covering most of his face.

Wolfram picked up the sword at the hilt and walked over to Saralegui-- all the while keeping most of his attention on Reyes. When he was close enough, Wolfram took a handkerchief out his pocket and used it to protect his hand as he grabbed the blade, holding the sword down to the sulking sovereign handle-first. "Your Highness."

The sword stayed in the air before him and, slowly, Saralegui raised his hand to take it. As Wolfram's grip loosened on the blade, part of the handkerchief fluttered to the ground, severed in rigid lines according to the creases where it was held. Saralegui raised his head, all traces of anger or upset gone, and spoke in his usual pleasant tone. "Thank you, Sir Belefield." Then he stood, the normal rules of their little social game clicking once again into place. "Yuuri," he purred, "don't look like that-- it's all good fun."

While Yuuri and Saralegui exchanged an awkward dialog, Conrad hesitantly took his eyes from Reyes. Wolfram was standing with his arms crossed, lost in glaring at the exchange for a moment. A tiny chunk was missing from the left side of his bangs and a thin pink line on his cheek grew darker. His brother caught him looking and humphed, turning back to his men to continue their
drills.

Conrad slid his sword home with a worrisome click. Politics.

********

********

Wolfram reached up to scratch his cheek before turning the page. Lucien had done a quick job of healing his little scratch, but the after-effects, as usual, had a tendency to itch for several hours. Stupid Prince Pervert--Oh? My sword? Not well kept-- Wolfram glared at his book. He'd love to get his hands on that lying snake with his own "not well kept" blade.

A few feet away, the chair to his little desk creaked and Wolfram's anger faded, replaced by the warm glow of Giddy Feelings. At least he didn't have to worry too seriously about Yuuri falling for that girl of a prince. After all, the wimp was here. In his room.

Doing homework.

It had started as a good excuse to spend time together at night, or at least Wolfram had thought it was an excuse, but then Yuuri had felt bad about lying and Gunter was actually assigning a decent workload, and their stolen time had turned into real study sessions. But, as Wolfram kept reminding himself, time was time. And besides, the wimp desperately needed help if he was going to become a proper king.

Wolfram took pride in the fact that Yuuri seemed to be improving much faster with him as a teacher and couldn't help but put at least some of Yuuri's recent increase in dedication under his new system of rewards.

It had all started a week ago.

After Yuuri's first night of sneaking into his room, they had started to make it a habit, sometimes switching rooms. Generally though, it was easier for Yuuri to sneak out of the Royal Suite than it was for Wolfram to sneak in, a fact Wolfram found reassuring.

The first time it happened, Yuuri had been trying to remember the names of all High Lord Nika von Karbelnikoff's children in their birth order. Out of fairness, the wimp had decided to memorize the known illegitimate ones as well, adding another thirty nine names to the list. On his eighth try he had finally gotten it right, jumping up from the desk and shouting in triumph.

Wolfram had sprung from his seat on the end of the bed to slap a hand over Yuuri's mouth and remind him that one should be more quiet when hiding in one's ex-fiance's room at gods-knew what time in the morning, but had only gotten to the part where he covered Yuuri's mouth with his hand. He could feel Yuuri's breath on his fingers, lips pressed against the curve of his palm. He had forgotten about the yelling. Forgotten about how, even though the wimp seemed so eager to be close to him that he would sneak out of his lessons and lie close at night, Wolfram had resolved to wait until he was sure. Until Yuuri made the first move and Wolfram didn't have to worry about being pushed away again.

But Yuuri's breath was so hot, and his eyes were so wide when Wolfram moved his hand away, that Wolfram had forgotten for a moment that fresh pain of rejection. It hadn't helped his resolve in the slightest the way Yuuri's eyes seemed to flick down, the way his cheeks slowly turned red and he licked his lips. So Wolfram had leaned closer, and Yuuri hadn't moved away. And then he had moved even closer, until his hands were shaking at his sides and something outside his control pulled his forehead closer to Yuuri's. Tugged. The wimp had closed his eyes and even this close
Wolfram could see his lashes twitching. And then their noses had bumped.

Yuuri made a sound, something small and sharp. His breath was quick-- hot. Wolfram swallowed.

It had been so hard not to pull him closer, touch him with this terrible force inside that Wolfram had been holding back for so long. But in the end it had only been a kiss. Just one moment where their lips pressed together, warm and dry and not nearly enough, before Wolfram had pulled back.

He hadn't known what to say.

Yuuri's face had still been red, and when he opened his eyes for a moment he had seemed surprised-- confused. And then he coughed and sat back down, returning to work as if nothing had even happened.

Wolfram had been unable to move for a few moments, too busy trying to will the fury from his veins. Now more than ever he had to fight his temper, because if he didn't keep himself in absolute control he might just drop dead! And wouldn't that just be the cruelest trick of fate?

But in some strange way, knowing something like that could happen made every moment almost surreal, like nothing really mattered anymore because everything was better than nothing. Wolfram was more confident than he ever had been about Yuuri's attachment to him. Sure, he tried to avoid Saralegui on most days as a safety precaution, but that was more for the sake of convincing himself that he wasn't being completely reckless in his decision to wait. That it wasn't just because Yuuri was finally letting him close and he was more terrified to leave than stay.

If Wolfram was here... Yuuri would focus on him. And if he wasn't, Wolfram couldn't convince himself Yuuri wouldn't wander, out of his grasp and towards someone old and familiar-- or worse, this new and mysterious Prince.

But now Yuuri was here. And even after that simple kiss he had been there, blushing and pretending to read while Wolfram had stood, fighting his feelings. So Wolfram had gone back to his own seat, and the lessons had continued as if nothing had ever happened.

The next night had been the same. Yuuri was trying to read a particularly difficult passage in the history book Gunter had assigned, and Wolfram had been leaning over his shoulder to help. The moment the wimp got the last line out he had turned in his seat, smiling up at him with a grin far too wide to befit royalty. But instead of turning back to his work his smile only lessened into something more tender and Yuuri's cheeks grew red. Did he really want to be kissed?

So Wolfram had let it happen again-- short and not nearly enough-- before everything had gone back to "normal".

It was starting to drive him mad!

Studying was supposed to be calm. Relaxing. Now it was all he could do to pretend to read as he tried to watch Yuuri out of the corner of his eyes. All the while attempting to ignore the tightness in his pants every time he even thought about the kiss that might happen. And the wimp was just sitting there! As if there wasn't a potential kiss looming around them!

Wolfram shifted in his seat and stole a peek at Yuuri. The wimp was still looking at the same text, lips moving slightly as he silently pronounced each word. His brows were deeply furrowed and he had one hand clenched in his hair, eyes narrowed in concentration. Wolfram did his best to keep the eager grin off his face as he waited for Yuuri to figure out whatever had gotten him stuck.

Five minutes passed.
Wolfram's toes were clenching anxiously inside his boots and his fingers were sweaty against the page. What was taking so long!? He was so high strung that when Yuuri growled and slammed his head against the desk he jumped a bit in his seat.

"Wolfram..." Yuuri whined, "I can't do it."

He forced himself to take a breath before standing. "Can't do what, Wimp?"

"It's like only knowing hiragana and then having a whole sentence of kanji!" Yuuri mumbled, rolling his forehead against the desk.

"What?" Wolfram walked over to stand behind him, peering over his shoulder at the book in question. "Oh. That's just because it's prophecy, they leave it in the old language so nuance isn't lost in translation."

Yuuri sat up in his chair so he could tilt his head back and look straight up at Wolfram. "But why do I have to know about prophecy?"

"Because," Wolfram crossed his arms, "this is one of the most important historical texts in the mazoku culture. Everyone of proper education is familiar with it." He smirked. "When I was in my forties, my teacher made me memorize it. Be glad you're only reading."

Yuuri pouted. "But what about this section? It's practically scribbles!"

Wolfram picked up the book and scanned the passage in question.

\textit{Tuwa bær frō asegeswáp}  
\textit{Tuwa úp ábregdan frō wæter}  
\textit{Ábréotan æt æðeling}  
\textit{Ábísgian æt æðeling}  
\textit{Gastcyning ñghwilc geénan ýðfaru}  
\textit{Yrfebéc limplêcan léoht æt lyfthelm}  

"This is this is one of the oldest prophecies-- some say the oldest." Wolfram answered. "It's one of the earliest records of our writing system in addition to being one of the most influential."

"But how can something that's only a prophecy be influential, I mean has it happened?" Yuuri tilted his head. "What does it say?"

"Hmm." Wolfram frowned. "I think the most recent translation is: Twice born of Ash--Twice raised by water--Killed by God--Filled by God--Our King who joins with waves--Will unite the world in mist."

"What does it mean?"

"What doesn't it mean?" He shook his head. "That's a flaw in prophecy, almost infinitely interpretable. There was a bit of an uproar about in in Shinou's time. After all, he united most of the original demon territories after defeating Soushi."

Yuuri turned in his seat to better look at him. "The original ones... Everything but Frankshire and Habaloug... Lesser Gael too, right?"
"Almost." Wolfram crossed his arms. "Mazoku and humans were separated in ancient times by natural borders, like the middle sea. The land border was the river that now separates Calbacade and Caloria."

"Right, I knew that... But why did it cause an uproar for Shinou?"

"Many people thought he was the king in the prophecy and thusly there were mixed political feelings. Mostly the problem lied with Gael. At that time, its power rivaled even Shinou's Shin Makoku--"

"Because the war with Soushi was fought on the main continent and they didn't have to spend resources rebuilding like everyone else." Yuuri grinned and bit his lip.

Wolfram nodded and tried to ignore how cute the wimp was being for the moment. "But even though they were also a demon nation, the people of Gael have always been very... secluded. Their refusal to acknowledge Shinou as the king from the prophecy created significant unrest."

"But," Yuuri scratched his head. "Why would Shinou being or not being the king in a prophecy cause unrest? The prophecy sounds like the king there was peaceful, or helped with peace... But either way, Shinou defeated Soushi and shouldn't that have proved he was a good king prophecy or not?"

"Well..." Wolfram started to pace, caught up in his explanation. "That's where history gets a little... cloudy. Allegedly, during that time there was another prophecy about the same king--"

"What did it say?"

"No one knows exactly now, but there were rumors that on a diplomatic visit to Gael Shinou had that prophecy destroyed."

Now Yuuri was on the edge of the chair, interest sparkling in his eyes. "But why--"

"No one knows for certain... Maybe you can ask the Sage about it if you're so interested?" he mused. "But in any case, the allegations that Shinou had destroyed the other, more negative, prophecy did little to help during such a delicate political time that was the beginnings of his empire. Gael finally put an end to the instability when it agreed to the same terms of allegiance that still remain to this day."

Yuuri sighed. "History is so complicated... But Wolfram..." He grinned. "I never get to hear about Gael. I know I'm supposed to be focusing on things from the Shimerons but... None of it seems to be helping with talking to Sara anyway. I mean... they used to be together but then it got too hard to control Shou Shimeron because of the mountains and there wasn't anything Dai Shimeron wanted very often. Hey, in a way they're like the human nations' Gael!"

Wolfram rubbed his forehead. "Not exactly the same. A lack of knowledge about two things doesn't mean they're connected. Gael is an old nation, set in its ways, and prefers to keep to itself, but it's hardly a mystery if you choose to do the proper readings."

"And I'm sure you've done the proper readings." Yuuri tilted his head. "Wolfram, have you ever been there? Gael is near Belefield--"

"No. I haven't," Wolfram snapped. Yuuri's eyes widened and Wolfram realized he might have been too abrupt. He hated talking about his childhood, but he knew if he didn't give Yuuri something the wimp would just continue to press. "I used to want to go. When I was very young I remember seeing part of a performance at court. Alban Eiler always fell near my birthday-- when I was still
young enough to pay attention to such things-- There were often performances on old religious days
like that and I enjoyed watching the fire dances. For a while I tried to convince them to take me--
to Gael to see the larger shows-- but I never went."

Yuuri was silent for a moment, and Wolfram worried what other questions he would come up with.
"Alright." The wimp grinned, slamming a his fist into an open palm. "We'll just have to go there!"

Wolfram blinked, mind racing in an attempt to understand the delicate science of wimp-logic.
"What?"

"Not right now, once everything’s figured out with Sara and Caloria and everything else!" Yuuri
stood up in his excitement. "It will be great! You've always wanted to go and I think Gael's
interesting... and besides it's supposed to be the birthplace or last-remnant or whatever of true
demon culture, so shouldn't I go there if I'm supposed to be the Maou?"

Wolfram couldn't suppress a short laugh as he shook his head. How the wimp managed to remain
so adorable and ridiculously optimistic he would never know.

Yuuri gave a mock pout and moved closer. "What? You don't think it would work."

Despite the absurdity of the conversation, Wolfram couldn't get the smile off his face. There was
just something inside him that warmed with the knowledge Yuuri was this excited about planning
something with him, even if it was inappropriately timed. "Someday. Perhaps." Wolfram had to
look away for a moment to regain a more proper expression. "But there are much more important
things to be worrying about now."

"I know." Yuuri's voice was close, and when Wolfram looked up he could clearly see the blush
seeping through his guilty expression. "But..."

"But what?" Wolfram pressed, moving a step closer while his heart hammered inside his chest. His
thoughts were already leaping toward the prospect of a kiss and his fingers tingled in anticipation.

Yuuri lowered his head. "I'm sorry... I know I'm not doing a good job... I haven't found anything
out from Sara... And I keep thinking to myself sometimes that every day I don't do anything there
are real people... who are dying... And it's all my fault because now I'm just so... so..." Even
despite the tilt of his head Wolfram could see the tears starting to well in his eyes. "Distracted... but
I can't help it and it makes me feel so terrible... and worthless..."

Without thinking, Wolfram raised a hand to touch his cheek, using the pad of his thumb to wipe
away a tear. "Wimp."

Yuuri's eyes widened in shock, but before he could speak Wolfram continued.

"There's nothing 'terrible' or 'worthless' about you. You're wasting time worrying about useless
things. And as much as I hate watching it... Your greatest strength is with people." Wolfram pulled
Yuuri's face up so he could look at him-- make sure his words sunk in. "This scheme to get
information out of Saralegui is something only you can accomplish. But the reason isn't because
you are the king or because you're listening to what Gwendal or anyone else says on the matter. It's
because people trust you. Not because you trick them... because you're the most stupidly honest
person in this world, and because you earn their trust by just being your wimpy self." There was
that pull again, that undeniable urge to be closer that had been tugging at him ever since he put his
hand on Yuuri's cheek, and somehow their foreheads touched and it made his entire body hum.
"Don't be anything else."
Yuuri's breath was quick against his face and Wolfram could feel him shudder when the tugging moved down and their noses brushed. "Okay," he whispered, and Wolfram could feel the air by his lips move as the word came towards him. Yuuri's eyes were half open and Wolfram felt his almost close as he looked down to see as much of his wimp's face as he could as they hovered on the edge of something.

Wolfram inhaled sharply when he felt Yuuri's hands tightening against the fabric at his waist. It was enough-- more than enough-- to convince him that Yuuri wanted this too and so he closed his eyes completely and moved forward. Yuuri's bottom lip was perfect between his own-- warm, and soft, and quivering slightly. Then he could feel Yuuri move too, closing his mouth just enough that Wolfram could feel the slight pressure of acceptance against his upper lip.

He half-sighed, pausing to enjoy his moment of bliss before moving back.

But Yuuri followed. Their noses were still touching, and really he had only moved away an inch but it felt like so much farther. Then he made a sound... so much like a word that Wolfram had to ask. "Wha-"

"Please." Yuuri whimpered, tugging at the fabric at his waist. "More."

Something inside him broke. Wolfram's hand on the wimp's cheek slid into his hair and he tightened his fist until Yuuri gasped and tilted his head back, giving Wolfram easy access to his half-open mouth. His blood was pounding in his ears as he moved forward-- lost and dizzy and entirely focused on all the possibilities this moment held. Yuuri watched him through lidded eyes, breath shallow and skin almost impossibly hot.

And Wolfram kissed him. He kissed Yuuri the way he'd always wanted to but had never allowed himself before. Desperately. Like Yuuri was the only thing that gave his life meaning. He kissed him like there was nothing else, no pride, no fear, nothing outside this feeling of hot flesh sliding together and the high sounds that Yuuri made in the back of his throat. Wolfram groaned, already distractingly hard inside the stiff fabric of his uniform, and let his tongue slide lightly against the inside of Yuuri's lips.

Yuuri whimpered and opened his mouth wider, welcoming Wolfram's tongue inside and letting his own slide tentatively against it.

And everything continued-- mouths and lips and tongues were touching and sucking and gods he could feel Yuuri's flesh swelling against his mouth. How red his lips must be. Shining and wet and standing out even against flushed skin. Wolfram could hardly breathe-- afraid to stop-- needing more of this even more than air. Drowning.

Yuuri's breath was hissing from his nose and Wolfram was seconds away from succumbing to the dizzying need, to the weakness in his knees, and pulling his wimp to the ground, before he finally forced himself away, having to use his grip in Yuuri's hair to pull him back too.

"No." Yuuri gasped and tugged at Wolfram's hips... "More."

"You're sure?" he breathed, watching Yuuri nod and feeling somehow-- in the back of his mind-- that he was dreaming or dying or both.

Then Wolfram growled, pushing Yuuri backwards the few steps it took until his back slammed against the wall. For a moment Yuuri looked uncertain and Wolfram was terrified he was going to tell him to stop, but Yuuri just tugged at his hips again-- a silent plea for more contact. Wolfram paused. He was still unable to rid himself of the idea that whenever Yuuri touched him he
pretended he was—something else— that the thought of touching another boy was too disgusting for him to process. So when Wolfram moved forward he twisted, so Yuuri was pressed against the side of his hip and thigh and was in no danger of being reminded of what Wolfram was—again.

But Wolfram kissed him anyway and Yuuri sighed and moved his hands up to hold Wolfram's shoulders—Yuuri rocked his hips forward against him and _gods_ he was... Wolfram moaned and used his other hand to wrap around the small of Yuuri's back—pulling him closer—putting his thigh between Yuuri's legs and feeling the other boy's erection _throb_ against him. Yuuri only keened—still kissing Wolfram desperately through the choked out sounds—and continued to rock himself against him.

It was so _good_.

Wolfram couldn't get enough. He ran his fingers through Yuuri's hair and inhaled his breath and scent and sweat. His ears were full of every sound Yuuri made, his skin burning with each contact. His own cock ached inside his pants, leaking and rubbing against his own skin and rough cloth, awkward angle at the very edge of unbearable. But oh how it didn't matter with Yuuri rutting against him, clinging and kissing and making the world fade away.

It was all Wolfram could do not to move him to the bed—push him down and lick every inch of him until Yuuri cried and begged him for more—not to drop to his knees right here and take that throbbing flesh pressed against his thigh as far into his mouth as he could.

Wolfram's mouth watered at the thought and he sucked on Yuuri's tongue instead. Gods, the ways he could make Yuuri come—the things he had wanted to do to him for years—fantasies running and meshing together in his mind until his cock gave a dangerous twitch and he had to force his attention away from such thoughts lest he make a mess of himself.

But Wolfram realized this couldn't go on. He was dangerously close and refused to ruin this moment and potential future ones by giving into this blinding pleasure—disgusting Yuuri past all hope. But just because _he_ couldn't didn't mean that he couldn't give Yuuri an experience that would hopefully make him hungry for more.

Wolfram moved the hand against Yuuri's back lower, giving into his desire to grab the swell of flesh there, making Yuuri gasp and push himself harder against Wolfram's thigh. But then Wolfram moved his hand forward—forcing his fingers between his thigh and Yuuri's erection—squeezing just enough to make Yuuri break the kiss and gasp—looking at him with wide dilated eyes and mumbling incoherently before his head tilted back to rest against the wall. Yuuri's fingers dug into his shoulders and Wolfram took his other hand from the wimp's hair so he could undo the front of his pants and finally, _finally_, have his first touch of damp, hard, flesh.

Yuuri bit his lip and thrust into Wolfram's hand. " _Wolf..._ " he pleaded, eyes closed and hands shaking.

Wolfram swallowed a groan and moved his hand slowly, amazed that something as simple as Yuuri's voice could make his cock leak and throb this hard. Even though Wolfram was touching him and they were so close—his hand was _inside_ Yuuri's pants and underwear—he couldn't see him. But ohh how he'd imagined—Imagined Yuuri hard and dripping and begging for him—tight skin soft over hard. He heard himself whimper and leaned forward to capture Yuuri's lips again—distracting himself from thoughts far too arousing.

And they were kissing, and Yuuri was rocking into his hand—now completely slick with sweat and precome—making wet sounds over their breath and shuffling that echoed loudly in Wolfram's ears. But then Yuuri's panting was louder—keening—and suddenly he tried to move away.
"No..." he begged, and though Wolfram forced himself to stop the movement of his hand he couldn't help but move his kisses to Yuuri's neck and ear.

"Why?" Wolfram breathed, his own voice desperate-- as if all his hopes hinged on the edge of Yuuri's orgasm.

Yuuri kept rocking into the slippery circle of Wolfram's hand-- small movements that seemed even against his own will. "Messy... don't want... mess."

Wolfram bit the flesh before him lightly. "Wimp."

"But..." Yuuri gasped, voice raw. "Can't... mess..."

Wolfram growled at the insanity that was the wimp and moved his free hand to his pocket. What had happened to his handkerchief? His eyes widened for a moment in realization. Damn that Prince Pervert! How did he manage to ruin--

Then something else came to mind and he moved his hand to his neck-- so desperate to pull off his cravat that he snapped the chain-- beads crashing and bouncing to the floor in a thousand tiny little plunks. Wolfram was far beyond caring-- nearly gave himself a fabric burn trying to get the blasted thing off.

Through all this Yuuri had been watching, blush spreading to the tips of his ears. Wolfram kissed him again-- softly-- and pulled back. "Okay?" he whispered and moved his hand gently against Yuuri's erection. Yuuri shuddered and nodded-- eyes following the motion of Wolfram's other hand down between them, to cover the tip Yuuri's cock with the smooth fabric. Wolfram only caught a glimpse-- dark flesh-- shining-- dripping. He claimed Yuuri's lips once again in a searing kiss before sliding his hand against Yuuri's erection in earnest, only able to kiss him for a few short moments before Yuuri tore away-- gasping and clinging to him as his cock pulsed-- warm and wet and thick spreading through the thin fabric and over his fingers.

Wolfram shuddered and buried his face in Yuuri's neck, drunk on the sounds-- on the knowledge that he had just made Yuuri come. They stayed like that for a while-- just breathing-- before Yuuri pulled away.

And refused to look at him.

Yuuri reached between them to take the cravat and make Wolfram let go of his erection, which was only just starting to soften in his grasp. "I'm sorry," he whispered, still looking at the floor.

"Don't be," he snapped, trying to ignore the cold feeling that washed over him with the look of shame and regret on the wimp's face. As he turned to go and wash his hands in the basin on the counter and give Yuuri some privacy, Wolfram tried to remind himself that at least he had been given as much as he had. Before he put his hands in the water he paused-- it might be his only chance, after all-- and quickly licked an already thick drop that had gathered in the space between two of his fingers. *Yuuri*. He tried to memorize the taste.

"Wolfram?"

He stiffened and stuck his hands in the water. "What." A moment of silence followed and Wolfram removed his hands from the basin and grabbed a facecloth, taking a moment to dry his hands before he reached into his pants and readjusted himself to a less obvious position. Then he turned and crossed his arms.

Yuuri was still bright red, his pants were re-fastened but his hair was disheveled and his lips were
obviously swollen. He was holding the crumpled cravat tentatively in one hand. "Um... Sorry... I..."
Yuuri studied the floor-- glanced up-- and turned an even deeper shade of red before looking down again. "What should I do with..."

Wolfram's heart gave a leap. Was it possible that Yuuri didn't completely regret their actions, but was merely upset about some sticky fabric? "Don't worry about it." He moved forward. 'I'll take it-

"No!" Yuuri shouted, surprising them both. "I mean... let's throw it away... I don't like... the idea of you wearing it again."

Wolfram raised an eyebrow at him. "Fine." Then he tilted his head toward the waste basket by the door.

Yuuri walked by him to throw it away, still annoyingly focused on things besides his face, and then rushed back to sit at the desk again, his back facing Wolfram. "So..." he mumbled, picking up the book "Everyone has read this, huh... Um... What's so great about it compared to the other history books?"

Wolfram paused and clenched his fists. So, this was how it was? Normal again. He wanted so much to scream, to ask Yuuri what he was thinking! Didn't something like that mean anything on Earth? Was Yuuri just playing with him? Using him? Was he actually starting to feel for him?

Because Yuuri wouldn't use him. Right?

He ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Fine. He would hold his tongue for now. Yuuri obviously didn't want to talk about it... and if he pushed him... "Well, that volume has the prophecies, which while they may seem somewhat arcane today had a huge influence on early mazoku thought and politics..."

And he kept explaining, and let everything go back to "normal".

********

********

A thick fog rolled over the hills on the outskirts of the village. The morning air was cold and damp against his skin, and his pants were soaked below the knees with the dew on the grass. It was the first hint of spring, an early warm spot in the southern region of Habaloug, but Yozak Grier had much more important things to worry about.

It had taken several months of searching, false leads and earlier quests abandoned, before Yozak had been able to find him. First he had tried to gather information in Shou Shimeron-- gotten close to something dark and foul-- death and madness in the streets. There was no help for them outside the walls of the castle in the center of the capital. A white stone wall cleaner than anything else in the rotting city. Guards went in and out. Occasionally a captive. He had been close to getting in-- could have gotten in.

Gwendal had ordered him away, to follow new leads. Didn't want his favorite scout getting sick. Yozak supposed he had been lucky so far, best not to push it until it was necessary. Besides, Gwendal's new project sounded promising. If it was true.

In the distance a small house emerged from the fog, just like all the others that dotted the landscape. Tiny houses housing the farmers of tiny farms. There were small patches of trees amongst the farmland, and Yozak moved behind a nearby grouping to wait. He sat and pulled out
the hand-held vision enhancing device from his rucksack. It had been one of Lady Anissina's most useful inventions.

There was no movement inside the tiny house-- none that could be seen anyway-- so Yozak leaned back against one of the trees. Several minutes passed. Birds sang. Bugs jumped in the grass.

Then something landed on his shoulder. *Carrier pigeon.* It cooed and nipped his ear. Yozak reached up to grab the little bird and pull the tiny slip of paper out of the box around its neck. It had been over a week since his last letter from Gwendal.

*Red Sheep,*

*Obtained samples. More upon results.*

*No need to rush the current task.*

~*Big Kitty*

Well, at least that was something. Not that he didn't trust the kiddo's ability to get information out of his new fiancé. Yozak smirked. Selfish Loafer was probably giving the castle hell--

Something moved.

The door to the house creaked open and a man came out, dressed in work clothes but with the posture of a soldier. Long dark hair still hung at a cropped ponytail down to his waist. Yozak's smirk widened.

*Maxine.* What are you doing so far from your Shimeron?

********

********

Greta was absolutely tired of it being cold all the time! No matter how many layers the maids put on her skirts, the wind always seemed to get inside. She wished they would just give in and let her wear pants for more than just sword and riding practice, but she was "growing up" and "needed to represent her standing in society."

She huffed and kicked a rock off the garden path.

It was still another hour until Wolfram would be done with his troops and have time to practice with her, and Yuuri said she couldn't sit with him and Saralegui if she kept making faces at the stupid prince behind his back. Greta pouted. It wasn't as if he didn't deserve it...

The sound of a horse neighing in the distance made her glance up-- probably just hauling food in from the market in town-- the main gate wasn't far from the place she was. Greta smiled, picking up her skirt as she ran-- off the trail to cut through some bushes and jump over a lump of almost-melted snow that would be a row of flowers come spring. She had thought of the perfect thing to distract her for an hour.

It only took five minutes for Greta to run outside of the gardens-- through the courtyard by the front gate, past the neighing horses and people unloading vegetables and chickens, around the side of the castle-- finally coming to a stop once the barn was in sight. She paused, leaning against the wall to catch her breath and wait for the red to go out of her face.

Greta listened to her heartbeat thrum in her ears as she looked at the entrance to the barn. She couldn't hear any voices from inside and immediately hoped it meant that Wilfrido's father wasn't
around to shout out tasks. He was such a stern man, and the way he looked down at her reminded her of her uncle. It made her skin crawl.

When she wasn't breathing as hard anymore she walked toward the main entrance, keeping an eye out for any sign of her friend or his father. Inside, all of the horses were lined up in rows and they all blinked their big eyes and shook their heads at her when she passed. Ao snorted at her approach, disturbing Wolfram's white stallion who scraped a hoof against their shared wall in protest.

"You're both so pretty this morning," Greta cooed, reaching up both her hands to pet each of them. Ao licked her fingers and she giggled, while Wolfram's horse leaned his face forward to be scratched.

A hand fell on her shoulder. "I'll never understand why Hildefuns tolerates you so well. He's bitten me twice this week."

The white horse snorted and moved away from the door of his pin.

Greta turned and grinned. "That's because he doesn't think you like him."

"I'm sure." Wilfrido crossed his arms. "What are you doing here anyway, Princess? Aren't you worried your fancy shoes will get dirty?"

"Don't be stupid." She rolled her eyes and shoved him playfully. "I'm waiting for my sword lessons with Papa."

Wilfrido took a step back and rubbed his face, only increasing the amount of smudged dust on his pale skin. "You're so stubborn." He frowned.

Greta tilted her head. "Why?"

"He's not Papa anymore, right?" He turned and started checking the feed bags along the stalls. "The king is going to marry the prince from Shimeron. You shouldn't stay in situations that will only hurt you later."

Greta could feel her face go red, she balled her hands into fists and followed him. "Why would you say something so horrible! My fathers love each other even if this whole thing with that rude prince has--"

"That person is going to be a sovereign here soon, and where will your Papa Wolf be then? He'll be assigned to a far, far distant territory at best. I hear what everyone says around here and I think you're crazy to believe His Majesty ever had an interest in--"

"Shut up!" Greta sprung forward, tears stinging her eyes as she hit the ground on top of him. He tried to spin around beneath her but she grabbed his ponytail and pulled until he cursed and reached up to grab her wrists, leaving nothing between his face and the dirt as they struggled. "I know Yuuri likes Wolfram best. He told me!" She lowered her voice and leaned forward. "It's a trick. That prince is really the bad one-- they're making people sick and this is the only way for us to find out how so we can help them. But if you tell anyone I'll sit on you and pull your hair out one at a time for the rest of your life!"

"Ow!" Wilfrido groaned into the ground. "Get off! I won't say anything about your father!" Greta loosened her grip and he pushed her off, rushing to stand and brush the dirt from his clothes, glaring at her all the while.

Her anger faded and Greta started to feel a little bad. It wasn't his fault, after all, what he heard
other people say. How was he to know any better? And maybe she shouldn't have beaten him so quickly, boys hated that kind of thing, right? Greta really didn't want him to hate her. "I'm sorry," she said, looking up with her most pitiful face from the ground. "I didn't mean to be so hard on you-- I just get so tired of hearing things like that." Then she looked down. "It's worse hearing it from friends, though."

For a while Wilfrido didn't say anything and Greta couldn't make herself look up at his angry face. But then: "Get up," he snapped. "You'll just get messier the longer you're down there-- it doesn't suit you."

Greta's cheeks went hot and she looked up at him and smiled. Wilfrido had lowered a hand to her and she took it, letting him help her stand. His face was still grumpy as usual, but at least now maybe things could go back to normal.

********

********

Yuuri took a sip from the silver teacup, holding the overly-sweet liquid in his mouth for as long as he could without swallowing. As was normally the case during his afternoons with Sara, he was quickly running out of things to say. He smiled awkwardly at his new friend and picked up a cookie from the assortment on the platter. "You really should give the cookies a try, Greta has gotten really talented these days."

Sara pouted and twirled a strand of hair with his finger. "But she hates me. How do you know she won't try to poison me?" He lowered his eyes.

As usual, Yuuri had no idea what Sara meant by what he said. He had been trying to read between the lines more, figure out what Sara was thinking, but Yuuri couldn't tell if he was kidding or actually suspicious of an eleven-year-old. "Don't be silly, Greta is going through a difficult time-- She's just a kid. You can't really think--"

"I'm sorry." Sara still didn't look up. "Sometimes I say things I shouldn't." His cheeks brightened. "When I get... jealous."

"Oh," Yuuri mumbled and stuffed the whole cookie into his mouth, taking plenty of time to chew before swallowing. "Well, she's my daughter, I should be proud of her."

"I'm your fiance, shouldn't you be proud of me too...?" Sara fisted his white robes with pale fingers and refused to look up.

Yuuri turned a bit in his seat and gave Conrad a desperate look, but had to return his focus to Sara before he could get a proper answer or expression.

"I'm sorry." The prince seemed to almost shrink in his seat on the chaise. "I shouldn't have... your heart's already taken and you're so miserable around me... I just didn't have any other choice--"

"Why?" Yuuri hated himself for his reaction. Shouldn't he be worried about *Sara* more than his "mission"? "Why didn't you have another choice?"

"Yuuri." Sara looked up, more serious than he'd ever seen him. His eyes darted pointedly between Yuuri and Conrad, who was leaning against the wall. "I don't want to talk about it now." Then he reached into a small bag tied to his belt. "As for your cookies, I'm sure you're daughter has talent, she is your daughter after all, but I'm much too fond of my own to bother with other sweets."

Yuuri looked at the small black cookie with interest, there was some white on the top-- probably
sugar or frosting. "What kind is it?"

Sara grinned and leaned toward him, putting a hand on his thigh. He held the cookie up between their faces. "Would you like to try?" His voice dropped low, just a whisper over his smile.

"Um," said Yuuri, inhaling the smell of the "sweet" by his face. It certainly didn't smell anything like any cookie he'd ever eaten. Sure, there was some sugar to the smell, but the rest was... earthy.

"Your Majesty," Conrad started, much to his relief. "I'm sorry but I'd have to sample it first, or--"

"That's alright, Conrad," Yuuri interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll try it. I've never really been fond of... erm... chocolate?"

Sara leaned back a bit and pouted. "It's not chocolate. But fine. I guess you're allowed to feed me whatever you want but I can't even offer one of my childhood favorites."

"Erm," Yuuri managed, trying to put some reassurance into his voice. "Maybe some other time, alright?"

Sara nodded, but hardly seemed happy. He still hadn't taken his hand off Yuuri's thigh.

Yuuri did his best to ignore it and picked up another one of his daughter's treats, enjoying the spicy sweetness. Again, he took his time to chew. He'd been thinking for some time that he might be able to get more of a story out of Sara if Conrad weren't listening in all the time. He appreciated his friend's desire to protect him, and understood it was important he not be alone with Reyes, who was an intimidating man to say the least, but Yuuri couldn't picture Sara doing anything bad to him. He'd tried to get Conrad to give them some time alone on several occasions, but was always refused. But now... there could be no doubt. Sara wanted to talk to him alone... Yuuri was sure if they could have a real conversation alone he would be able to find something out, be able to help all those people. Or at least prove Sara's innocence in all this.

He swallowed. "So, Sara, you always mention your childhood, what kind of things did you like to do?"

Sara raised an eyebrow and licked a few black crumbs from his lips before speaking. "Ohh Yuuri, you know how it is, the restrictions put on royal children..."

Yuuri laughed nervously. "Yeah."

The hand on Yuuri's leg moved higher up his thigh. "I could ask you the same thing. When I was reading up on your history there was no mention of you during Cecelia's rule... Where were you hiding, Yuuri?"

Sara leaned closer and now that the strange damp smell of the cookie was no longer between them Yuuri could pick up the unusual scent of his friend's cologne. That smell always made his mind wander to places it shouldn't, and sometimes when he just got a brief wiff, it reminded him of how Wolfram smelled after a bath-- like soap and sweat from the steam-- his skin. Yuuri blinked and remembered the situation at hand. "Oh... well..." he stuttered, uncomfortable with the progressive journey of Sara's hand on his leg. "You've met Cheri now, can you imagine a historian writing about anything else during her reign? Not to mention the war--"

"Ohh and that." Sara's expression darkened and his hand stopped. "Yuuri, you wouldn't do such a thing."

Yuuri blinked. "That was a terrible and complicated time... Everyone experienced such horrible
things. I can't picture anyone wanting a war."

"But what if your advisers said it was the only way?" Sara's eyes went big. "I can't imagine such a wonderful, peaceful king like you, Yuuri, ever agreeing."

"Well, we've come close a few times, but I've been lucky so far in avoiding such things--"

"What if," Sara interrupted. "What if your... your Sir Belefield said to..." His eyes fell again. "I bet you'd do anything he asked you."

Yuuri could feel his cheeks go red just thinking about Wolfram-- the scenario Sara was suggesting aside. "Why are you even thinking about something like that!" he snapped. "There's no way I'd agree to war no matter what! There's always a peaceful way to resolve anything! War only brings more death... more grudges!"

Sara had removed his hand, now leaning away from him. His eyes were wide and his lips set in a thin line.

Yuuri knew he was over-reacting, but his blood was so hot, and he hated thinking about how useless war was. How many people had died. The frustration of this, too, was getting to him. The time he spent inside-- awkward silences-- he felt so trapped by the obligations of every day and the stress poured off of him in waves. "Another thing-- stop comparing yourself to Wolfram all the time! He's been my friend for years. I think we're becoming friends too, but Sara you can't just walk into someone's life and expect to be the most important person!" His breath was coming hard and Yuuri could feel his pulse in the tips of his fingers.

Sara's expression, however, was what made him stop his lecture. Tears were pooling in the corners of his eyes as he stared at Yuuri in shock. "I'm sorry..." he whispered and looked away.

Yuuri's anger faded, but his pulse only quickened. He could feel everywhere his clothes touched his skin and he could feel a sweat begin to break on his forehead. "Sara..." he started, but didn't know quite what to say. Yuuri was so distracted at every moment... He'd been up almost all night thinking about things, and Wolfram, and things Wolfram did with his hands when he was pressed against the wall...

There was a knock at the door and Yuuri jumped in his seat, both startled and guilty about his previous thoughts. He turned and nodded at Conrad. Yuuri didn't think he'd been this happy for an interruption in his life.

Conrad opened the door and Yuuri watched as his chaperone talked to whoever had knocked-- Yuuri was sure he could hear Lucien's voice. When Conrad reentered the room he was smirking slightly. "Your Majesty, I've been instructed to inform you that the princess arrived for her lessons this afternoon covered in mud and smelling suspiciously of horses. Sir Belefield is convinced this means she was rolling around with the stable boy and insists you... I believe the exact words I was told to use were: 'hang the brat from his toenails with those blasted dragons of yours until he drowns or swears never to touch your daughter again.'" Conrad's face was overly tight and Yuuri could tell he was trying not to laugh. "However, with all do respect Your Majesty, I would have to advise you to refrain from acting with my brothers desired level of enthusiasm."

Yuuri laughed. "Wolfram's gotten carried away again. I'm surprised I haven't been called to put out any fires in the barn by now."

"You're not more concerned?" Conrad asked, walking back to his place by the wall. "I thought you were worried about this?"
"Well," he started, rubbing the back of his head. "I guess they are only little, right? Just a bit of rough play for kids, right? Rolling around isn't really anything dangerous."

Sara leaned forward and stared at him.

"What?" Yuuri blinked.

"Yuuri, you really are clueless sometimes." Sara reached forward and touched him above his lips. His fingers were cold, almost wet. "You've got something on your face-- but anyway, your precious daughter is rolling around with a boy and you're not worried?"

Something uncomfortable started to creep into his chest. "Wha--"

"Rolling, Yuuri." Sara scooted closer, pressing their legs together and leaning in to make his point. Yuuri could feel the other boy's breath on his neck and every hair on his body seemed to stand on end. "Rolling in the barn? Really, Yuuri, do I have to... spell it out?"

Yuuri could hardly breathe. Sara was so close to him. He was very uncomfortable, because he actually wanted to be close to someone more terribly than he could ever remember-- except for last night-- but he was sure he shouldn't be feeling this way about Sara. Or maybe his fears were true. That he really was just taking advantage of Wolfram, his best friend, in all this hormonal confusion.

He really was a worthless person.

A worthless person who was about to have a very public erection in a matter of seconds. "Conrad!" he squeaked, feeling ill. His head was so clouded and his heartbeat was so fast he worried if he could even walk. "I'm sorry, Sara... I'm feeling really... sick."

Sara moved closer, a hand on his leg, a whisper in his ear. "Don't go. Stay with me."

"I'M VERY SORRY!" Yuuri managed, standing up straight and heading for the door. "I'm about to be sick. VERY ILL. I have to go."

"Your Majesty! Are you alright?" came Conrad's worried voice behind him as Yuuri opened the door and started to rush down the hall.

Yuuri balled his hands into fists and tried to walk faster-- to think of anything besides Wolfram's teeth on his neck, his hand-- "I'm FINE. Don't worry... I just need to go lie down. I think I might throw up... probably just something I ate. Please don't worry about me... take care of Sara."

"But Your Majesty--"

"Conrad!" Yuuri turned, blushing furiously and praying to every god he could name that his friend wouldn't be able to see-- "Please just let me go to my room." He didn't think he'd ever felt this mortified... worse than when his mother walked in on him in sixth grade.

Conrad blinked and for a moment looked almost... dangerous. But it was gone in an instant and he blushed. Thank god he didn't smile at him. Yuuri wasn't sure he'd ever be able to look at him the same way again. "Of course, Your Majesty." And Conrad turned, walking back down the hall to where Sara and Reyes were standing outside the still-open door.

Yuuri didn't know how his body could possibly contain enough blood to make him blush this much as well as give him such a terrible problem... But he was free, free to run as fast as his embarrassment and tight-pants could take him. Silently begging his mind to forget the past five
minutes of his life along the way.

How did this happen!? Yuuri almost never let his thoughts get this far out of control! It was all Wolfram's fault. It had to be! Touching him-- making him want things he'd never wanted. Sure, he'd reasoned that pretending to be gay was all for the best. But the whole point of that, the whole reason he'd be able to keep any small bit of integrity, was that he'd only be pretending.

He liked Wolfram as a friend. Only as a friend. He just hadn't really gotten to touch anyone all that much and, well, touching felt good, sometimes. Just between friends. And he'd never been intimate with anyone before, and that sort of thing... that sort of thing must feel that way no matter who you did it with. Better with girls... Better with girls. His mind hummed in a terrible guilt-filled circle.

But then what was he doing to Wolfram? What was he possibly encouraging! Why was he so curious about... Why did he actually want...? Yuuri growled and walked faster, the walk to his room never seeming to pass at such an agonizing pace. He was trapped! He either was turning gay or taking advantage of his best friend! There was no possible way for this to be alright! He was trapped. A terrible person.

A terrible person with terrible thoughts swimming endlessly in his mind. Wolfram. Wolfram's hands. Wolfram's kisses. The heat of his body and the sound of his breath. Things that made him feel terrible after the fact but were impossible to deny when they were available to him. He wanted... Yuuri wanted.

And he was terrified.

********
********

It was mostly dark inside the royal bedroom. The light from the setting sun sent strips of orange from the window, most of them blocked from one side by the heavy canopy on what used to be their bed, but now was only Yuuri's. Wolfram had snuck in only a few minutes ago, hoping to get a chance to talk to Yuuri about Greta before the wimp would see their daughter at dinner.

He couldn't afford to spend much time worrying about what went on with that... boy and Greta in the stables this afternoon, however, as that ever-present gnawing emptiness in his gut was getting worse and it would be so easy to forget, to do something he would regret in a moment of paternal rage. The Sage had been to see him twice this week, and Wolfram knew he was being stupid to wait this long, but he just had to be sure the wimp would be alright without him.

That was another reason he was here, sitting behind the changing screen in case one of the maids came in. If he was going to go, it should be soon. It would take time to convince Yuuri that the journey was safe and to calm him down over the fact that he hadn't been told about his need to leave earlier. Maybe it was only because of their... "relations" last night, but Wolfram was feeling much more confident about his place in Yuuri's thoughts and knew he wouldn't be any help to the situation dead...

Tomorrow night, he told himself. And this time Wolfram meant it.

The door opened and Wolfram stiffened, listening carefully as it closed again just as suddenly. Quick shuffling footsteps entered the room, bumping into one of the posts on the bed and muttering in a decidedly wimpy voice. As Wolfram stood to come out from behind the screen he was distracted by the sound of rustling fabric followed by a shift in the mattress. He paused. If Yuuri was changing he should probably give him a moment to finish. The wimp was so fickle
when it came to things like that lately.

Instead of the expected sounds of shoes hitting the floor or Yuuri getting up to move to the dresser, something entirely different met his ears. It was a familiar sound-- one he didn't expect after so many years of sleeping in the same room without ever hearing. Until now.

Wolfram's breath caught and he could feel himself getting hard with just the realization of what the wimp was doing. This had been one of his earliest fantasies... Walking in on this. Taking advantage of Yuuri's preexisting arousal. Touching him for the first time without being pushed away. Wolfram shuddered, noticing for the first time that his right hand had drifted over to the front of his pants. He slowly moved his thumb over the heavy fabric, having to bite the knuckles on his other hand to stifle a sound.

There were so many options. Most of which he never would have considered before, back when he was determined not to become like Mother. When he thought that he and Yuuri might actually get married one day and that he should act with the proper traditions and decorum.

But now... Now he already had the reputation of a whore. And he wanted. He wanted everything that Yuuri would give him and more. While he still had time to take it.

Wolfram stopped the motion of his right hand. Instead, reaching down the front of his pants to reposition his erection so that it was flat against his stomach. Thankfully his jacket was long enough to cover everything. As uncomfortable as it was it was much better and much less obvious than keeping himself confined to his pants.

Carefully, Wolfram took a step forward and peeked around the side of the screen, just enough so that he could look at the mirror over the dresser and see a reflection of the room. Yuuri had his back to him, sitting on the side of the bed farthest from the door. He was still wearing his uniform top, head bent forward as his right arm moved. As quietly as he could, Wolfram moved from behind the screen, Yuuri's tiny sounds and whimpers getting louder as he approached. He could hear the sounds of wet skin moving together. Fast. Too fast. The wimp clearly had no patience, no desire to draw out the act.

Wolfram's heartbeat pounded in his ears as he moved, so loud that it seemed surreal that Yuuri hadn't noticed him yet. Closer. Closer. Until he was close enough to lay a hand on Yuuri's shoulder.

“ACK!” Yuuri shouted, and would have jumped two feet if his knees weren't tangled in his pants and underwear. “Wolf-- Wolfram what are you doing here?” He twisted, trying to scoot farther away from him along the edge of the bed.

Wolfram followed. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth, thick with nerves. He could do this. He wanted this. And the look in Yuuri's eyes, under the shock and embarrassment written on his cheeks, told him Yuuri might want this too.

Yuuri had reached down with both hands to cover himself, fingers twitching anxiously in their fight to remain still. “Please,” he whimpered, and licked his lips. “Just give me a moment... This is too... too embarrassing... Wolfram, don't look at me... please.”

Wolfram tightened his grip on Yuuri's shoulder. “Wimp.” He could smell Yuuri. His sweat, his desire. It made his blood boil and his mind fog. Yuuri's eyes, looking at him, arousal evident on his face, the bead of sweat on his left temple. Without thinking Wolfram leaned forward to lick it away, salt spreading on his tongue. Yuuri gasped and shuddered, leaning into him the tiniest bit. Wolfram could feel his breath on his face. This was too much... too much to pass up. He forced all
uncertainty from his voice and moved his head slightly to whisper in Yuuri's ear. “You're going about this all the wrong way. You'll hurt yourself at that pace.”

Yuuri made a small noise and pressed his ear against Wolfram's lips.

Wolfram kissed him. Slowly at first, in case Yuuri changed his mind, pressing his lips against the shell of his ear before moving down to suck at the lobe. Yuuri gasped as Wolfram pulled the flesh between his teeth, just for a moment, before moving down to his neck.

“Wolf--” Yuuri mumbled, and then there were hands on Wolfram's chest, gripping the fabric and pulling him closer.

Wolfram dropped to one knee, moving his kisses along Yuuri's neck, up to his cheek and then finally to his lips. Yuuri's top lip was sour and Wolfram wondered what he had been eating for all of a second before that fog of want in his mind became so thick he was blind. Blind to everything but Yuuri's mouth, their tongues touching and lips sliding and occasionally teeth clashing in their ferocity.

This wasn't enough. Wolfram wanted more, wanted to enjoy the naked cock he knew was waiting between them. Yuuri.

Wolfram lowered his other knee to the floor, kneeling in front of him, between Yuuri's legs, so he could press his chest against Yuuri's as they kissed, his face tilted up. He could feel Yuuri move, gravity and Wolfram's body finally getting the best of his pants which fell to pool at his ankles. Yuuri's thighs hugged his hips as Yuuri pulled him forward, and Wolfram could feel the tip of Yuuri's erection pressing against him. He moaned into Yuuri's mouth and wrapped his arms tighter around his neck. Yuuri echoed his own wanting sound and moved his hands from the front of Wolfram's uniform up to grip at the leather of his epaulettes.

It was almost impossible to pull away. But somehow he had managed, looking at Yuuri's blushing cheeks and swollen lips.

“Why?” Yuuri whined and pulled at him, pupils wide enough to make his dark eyes even blacker, reflecting the orange light from the window.

“Careful,” he whispered, mouth already watering in anticipation. “Don't move or I'll bite you.”

Yuuri's eyes widened in realization as Wolfram pushed his knees apart, lowering himself down to sit on his feet. “You can't be serious...” Yuuri was clearly torn. His eyes flicking from his own lap to Wolfram's face in anxious disbelief.

Wolfram kept his eyes on Yuuri's face, but reached forward to touch the hot bare flesh between them. Yuuri hissed and almost closed his eyes as Wolfram touched him, moving his hips forward slightly and biting his lip. “I won't force you,” Wolfram breathed, trying to make sure the heat of his breath teased the flesh a few inches from his lips.

Yuuri's mouth hung open in disbelief. Wolfram tried to count in his head, forcing himself into patience, but he only reached seven before lowering his eyes from Yuuri's face to take his first real look at his wimp's aroused flesh. Gods, he was beautiful. Wolfram pulled his hand down along the shaft, watching in desperate fascination as skin moved over hard. There was a large drop accumulating at the tip, and the motion sent the droplet sliding down the head. Wolfram leaned forward, licking up along the path of the droplet and letting the tip of his tongue slide against the slit. So good.
In an instant Yuuri's hands were buried in his hair, gripping almost painfully at the scalp. Wolfram practically purred in approval, placing a soft kiss against the top and gripping Yuuri's thigh tightly with his other hand. His palms were sweating and his pulse hummed in his neck. He had never done this before. Sure, he had fuzzy memories from a past life that wasn't his, but this. This was real and bright and burning with sensation.

It was so hard not to just lean forward and swallow him whole. He certainly wanted to, but for the moment was halted by fears of teeth and hurting and being pushed away. He had to be perfect. He had to make sure Yuuri would want this again and again. Would want him again and again.

Slowly, slowly he moved forward, covering his teeth with his lips and trying not to die with joy as he filled himself with Yuuri. Thick and hard and flooding his mouth. Wonderful, wonderful. Yuuri.

His.

When it touched the back of his throat Wolfram forced himself to slide back, disappointed by the barrier, but content to explore what flesh he could touch with his tongue and lips, hand covering the rest. This was so good. So right. Making Yuuri's breath catch and his hips twitch forward.

In moments Wolfram fell into a rhythm. Down and back, air hissing through his nose and tongue tracing eager patterns wherever it could. He tried to move his hand in coordination, always wanting more. More keens from Yuuri, more flesh inside him. More. His jaw started to ache, but it didn't matter and each time he went down he fought the urge to gag as the head of Yuuri's cock rubbed against the back of his tongue. He moaned in pleasure even as tears stung his eyes from almost choking. Trying his hardest to do whatever would feel best, what he remembered feeling best.

Yuuri's sounds were getting louder, unintelligible whimpers and whispers and ragged breaths. Wolfram could feel Yuuri's pulse pounding rapidly against his lips. And suddenly, just as the tip pressed against the back of his throat, Yuuri pulled-- jerked his hips. Something seemed to give and suddenly his lips were touching the base of Yuuri's cock. His vision blurred and his throat was too full and he was choking.

Wolfram jerked back and he could feel the flesh moving out of him, dragging against him. Then he could breath. He coughed, moving Yuuri's erection out of the way with his hand and resting his head against Yuuri's thigh as tears pricked his eyes and every sharp exhale seemed to tear at his throat.

"Ohh God! Ohh God, Wolfram I'm so sorry!" Yuuri's worried voice rang in his ears.

Wolfram bit down on the thigh in front of him, making Yuuri squirm for a moment before kissing the offended skin. "Don't be sorry," he murmured, too euphoric about even touching Yuuri to care about a sore throat. "We'll just save that for later." He turned his head a bit until he was facing Yuuri's now-twitching cock. A thin line of liquid dripped from the tip, sticking somewhere below his field of vision. Wolfram licked it away. Then he licked everything he could get, tracing the hot flesh with his tongue in long full strokes, not caring at all when the slick skin escaped his lips, leaving wet on his cheeks and chin and nose.

Yuuri made it all worth it. The way he breathed, the way he smelled the way his voice--

"W-- wait--" Yuuri mumbled, gasping as Wolfram's tongue came up to circle the head, tracing every curve while his hand continued sliding along the shaft. His breath squeaked every time Wolfram's lips caught on the ridge, and Wolfram had to use a surprising amount of force to keep Yuuri's hips on the bed.
Before the wimp's warped logic could tell him to stop, Wolfram took as much into his mouth as he could, making sure not to let it too far back, no matter how much he wanted to feel it. Feel the effects of Yuuri and... this for days. For a lifetime.

Yuuri pulled his hair and groaned, words lost to the pleasure that Wolfram was drowning him in.

How many times had he pictured this? Touching Yuuri in every possible way. Making him come over and over, muscles stretching under skin as they tightened in pleasure. His own cock twitched against his stomach, head rubbing slickly against the now-wet fabric that covered it. Every time he moved there was friction. But not enough.

And then all at once taste exploded on Wolfram's tongue, the underside of Yuuri's cock throbbed hard as each spurt landed against the inside of his mouth. Wolfram groaned, and it was almost like coming himself... only more. He could feel Yuuri's thigh shaking under his hand as he continued to suck lightly until the twitching stopped. Trying to memorize the flavor and texture and Yuuri before he finally swallowed, thick liquid sticking on the way down and almost making him gag again. He didn't care. He licked Yuuri everywhere again, just to make sure he was clean before daring to lean back.

Yuuri's eyes were still closed and he was shaking, bottom lip trapped between his teeth. Without opening his eyes, Yuuri slowly untangled his fingers from Wolfram's hair, and leaned down past him to pull up his pants, leaving Wolfram with no choice but to scoot away for a moment while he pulled the fabric over his knees.

That sick feeling, of shame and regret and hurt rose in his chest like bile and Wolfram crossed his arms over his chest and dug his fingers into his arms, desperate for another type of pain. Something tangible and safer than this sneaking doubt.

Slowly, Yuuri opened his eyes, finally looking at him, ashamed and still painfully want-able. But that never changed. Wolfram knew he always wanted.

Then Yuuri took a breath, ready to speak, say something that in all likelihood would be wimpy.

And was interrupted by a knock at the door. The knob turned.

"Yuuri?" Prince Pervert at the door. "Yuuri, I have something important... Is it alright if I come in?"

********

********

Yuuri couldn't imagine there ever being a situation where the timing was worse. "Um," he stuttered, turning a bit to face the door, hoping that Wolfram, who was glaring at him while he tried to slide slowly underneath the bed, was completely out of sight. "Now isn't really the best time."

Sara pouted. "But... we finally have a moment alone..."

Damn. This really could be something important, something that would help. But Yuuri didn't know how he could possibly think well enough to form a proper sentence, let alone drill Sara for information, after... after... that. His head was still spinning and he didn't think his heart would ever slow down. That had been...
Yuuri coughed. "I'll be out in a moment, please wait for me in the hall."

"Fine." Sara pouted, giving him a long look, and closed the door.

Yuuri sighed in relief and looked back at Wolfram, now trying to escape from under the bed. His friend was still glaring at him, and-- Yuuri was struck by how ridiculous this whole thing was. He smiled.

"What are you smiling about, Wimp?" Wolfram huffed.

This was so awkward! Wolfram had just... with his mouth... but it had been the most amazing thing. But Wolfram... and his mouth... and Wolfram! His smile widened, and without meaning to, he started to laugh. But that was terrible, too! He tried to stop, but the more he tried to stop the more he had to laugh. "No... no... Wolfram, Wolf-- I'm not laughing at you, I promise... just you... under the bed... you're too dignified for things like that and..." He couldn't breathe! "Ohh this is just... I can't..."

Wolfram pouted, and Yuuri could see the hurt on his face, but even that didn't make him stop. Wolfram pouting like that just made Yuuri want to kiss him. Wolfram was so cute... so good to kiss. Like everything was right and nothing mattered. So crazy! He had gone insane! This was a dream... He was going crazy. Wolfram would never give him a blowjob, would never look like he enjoyed something so impossibly dirty. The type of thing like Shouri had on his computer... Yuuri reached forward, running his fingers against the smooth skin of Wolfram's jaw. "This feels so strange." He scooted off the bed so he could sit on the floor by Wolfram, laughter finally slowing enough for him to think. Now that he was was closer to Wolfram, already touching him, it made sense to touch him more. Smiling madly and touching his face, threading his fingers through impossibly soft hair.

"Yuuri...?" Wolfram's eyes were so wide. So green. So beautiful. And his mouth. His mouth was so swollen, skin red and puffing and teeth so white, peeking between abused flesh as he stared at Yuuri, lips half open. So good for kissing. Yuuri leaned forward, pressing his lips against Wolfram's softly, just once, before pulling back.

Wolfram's eyes were still wide, blinking. And then he smiled back, the most beautiful, hopeful, carefree face that Yuuri had ever seen. It made his body hum all over again. "Wimp." He grinned.

Yuuri grinned back. "Don't call me a wimp!" And then he pounced. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Roll on the floor with Wolfram. Touch him more. Touch the person that had just made him feel more... that than he'd ever dreamed possible.

And they were laughing and touching, and somehow Wolfram must have let him pin him down because Yuuri was on top of him. Wolfram stopped laughing but kept looking at him, eyes bright. He was so right. Yuuri was so right. It was worth pretending forever if he could make Wolfram look at him this way. He leaned down to kiss him again, and Wolfram had his hands on Yuuri's hips, pulling their bodies closer.

Then Yuuri felt it. Stopped.

Wolfram's smile faded.

No!

So Yuuri kissed him anyway. No matter how weird that was. Such a reminder of the way Wolfram wanted him, so much more than Yuuri could ever want him back. It made him feel so worthless.
He'd never really be good enough for him, but he was far too possessive now to push Wolfram away to find someone else who would love him properly. Too selfish to do the right thing.

He pulled back and Wolfram gave him a small smile. "You should go. You're fiancé is waiting for you in the hall. Cheater."

"S'not cheating." Yuuri blushed.

Wolfram kissed him again. "Go, or he'll get suspicious or someone will catch him out there and come in and then the whole castle will know what a cheater you are." Wolfram shoved lightly on Yuuri's shoulders. "I'll see you tonight anyway."

"Yeah." Yuuri smiled, heart already racing at the thought. "Tonight."

********

********

The Demon Nation of Gael, Landlocked Quarter, Capital Ring. Same Night:

********

The counsel room was dark. Tai sat with his head bowed in the middle of the circle, Frith lying on her stomach beside him. He placed a hand on her back. Even with experience, Tai found the deliberations unsettling. He was glad that his Rabbit would have her face to the ground.

A sharp cry from the offering sliced through the rippling torchlight of the room. The animal fell to its knees, blood pouring from its stomach as its entrails fell onto the marble stone upon the podium. Streaks of dark on light. Rivers down.

The metallic smell filled the air as the creature fell, whimpering in its last moments. Under his hand, Frith jerked with a sob. Innocent creature. Tai ran his thumb against her back.

"You will go," Master Cailean spoke, voice calm as he examined the now-still heart. "You and the one who walked it."

Tai stiffened. "When?"

"Tonight." The master stood. "You will take the the holy trail from the mountains, the returning journey of those touched by Ethne. Through Habaloug to the united countries. I cannot say for certain that you will find our king in Shin Makoku, but I think it would be wise to talk to the young king."

"Of course." He lowered his bow.

"And if you do sense the true power in him, I give you leave to kill those who would threaten our king." Master Cailean's voice was hard.

Tai pressed his forehead to the ground. "Yes."

"Remember, that if our chosen prophecy fails, if his spirit is crushed. He will kill us all."

"Yes."

********

********
Even after the door closed Wolfram couldn't seem to stop smiling. He wasn't sure exactly what the wimp had been thinking, but he seemed to be happy. Happy with him.

Being touched that way, looked at that way by Yuuri... It was better than any dream.

Wolfram got up off the floor to sit on the edge of the bed. It was still warm from when Yuuri had been there earlier and Wolfram ran a hand through his hair, laughed once. It was like suddenly being able to breathe.

He couldn't even make himself be too bothered by the fact that Yuuri had left to speak to Prince Pervert. The wimp had seemed reluctant to go, almost tripping over himself as he had sent him one last look from the door.

And then it hit him.

Why was Saralegui even here? Why wasn't Weller with him? Who was protecting--

Wolfram jumped up, grabbing his sword on the way to the door. He turned the knob slowly and pulled, just enough to let a sliver of light into the room.

"--important. Where should we go?" Yuuri's voice, already a good ways down the hall.

"Wherever is fine. I just need to speak to you."

Wolfram pushed the door open further, peeking out to see Yuuri and Saralegui-- no guard-- alone--walking away from him down the hall.

Where had Weller gotten to?!

He waited until they turned the corner, then slipped out the door, running almost silently down the hall, always a corner behind them as they walked. They were heading to the North Wing, probably to the Pervert's suite. Wolfram gripped his sword tighter as he moved in the shadows behind them.

Yuuri had gotten a lot of practice sneaking down these hallways, to his room. By now he must have memorized the shift schedules and was taking Saralegui in a winding path through the servant quarters in order to avoid as many guards as possible.

What was the wimp thinking? They would have to reorganize everything after leading that snake through such a blind spot in castle security!

Thankfully, it was impossible to get in or out of the royal wing without encountering at least one guard. When Wolfram wanted to get in, or Yuuri needed to get out, he would make sure Lucien was the one at the post. Today, the guard they passed was young, and saluted nervously when Yuuri ordered him to stay put.

"You're helping with a very important, very secret mission." The wimp's voice echoed happily down the corridor.

The Pervert's voice followed. "I'm sure you'll be rewarded, hmm Yuuri?"
Wolfram growled. He could practically hear Saralegui touching Yuuri.

The sound of vanishing footsteps followed and Wolfram chanced a peek around a pillar. From his spot, Wolfram could see the guard wait until Yuuri and Saralegui disappeared from sight before heading quickly in his direction, almost running into Wolfram as he turned the corner.

"Good man," Wolfram hissed, a hand on his shoulder. "Go find Weller."

The guard's eyes widened and he nodded frantically before heading off.

Thank goodness the wimp was absolutely terrible at being sneaky.

The only reason Wolfram wasn't putting an end to Prince Pervert's "alone time" with Yuuri in the first place was it would mean admitting exactly how he knew they were having it. Wolfram had given up caring about his own reputation a long time ago, but Gwendal would probably kill him, or worse, look at him with that terrible disappointment. Not to mention how delicate this loathed situation with Saralegui actually was.

He couldn't risk Shin Makoku, all those affected in the East, Yuuri, to something he had no control over just because he hated Saralegui. Just because he rushed forward in a jealous rage. Wolfram tightened his grip on his sword, forcing himself to breath slowly as he followed them.

It would be alright. Weller would be found. He could interrupt this. He was the expected chaperon, allowed to be at Yuuri's side in the public eye.

Of course, if that snake made a wrong move Wolfram was here, in his place in the shadows, ready to strike.

Eventually, Yuuri and Prince Pervert arrived at Saralegui's room. Saralegui's guard was still nowhere in sight. Wolfram's eyes widened. Maybe that explained his half-brother's absence better than anything else. He shoved the thought away. Conrad could handle that barbarian easily.

The doors closed. Wolfram rushed forward, ear to the thin crack between the knobs. He could hear them talking-- Yuuri laughing. The keyhole to the suite was wide and Wolfram looked in, able to see the back of Yuuri's shoulder and head as he sat on a chaise in the middle of the room. There was a hand near him-- Saralegui.

Wolfram narrowed his eyes.

********

Yuuri shifted nervously in his seat. His heart was pounding and his stomach fluttered unnervingly. This was so huge! He and Sara were finally alone, could finally talk! This was so important!

So why couldn't he think straight?

Once they had gotten to Sara's room, the pair had fallen into an awkward silence. Yuuri rubbed his sweaty palms together and coughed. "So... Sara, what--"

"Don't say anything." Sara pressed his fingers against his lips. There it was again. Numb and cold. Such a strange taste. Without meaning to, Yuuri pushed his tongue forward in an attempt to identify the odd flavor. "I know we haven't had much time alone, but I have a few confessions to make." Then Sara squeaked and Yuuri noticed it was because he had the other boy's fingers in his mouth.
He realized what he was doing and jerked back, face scalding. "I'm sorry--"

"Don't be..." Sara leaned forward to follow him. "I've been wanting to tell you how I've felt for so long. The first moment I saw you. Forgive me for being so bold... Yuuri, but you're absolutely stunning."

"What?" Yuuri managed. His own words seemed to echo too late in his ears.

"I know you're taken. You must hate me for proposing-- separating the two of you-- but I just didn't have any other choice." Sara's face was so close. Warm.

Yuuri forced reason to the forefront of his mind. "Why? Why didn't you have any other choice?"

"That's not important," Sara cooed, his breath sliding against Yuuri's cheek.

Yuuri raised a hand, and put it on his friend's shoulder to keep him back. "But it is, Sara. It's so important." As he spoke, Yuuri was oddly aware of his lips, where his tongue was in his mouth, the heat of Sara's shoulder through his palm.

The other boy pouted. "You're so difficult." And then Sara kissed him.

Yuuri's eyes widened as he fell back against the chaise, Sara's weight pressing him down. This was... not... what was supposed to be happening. Sara's tongue was in his mouth. Strange. Wet. Similar, but somehow not the way it felt when Wolfram kissed him. He supposed everyone kissed differently. After all, how was Yuuri supposed to know what kissing was like? He'd never kissed anyone before, besides Wolfram, and he was sure that didn't count because Wolfram was a boy after all.

His body was hot. Uncomfortable. Everything seemed to be moving so slowly. His skin tingled and he was sure if he hadn't just been given the most mind-blowing sexual experience just minutes before this would have been a much more embarrassing situation.

Sara was still kissing him, though, and thinking about what Wolfram had just done in their bedroom was making the fuzzing and buzzing of his senses even worse. Sara's fingers were in his hair and Yuuri wondered how they had gotten there.

This was not what was supposed to be happening.

********

********

Wimp

Cheater

Bastard

Pervert

WIMP!

He would kill them. Damn him. Damn them.

Wolfram's insides screamed in rage. The pain of betrayal covered by a sickening upsurge in his gut. Something that seemed to have always been there, warm, a part of himself, tore its way up out of him.
He fell back, hands slamming into the ground before his back connected with hard stone.

Wolfram realized he had done something very, very stupid. He had to get out of here-- Yuuri wasn't being hurt... Wolfram had to get out. Out now. He had to go East. Now.

He was no use to anyone dead.

Wolfram tried to stand but he couldn't make it, his body wasn't listening to him-- too clouded by the agony raging in his nerves. Air clogged his lungs-- choking him. Wolfram rolled onto his stomach, clawing at the tiles. Moving forward inch by inch.

He had to get out-- Had to get out.

********
********

Conrad's feet pounded against the stone floor, blood echoing in his ears as he ran.

Stupid.

He had been so stupid! Leaving Saralegui and Reyes with only a single guard. Conrad tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword as he ran, the footsteps of other soldiers behind him adding to the rapid thrumming of his heart. He hadn't been thinking clearly. After seeing his innocent Yuuri like that-- He had needed a moment to clear his mind.

If something happened to Yuuri because of his stupidity-- metal dug into his palm and the edge of his vision blurred, peripheral world forgotten in his blinding focus toward his goal.

Hopefully it would be nothing. Hopefully, if something did happen, Wolfram would be able to stall-- give him more time.

Hopefully.

Conrad turned a corner at breakneck speed, tip of his scabbard dragging sparks against the stone floor as he leaned into the turn. He was almost there, just a small flight of stairs and a hallway to go.

He started the winding stairs, taking the steps in threes, there was someone coming down-- Conrad moved to the other side to move past when a voice behind him cried out--

"Lieutenant!"

Conrad let his focus snap to the figure on the stairs, one arm stuck between the railing and the wall. A blond rag-doll.

"Wolfram!" Conrad's own shout in his ears. He slowed, barely managing to stop in time to examine his brother's limp form. Conrad's hand shook as he reached out to touch him. The fabric of his uniform was wet and scalding to the touch. "Wolfram-- What happened?! Yuuri--"

"Yuuri is..." Wolfram's voice was a breath, a shaky whisper he could barely hear. "Wimp..."

Conrad pulled his brother's face up to look at him. Wolfram's pupils were almost completely dilated and his head head was heavy. Conrad kneeled to speak to him. "What happened to you? What happened to Yuuri?"

Wolfram's eyes looked past him, unfocused, glazed. "I always thought... it would be you..."
Someone else kneeled at his side. "Lieutenant..." Lucien's voice wavered. "You overspent." The corporal touched Wolfram's forehead-- green light--

Wolfram screamed.

Ragged, without breath, echoing on the stone as his limp body jerked back-- Conrad barely kept his brother's head from connecting with the wall.

"Take him to Gisela. The rest of you follow me." Conrad moved away, continuing his race up the stairs.

It was what he had to do. Wolfram was a soldier. Conrad was a Captain. He shouldn't have stayed as long as he had. Their king-- Their Yuuri-- was most important.

********

Yuuri's mind was a pleasant buzz. Unfocused. Like when he'd had too much sake at a friend's birthday and spent the rest of the evening half asleep on the couch.

He was on a couch. A half-couch, at least. Just like that time.

Except Sara was kissing him. It was weird and wrong, but every time he thought about doing anything it was so much easier not to move. But then there was a tickling on the edges of his senses, and the tickle grew to a sting. Then the sting soared into pain and he pushed Sara away-- gasping and clutching his left hand.

"Yuuri! What's wrong?" Sara's voice, above him-- Yuuri must have fallen to the floor.

The ring. Wolfram's ring. Seared his finger and Yuuri could smell his flesh burning.

Out of an instinct, water flowed from his hand-- evaporating on contact.

And after a few mind-numbing moments, the pain was gone.

Yuuri opened his eyes. His left hand was pale and shaking, and when he moved the ring up his knuckle it revealed an angry white blister. He tried to take the ring off completely, but just like always the magic refused to let it go past his final joint. He took a breath, and then another. Then he looked up at Sara.

The other boy's glasses were fogged-- probably from the steam of trying to extinguish his hand. "Yuuri, what happened?"

"I don't know." Yuuri's mind was finally clear and he frowned. "But Sara, that... can never happen again."

Sara looked away and tears started to pool in his eyes.

The door crashed open.

"Yuuri!" Conrad yelled, bursting into the room with at least a dozen guards. "Yuuri, are you alright? Why are you two in here alone?"

Yuuri blinked. "I'm fine, Conrad. We were just talking--"

"But your hand!" Sara whimpered, still pouting on the chaise.
"That was strange... It seems to have stopped, though." Yuuri looked down at the blister. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to sting. He jumped a bit as Conrad, now beside him, leaned down to take his hand. "Ah... It's not very bad, really..."

"What did this?"

"The ring--"

"What ring?"

"Wolfram gave it to me." Conrad's fingers were strong and warm where they touched lightly around the wound. "It's special. Never done anything like this before, though."

"Can any of you heal this?" Conrad directed his attention to the gathering of guards still by the door. One man-- Gwendal's-- rushed forward, kneeling at Yuuri's side, and after bowing his head in respect, reached forward to take his hand from Conrad's grasp. A faint green light escaped the tips of his fingers and Yuuri could feel the pain in his hand being soothed away, leaving only a warm tingle and a thin white line.

"My most sincere apologies, Your Majesty... Because the injury is magical... I cannot remove the mark."

"That's alright." Yuuri smiled, grateful that the pain was gone. "The ring covers it up anyway."

"Where is your escort?" Conrad was addressing Sara, voice hard.

Sara started to shake, refusing to look up. "Éix," he whispered, and the door on the other side of the room opened.

Reyes was standing in the closet, bound guard at his feet. A few of the men at the door rushed towards them to assess the unconscious soldier.

"He's not killed!" Sara's voice, shouting over the footsteps. "I just wanted to talk to you..."

Yuuri turned to look at Sara. The other boy was curled up on the chaise, clutching his legs to his chest and looking at Yuuri with red eyes over his knees.

"I just wanted to talk to you, Yuuri... Please don't let them hurt me."

"What?" Yuuri breathed, trying to understand Sara's strong reaction. "No harm's been done--"

"Unfortunately--" Conrad snapped, still standing at Yuuri's side. "That is not the case. This little game of yours has gone too far--"

Sara screamed and hid his face. "Don't let him kill me, Yuuri. Yuuri, please. Yuuri--"

Yuuri reached up to grab Conrad's arm, using it to pull himself to his feet as well as stop his guardian's advance. "Sara, stop this, Conrad's not going to-- do anything." He tried to make his voice as calming as possible.

"But he's killed so many." Sara was babbling now. "Monster of Ruttenburg. Murderer. MURDERER!"

"Sara..." Yuuri took a few steps forward and put a hand on the crying boy's shoulder. "It's alright."

Sara stopped shouting but still sniffled and shook, looking up at Yuuri with wide eyes. He bit his
lip and tried to nod as a tear dropped off the end of his nose.

Then Yuuri felt Conrad's hand on his back. "We should go. Give him time to recover before dinner."

_No..._ He couldn't just leave Sara this miserable. "Conr--" His guardian's hand gripped his shoulder. Hard.

Conrad had never touched him like this before. Almost painful. "Your Majesty."

Yuuri took one last look at the shivering boy on the couch. "Alright." He leaned forward and touched the top of Sara's head, like when he was comforting Greta. "I'll see you at dinner, Sara. Don't worry, we're still friends. No one will hurt you."

Sara nodded and leaned into his touch before Yuuri let Conrad lead him towards the door. His friend didn't let go of his shoulder all the while he was snapping orders for several guards to watch Sara and Reyes.

Yuuri could somewhat understand Conrad's concern. After all, Yuuri hadn't told him he was going, when he had promised Conrad he would... not to mention that when his guardian had arrived he had been on the floor in mysterious pain. Conrad was probably just worried about him and was being more overprotective than usual because of it.

Conrad didn't loosen his grip until they had traveled down several hallways toward the main part of the castle. Yuuri was too stunned to question it, but settled for glancing up at him every few steps with wide eyes. Something about Conrad's face kept him quiet and Yuuri wondered if there was something else going on that his friend wasn't telling him.

His suspicions only increased when they arrived at the door to Gunter's study and Conrad entered his teacher's room with only half a knock of warning.

"Your Majesty! Conrad!" Gunter sputtered, knocking a few books from the edge of his desk as he stood in shock.

"Please take care of His Majesty for a moment, I have to speak to my brother." Conrad's voice was hard.

"Of course." Gunter clasped his hands before his chest. "I always enjoy the honor of His Majesty's company." The overenthusiastic man rushed over to stand at his side. "But, Conrad, what has the selfish loafer done this time? I knew he was going to upset the current situation sooner or later--"

"Gwendal," Conrad snapped, "is the one I need to send a message to. I'll return later to see to His Majesty."

"Conrad!" Yuuri wrenched himself from Conrad's grasp. "What is going on? What's happened?"

"Your Maj--"

"CONRAD!" Yuuri shouted. "Tell me what's happening! You've never been like this! Can I do something? Can I help--"

The hand returned to his shoulder, this time soft. "Yuuri." Conrad's eyes were strange. "If you can help, you will be sent for. I don't want to worry you. Please stay here."

"When have I ever stayed when you've worried me like this!"
"A soldier is injured. Gisela is with him. He has the best help possible at the moment." Conrad took his hand from his shoulder. "I'll come for you soon and let you know how he's doing, alright? In the meantime, please don't go sneaking off. You'll scare us again."

"But Conrad--"

"Please, Yuuri. Please don't scare me again today."

Yuuri bit his lip. He knew there was something more going on... but now he felt terrible for making Conrad worry so much. "Okay." The word left his lips before he realized and Conrad was gone, racing footsteps fading down the dim hallway. Gunter started talking behind him, as fast and enthusiastic as ever, but Yuuri wasn't listening. He was too distracted by the dread that crawled up his spine and sat numbly in the back of his throat.

Something was definitely wrong.

********

********

For the second time that day Conrad ran. Each footstep a heartbeat. Each breath too slow. Blood pounded in his veins-- thick, full.

He couldn't let Yuuri see.

If he arrived at Gisela's chambers and his baby brother was dead-- Conrad wouldn't let Yuuri see him run for a third time. To the north wing. To the fancy suite. To murder that prince.

Slowly.

Because Conrad was sure this was Saralegui's doing. What else could have caused his brother's sudden--

A guard called out to him on his right-- worried about his rush.


Until he finally reached the door.

And stopped. Breath rasping from his lungs as he looked at the cracked wood of the painted white door. There wasn't sound. No screaming. Nothing to tell him his brother was still alive. For a moment Conrad wondered if they might have gone somewhere else-- but there was ice by the door. The same big blocks the servants hauled up from the cellar each morning. Melting into the hallway. He reached his hand towards the doorknob-- turned. Hot steam slammed into his face as he entered the room, so thick he could feel his clothes grow heavy in an instant.

"I TOLD you to just leave the ice by--" Gisela snapped, stopping when she looked up and recognized him. "Conrad."

Gisela was sitting on the edge of a soaked bed, holding Wolfram's bare ankles as his brother squirmed beneath the weight of a half melted block of ice on his red and naked chest. Lucien was struggling to hold Wolfram's wrists above his head as the boy whimpered. Conrad approached the bed. Numb. "What happened to him?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Gisela looked back down at the task at hand-- putting red feet
against another slab of ice until it popped and hissed in its rapid melting. "Stupid. Stupid..." Her voice was strong, her hands were steady, but tears started to fall from her eyes-- slipping along pink cheeks. "THIS... This doesn't happen all at once. He must have known..."

"Brother." Wolfram gasped, eyes searching the room as if he were blind. "Conrad."

Conrad rushed forward to kneel by the bed-- taking one of his wrists from Lucien to hold his hand. It burned. "Wolf--"

"They won't kill me. You have to do it... Please." Wolfram turned his head to look at him, hair soaked from sweat and melted ice-- lips bright and pupils wide. His little brother, so proud, so modest. Naked except for a towel draped over his hips, and begging for death. Someone would suffer for this.

"He's delirious. It's the heat." Gisela's voice shook-- just a tremor. "I promised myself I'd never lose someone like this again..."

"What is this?" Conrad breathed... He knew about soldiers overusing magic... death by their own element, but Conrad had only been assigned half-blooded troops. He'd never seen it this close.

Lucien spoke, pale face dotted with sweat. "He overspent. Burning out."

"Why?" Conrad shouted, gripped Wolfram's shoulders and shook-- bare flesh burning his hands. "WHY? Wolfram, did you let this happen?" He closed his eyes, unable to bare the sight of it. "Gisela, DO something. HELP HIM!"

"I'm doing what I can," she snapped. "How DARE you think otherwise!"

Wolfram arched in his grasp and Conrad opened his eyes in time to see the half melted block of ice slide off his chest-- shattering against the stone floor. "Yuuri... Want..."

"He's been asking for His Majesty." Lucien's voice was low. "I didn't know what happened... if he's alright it would be best to--"

"Gods..." Conrad breathed. This couldn't be happening.

Wolfram squirmed again-- arching-- a half cry of pain spilled from his lips and his hand flew free to grip Conrad's thigh-- fingers twisting in cloth. "Yuuri... Protect... I have to go East... Yuuri." And then he stopped struggling. Breath fell from his lips... soft... even... Heated flesh cooling-- lips changing from red to purple.

"Move him to the other bed," Gisela whispered. "And send someone for His Majesty."

"He's getting cold." Conrad put a hand to his brother's cheek-- watched as goosebumps rose on pale flesh.

Lucien lifted Wolfram's limp form and Conrad could feel the hand slide from his thigh. "It won't be long now. We can try to warm him up-- keep him comfortable..."

Conrad jumped as the door opened too fast and slammed against the opposing wall. "What is this madness! Conrad-- Wolfram?!" Gwendal's forehead was wrinkled in shock. A pair of wide-eyed guards stood behind him.

"Big Brother," Wolfram mumbled from Lucien's arms. "Where's Yuuri.... Greta..."
Gwendal's hands shook as he stumbled forward-- as if he were afraid to really touch. Both brothers watched in shocked silence as their little sibling was moved to the other bed and covered in a thick blanket. "Someone bring His Majesty-- don't tell him what's happening-- just--"

Suddenly Lucien screamed, leaping away from the bed as far as he could-- Wolfram's hand tight on his wrist.

"More." Wolfram's eyes were wide-- suddenly alert-- but somehow wrong.

Gisela rushed between them. "What did you do!"

"I didn't do anything--- I just tried to warm him up--- He was cold--- I only used a little magic!"

"More." Wolfram's voice rose and Conrad could see blood welling under each finger as it punctured the young soldier's wrist.

"Do as he asks!" Gwendal growled.

Gisela's eyes were wide. "I've never seen anything like this-- Just try it--"

"Alright..." Lucien's voice shook and the tiniest flame lit near his fingers.

Wolfram practically flew from the bed-- pinning the other man to the floor-- holding the captured palm against the back of his own head and releasing a terrifying howl of triumph. Then he leaned forward and bit the other man's neck. Flame spiraled up from Lucien's hand-- licking the ceiling as the trapped soldier screamed and tried to break free. And all at once the only thing Conrad could smell was burning flesh.

"Get him off! Gods! I'm not doing it! HELP!" Lucien tried to move away-- only opening the wound on his neck further. "He'll take it all! Wolf! Wolf it's me STOP IT!" Then he started to sob, tears running down his face as Wolfram held him. "Someone help..."

Conrad stayed where he was. If whatever... *this* was would save his brother... He would not help this man.

Gisela moved, though-- tried to put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder. "That's enough." From a few feet away Conrad could clearly see her grimace as she touched him-- must be burning.

Wolfram keened-- pulled back enough to lick at the blood still pumping from the wound.

Lucien shivered, probably too scared to move. Of all the stories he had heard of demons while he lived in human territories-- Conrad had never seen anything like this.

"That's enough. You have more time now." Gisela rubbed his back-- glistening with sweat. "Don't kill your friend, Wolfram. What would Yuuri think?"

"Yuuri..." Wolfram mumbled--letting go of Lucien's hand and sitting up. Blinking several times in recognition. And in a flash the instinct was gone from his eyes and limbs and Wolfram was there again. He moved back from Lucien's trembling form and sat on the bed-- grabbing a pillow to cover himself as his cheeks reddened. Blood dripped from his chin. "What happened?"

Without looking away from Wolfram, Gisela reached a hand forward-- green light weaving flesh closed as Lucien quieted in relief. "We should be asking you that question, Your Highness. I've never seen anything like that before."
"Is he alright?" Gwendal asked from the doorway.

Gisela took her hand from the now wound-less man and touched Wolfram's forehead. "His magic is very low-- but he's not in immediate danger so long as he doesn't try to use his maryoku."

"In that case, you two--" Gwendal snapped, and Conrad turned to see the two guards-- still standing with open mouths by the door. "Don't get His Majesty after all. I suppose your profound failure to follow orders has worked to our advantage for the moment." Gwendal turned back towards the room. "Wolfram, you will be dressed and in my office as soon as you are able. We will talk and then you will immediately leave for lesser Gael to see your spirit."

Wolfram's head was bowed. "Yes, Sir." He wiped some blood from his lips-- pausing for a moment to examine the red on his fingers. "I'm sorry... Lucien."

"It's alright," the blond on the floor whispered-- not looking at him.

"I'm glad you've made up, then." Gwendal snapped. "You, Corporal, will be accompanying Sir Belefield on his journey. I would imagine after this... episode you are in need of the spirit as well."

"It would probably be for the best," Gisela soothed.

Lucien nodded and rubbed his neck protectively.

"Conrad." He looked up-- When had he kneeled? "Make sure Wolfram arrives in my office in one piece... I'm going to secure His Majesty before the meeting." And then Gwendal turned on his heel and was gone.

Wolfram's fingers tightened on the pillow. "What happened to my uniform?"

"Sorry," Lucien mumbled. "We had to cut it off."

"Don't worry." Gisela tried to smile. "I'll find you something."

Conrad pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and moved forward to wipe at Wolfram's chin. "You scared us to death. What happened?"

Wolfram pouted and snatched the cloth from his hand, continuing the task himself. "I don't know what happened. I knew it was running low-- it's not my fault Yuuri--" He paused... eyes dark.

"Yuuri's alright. The Prince and his guard are well seen to at the moment." Conrad let one hand ball into a painful fist. "This is all my fault... I never should have left him... I'm sorry."

"Don't be such a wimp, Weller," Wolfram snapped. "Get me a new towel."

"Yes, yes." And Conrad forced himself to smile, just the smallest bit.

********

********

Murata shifted his back higher against the wall as he watched from the far edge of Gwendal's office. He had just arrived at the castle-- to persuade Sir Belefield to return to Lesser Gael of all things-- when he'd been informed of this. It was a miracle Wolfram was still alive.

He only wished he had been there to see it.

From Sir Weller's accounts it seemed to have been quite the spectacle. Though the Captain had
been unable to shed any light upon the magical specifics of the situation, Lady Gisela's theory had been quite intriguing. Apparently witnessing the death of the much beloved Susannah Julia had sparked her to do a bit of research in the field of magical over-expenditure. During her description of the incident she had put great weight upon the fact that the young Corporal had been with Sir Belefield when he made his journey to meet Ethne all those years ago. His fire would have been given directly before or after Wolfram's and therefore close enough in temperament to Wolfram's own not to destroy his soul.

Although Murata had kept his agreement to himself, the Biting Incident confirmed her theory in his mind. If Wolfram had taken some of the Corporal's magic into himself it would make sense that some kind of blood magic would be required to seal the pact. But that type of magic lay within the realm of things banned in demon society centuries before his first life. That Wolfram had been able to perform such a ritual act of barbarism during some near-death instituted trance was both miraculous and mildly terrifying.

How Murata wished again he had been there to see it...

The young Corporal seemed to be doing well, considering, and was currently sitting pale in a chair by the door. Murata imagined that the trauma of being the near-victim of physical and magical cannibalism could be lightened by the fact that it was preformed mid-pounce by a very naked Sir Belefield.

How Murata wished he had been there--

His thoughts were interrupted when Sir Belefield (now unfortunately clothed) entered the room accompanied by Sir Weller. He was wearing one of his more plebeian ensembles and his hair seemed almost brown. Murata's eyes flashed again to the Corporal, who was still in more formal attire. Clever. The resemblance was definitely there.

Immediately, Lady Cecelie jumped from her seat and trapped the poor boy in one of her trademark embraces. "Ohh my baby! Thank the gods you're alright! When Gwen told me what happened-- I-- ohh!" She hugged her youngest tighter as tears ran down her face. "I can't believe you, Conrad! Why didn't you send for me the minute you knew?!

Sir Weller's face was dark. "It was a mistake. The responsibility is mine--"

"Enough!" Gwendal snapped, rising from the chair behind his desk. "It has been brought to my attention that Wolfram knew of this-- This is a result of carelessness-- of profound stupidity the likes of which--"

"Gwendal!" Cheri shouted. "Stop it! It isn't the time to yell-- Ohh my poor baby, can we get you anything?-- How about a nice bath. You can use some of my perfume and I'll sneak you His Majesty. How does that sound, Wolfie?" She pulled him away from her bosom to hear his response and Wolfram immediately gasped for air.

"Mother--That's enough! It was stupid of me. Gwendal is right to yell. Please-- Mother... enough coddling."

Cheri drew back, but her sobbing returned and she fell into Conrad's arms for comfort. "All my sons-- I've been such a terrible mother-- I've loved you all so much but I'm such a failure! My baby almost left me again!"

"You've been wonderful, Mother. There, there..." Sir Weller did his best to comfort the sniffling woman. "I'm so sorry."
"Wolfram--" Gwendal continued, despite their mother's commotion. "You understand why I have to say this, don't you?"

"Yes... Brother." Wolfram stood up straighter-- looking stable despite the pallor of his cheeks.

"First, perhaps you should explain why you are so late."

Wolfram's hands went into fists. "I had to say goodbye to Greta... My daughter should not be affected by my poor judgment--"

"Had you died-- Had you DIED, Wolfram, do you think she wouldn't have been affected?"

Gwendal waited, but Wolfram made no move to respond. "What were you thinking?" He sat, thumb and forefinger rubbing his wrinkled forehead.

"Yuuri--"

CRACK. Wolfram's voice was interrupted by Gwendal's fist hitting the desk. An ink jar toppled-- glass rolling against the wood before it shattered in a black spectacle on the stone floor. "Matters of the heart..." he growled, before looking up. "You are to go to Lesser Gale at once! You will not see His Majesty before you do! For ONCE you will put your own health first! THAT is an order, Lieutenant."

Wolfram bit his lip through his glare. "Yes. Sir."

"I have already sent word ahead via pigeon." Gwendal stood again, walking around to stand in front of his desk. "Every checkpoint along your traditional route from here to the border will have new horses ready for two riders. I expect you to push as fast you can tonight and if you run the horses to froth at tomorrow's light you should be at least a hundred miles by noon tomorrow."

"Only two riders?" Cheri interrupted. "Shouldn't we send more? We need to protect him--"

"It's safer this way, Mother," Conrad soothed. "There is always the chance that someone in the Castle could be sending information to our enemies-- That Prince and his Guardian shouldn't find out Wolfram has left the protection of the castle. Lesser Gael is surrounded by Human territory and we don't want Wolfram's journey known by the wrong people."

"Which is why--" Gwendal continued, "Wolfram will be visiting Belefield for a few weeks. Another entourage is leaving in an hour."

"I don't think Uncle will like that much," Wolfram snapped.

Gwendal's face darkened further. "I'm sure his response will be-- amicable, considering the circumstances. And the story within these walls won't change much even if it isn't." He gave everyone a hard look before continuing. "The only people who will know your whereabouts who aren't in this room are Gisela, Anissina and His Majesty. Conrad-- I expect you NOT to allow any sort of adventures at the moment."

Conrad nodded.

"Make sure he understands--" Wolfram cut in, voice giving just the smallest of shakes. "If you don't explain it at least twice-- Make sure he knows everyone else will worry if he leaves-- If you have to, use Greta. He shouldn't break a promise to her."

"I take it you told your daughter, then." Gwendal glared.
"Yes," Wolfram managed, through gritted teeth. "She's my daughter. And she can keep a secret."

Gwendal was silent for a moment-- Murata was sure it was because of his own affection for the girl that he didn't question Wolfram's decision further. Murata knew Greta meant well... but she was still a child. It was dangerous.

"The horses should be ready by now." Gwendal stepped forward, until he was directly in front of Wolfram. "You will be safe. You will return."

Wolfram had to look up to see his brother's face. "Yes, sir."

Gwendal put a hand on the boy's head. Only for a moment. "Hurry."

Wolfram only had time to nod once before he was captured in his mother's embrace once more. Conrad placed a hand on the boy's shoulder for a moment and Wolfram made a few snapped comments about expecting Sir Weller to take good care of the wimp in his absence. In a matter of mere moments, Sir Belefield and the Corporal had been rushed out the door, towards waiting horses and a winding road to Lesser Gael.

Murata sighed and pushed away from the wall. Lady Cheri had followed Wolfram out of the door and now only Gwendal, Conrad and himself remained in the immaculate office. Gwendal moved to stand by the window. He probably wouldn't be satisfied his brother had followed orders until he saw two riders slip out the East gate.

There was a knock at the door and Sir Weller moved to answer it. Lady Karbelnikoff was there, accompanied by Gisela and a frazzled looking Dorcascus carrying a large box. Now that one meeting was over, it seemed to be time for the next.

********
********

Anissina could still feel the lump in her chest from when she had seen the Boy Wolf in the hallway. Pale and ready to leave the castle for a journey more dangerous than anyone would say aloud. She had managed to make a few passable spice cakes the previous night but had only been able to wrap them in a small cloth in her rush to move necessary equipment down from the lab for this meeting. Wolfram had given her a strange look, but taken them all the same.

She hoped they were safe to eat. The ones she had selected certainly had looked less black than the others.

Gwendal's office was quiet except for the sounds her equipment made as she unpacked, setting everything up on the long wooden table in the middle of the room. The Sage loomed in the shadows, sun reflecting off his glasses as he watched her go about her work. It was all she could do not to throw something at him. He had known something like this could happen...

But so had she.

Anissina rationalized that it had really been Wolfram's decision. But it still made her feel better to blame the Sage.

Now that Dorcascus had left and all their things had been placed upon the table, Gisela was pacing. For a woman who had seen so much death, the incident this afternoon clearly had her shaken. From the description it seemed to have been a truly remarkable event. Anissina could hardly wait to solve this whole plague thing so she could start doing proper research about what had happened.
Gwendal had his back to her and was looking out the window. She wondered how many new knitted items would be gracing the shelves in his room after this. At least Greta would have a few more presents to keep her occupied while the little girl worried about her traveling Papa.

Once she had finished setting up, Anissina cleared her throat. "Now that everything is ready, shouldn't we get started?"

The Sage moved away from his shadows and well-placed light to stand beside her. "Such interesting things always come out of your lab, Miss Anissina. I've been curious since you told us about it. What exactly--"

"His name is What's-Wrong-With-This-Kun. He looks at things and figures out what's different from how they should be." Anissina grinned proudly. "But I'll need someone to power it. Gwendal-"

"In a moment," the man huffed from the window.

The Sage gave a nervous laugh. "We should probably talk about a few things first."

"Your Grace, do you really think working separately is necessary? Shouldn't we pool our resources first to figure this all out faster?" Gisela crossed her arms worriedly.

"It will only be at first," he soothed. "We all have different strengths, and if we all try to figure it out using those strengths by ourselves at first, it should save time that would have been spent arguing." Then the Sage leaned on the back edge of a chair. "You brought the samples?"

"Of course." She gestured toward a small bag on the table. "I'm sure they're pure. The containers sent by Miss Anissina were very helpful."

Anissina beamed. "Did you expect anything less?"

Gisela bowed her head in recognition before moving on. "I tried to take samples from as wide a range as possible, so we could notice changes within those affected-- both mazoku and human, as well as a few samples from those who seemed to be recovering and those who had never shown any symptoms. Hopefully we should be able to identify what is causing it."

The Sage nodded his approval. "Between Lady Gisela's expertise in this world's medicine, Miss Anissina's inventions, and the technology and resources I've brought back from Earth, I think we have a good chance."

********

********

Yuuri pouted and glared spitefully at his mashed potatoes. He had refused to look at Conrad ever since his friend sat down at the table.

Four hours.

Four extra hours of one of Gunter's intensive study sessions. And Yuuri still had no idea why the older man had run off so suddenly after the... incident with Sara. Sure, he knew the story about the injured soldier-- but something so small didn't warrant the visit from Gwendal soon after Conrad had left--

This HAD to stop! After dinner he was going to insist upon meeting everyone. He was supposed to be king!
But more than that... he was friends with everyone. How could Conrad keep something from him!? Yuuri could hardly wait to see Wolfram tonight. At least he would tell him if he knew anything. Tonight. Yuuri could feel his face get hot. Images from that afternoon swelled in his mind and he gripped his spork until his knuckles went white. He still couldn't believe it hadn't been a dream... Wolfram had-- and it had been so-- Yuuri tried closing his eyes in an attempt to will the heat from his cheeks, but that only made the images stronger.

He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Your Majesty, are you alright?" came Conrad's worried voice.

Yuuri nodded vigorously and proceeded to chug the rest of the water in his goblet to give himself a few extra seconds. "I'm fine, no need to worry." He was saved from answering any more questions when Sara sniffled over his dinner. Again.

He felt a wave of guilt wash over. Yuuri had been so busy spending all his wondering thoughts on his situation with Wolfram that he had almost forgotten about what had happened with Sara. He shuddered. Wolfram couldn't find about about that any time soon-- Not that Yuuri wanted to lie to him... It was just... Well, what had happened with Sara had been some kind of awful mistake. It had just sort of happened. What if Wolfram found out and was furious, or worse, hurt? Yuuri couldn't stand the thought of the type of impact this would have on his relationship with his best friend.

It wasn't as if he'd wanted it! This was so-- He'd never even had a single girlfriend! Why was he suddenly some sort of pretty boy magnet? After all, Yuuri must have gotten used to the idea of Wolfram liking him a bit over the years... but Sara? And so suddenly! Why did Sara have to like him of all people?

Yuuri took a bite of his food and stole a glance up at his surroundings. It was just himself, Conrad, Sara and Reyes sitting down. But there were at least a dozen guards standing at attention in an oppressive ring around the table. He couldn't take it anymore! Any of this-- "Sara..." he said, in his calmest voice. "Are you finished?"

The other boy put his hands in his lap and nodded, looking across the table at Yuuri with large hopeful eyes.

Yuuri clenched his toes and prepared to disappoint him. "Then I'm sure you won't mind if I excuse myself. It's been a long day and I really want to get to bed early."

"I'm sorry." Sara's head bowed, bangs covering most of his face. "You're mad."

Yuuri tried to unclench his jaw enough to speak. "I'm not mad. I just--" He sighed. "I just want to go to sleep."

Sara simply nodded again.

Even though Yuuri felt terrible leaving the situation with Sara as it was, there were just too many other things on his mind to handle that properly right now. He was sure that he could convince Sara that friendship was the best course. After all, he wasn't particularly good-looking-- Yuuri paused. Maybe Sara didn't really like him after all, but it was only because he was king. That would make much more sense than Sara liking him for anything to do with himself. He would just have to explain to Sara that he didn't need to do anything like that to assure their country's connection.

Yuuri smiled a bit. Well, even if he couldn't have that conversation now, it was a relief to have it solved in his mind. "Sara. I'm not mad at all, so stop worrying, alright? We'll have a nice long talk
tomorrow, so try to get some rest yourself." He kept the smile on his face until Sara looked up to see it, then he stood. "Conrad, will you walk with me?"

The other man was already on his feet. "Of course, Your Majesty. You needn't have asked."

"Well then, goodnight," Yuuri said and headed for the door. He waited until he and Conrad were a few hallways away before speaking. "Conrad... I don't like that you're hiding things from me."

"Your Majesty, I--"

"Yuuri."

"Yuuri, I--"

"We should go somewhere. Gwendal should hear this too... I can't believe everyone is still tiptoeing around me after all this time! How many times do I have to prove myself to all of you?!" Yuuri had to put his hands into his pockets, they were shaking so badly. "We're friends... This 'Your Majesty' business aside-- shouldn't that matter more, Conrad?" He kept walking, not wanting to turn and see the look on his friend's face.

Conrad put a hand on his shoulder, stopping them both. "Yuuri, we can talk to Gwendal in a moment. I need to tell you some things first."

Yuuri bowed his head. "Fine."

They walked again in silence until Conrad led him into an empty conference room. It was one of the places they used when a lot of important people came to the castle and ended up spending hours pretending not to yell at one another. Expensive looking tapestries hung from the walls and the fact that they were the only two people in the room made the table seem longer and the chairs seem more empty.

"Why don't you sit, Yuuri." Conrad locked the door behind him before walking toward him.

"Conrad." Yuuri remained standing. "Why did you lock the door?"

The other man looked pained. "It's to give me more time to keep you from running out of it."

"Erm." This was turning out to be a bit more serious than he had anticipated. Cold nerves pooled in his gut and he leaned back against the table.

This must have been close enough to sitting to put Conrad at ease and the older man moved away from the door to stand next to him. Conrad put a hand on his arm and Yuuri couldn't help but wonder if it was there for comfort or confinement.

"Yuuri," Conrad started, and took a breath. "What I told you this afternoon about a soldier being hurt wasn't a lie."

The sour coil in his gut wound tighter and Yuuri had to force his voice out. "Who?"

"He's alright now-- You have to focus on that before I tell you anything more." Conrad's grip on his arm tightened.

"Okay, so this person is fine now. Who was it, Conrad?" Yuuri could feel a cold sweat break across his skin as he waited.

Conrad took a breath. "Wolfram."
"WHAT!" Yuuri turned as fast as he could with Conrad's grip on his arm, fingers digging into him. He needed to be facing him. "Conrad-- What happened? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Yuuri, please calm down!" Conrad put his other hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "He's fine now, remember! But..." The older man lowered his gaze, seemingly focused on the floor between them. "I won't deny that the mistakes I've made today have been many, and that if it wasn't for the fact that Wolfram was very very lucky, you-- There would be no forgiveness."

Yuuri looked up at his friend's face. "Conrad. You're scaring me... please just explain what happened. Where is Wolfram now? Can I see him?"

"No." Conrad's voice was soft.

Even though Conrad opened his mouth to speak further, Yuuri couldn't stop himself from cutting him off. "If he's fine, why can't I see him?" Yuuri's voice shook. Wolfram was always supposed to be there. This bright and incomparable presence in his life. The thought that Wolfram could so suddenly not be there was terrifying in a profound way. Somehow worse now than when he had thought Wolfram dead the first time-- lying on the dirty ground while Yozak took his pulse. Yuuri's hands were shaking, and in an attempt to ground them he gripped the front of Conrad's jacket. "Conrad, where--"

"He's on his way to the only place that can truly make him well--"

"I thought you said he was ALRIGHT!"

"His life is not presently in danger! He ran out of magic, he has to go to Lesser Gael to replenish it. He has to have Second Rites." Conrad was finally looking at him, eyes wide and willing him to be calm.

Yuuri was decidedly not calm.

How could something like this have happened so suddenly! "What do you mean... run out of magic?" It was one of those things everyone here seemed to talk about, but Yuuri had never heard of it happening since he'd arrived. Everyone always warned him about overdoing it in human territories, but since he'd never really been hurt from it Yuuri tended not to think of it as a real threat. When he needed magic it simply came. But then again, hadn't overusing magic caused the death of Conrad's Susannah Julia?

"Apparently Wolfram knew he was running out, was under orders not to use his magic until he journeyed to Lesser Gael--"

"You KNEW something like this and didn't tell me!" Wolfram knew something like this and didn't tell me?

"Of course not! The only one who seemed to know was the Sage and he says Wolfram had been delaying of his own decision. But..." Conrad trailed off, his eyes once again dark, distant. "When I told you a soldier was injured this afternoon, I didn't know what was wrong. Only that he was hurt-badly. I found him on my way to find you. One of his men was with me and took him to Gisela while I went to find you-- Wolfram had told a guard that you were alone with Saralegui-- I didn't know what had happened. I didn't know if you were alright."

"But I was!" Yuuri interrupted. "If you knew then... why didn't you say something!"

"Because you didn't know. Something had happened to Wolfram when he was following you and Saralegui, I-- I knew-- at the time I thought it had to be Saralegui's fault. After I left you-- If
Wolfram hadn't been alright--" Conrad paused once more. "I would have had to kill him. I'm not proud-- There are parts of me of which I am not proud. I did not want you to have to watch me kill him."

Yuuri felt like he was in shock. "What if Wolfram wasn't alright... What if I could have saved him but I wasn't there?"

Conrad remained silent as blood rushed in Yuuri's ears.

And then the other thing Conrad had said seemed to register. “You would kill him?”

“If I thought he killed my brother. Yes.”

Sara's voice echoed in his ears. Monster of Ruttenburg. Murderer! Murderer!

“No...” Yuuri whispered. “You wouldn't. Conrad, you couldn't.”

Even though his voice was hard, Conrad's eyes were sad. “I'm not proud.”

“But Sara didn't do anything! He was with me the whole time! Sara didn't do anything that would make Wolfram need to--” A heartbeat. Yuuri felt like he couldn't breathe. No. Wolfram couldn't have seen that. And even if he had it wasn't as if Sara could have known that Wolfram would get sick if he used his magic-- If he got angry enough. Yuuri hadn't even known... There was no way Sara could have.

“Yuuri.” Conrad had removed the hand gripping Yuuri's arm and placed it lightly on his head. “Are you alright? Did Saralegui--”

“No.” He forced himself to look at his friend's face again. “I don't understand why Sara is everyone's target for everything. He's not a bad person.”

“I have my own reasons to be suspicious.” Conrad removed his hand from Yuuri's head.

Yuuri frowned, “What reasons?”

Conrad's eyes narrowed. “When I found you Yuuri, Sara was very concerned about the fact that I was in the room.”

“Well you can be a bit menacing... And he's lived in a human territory... I'm sure your reputation is intimidating to people who don't know the real you.” Yuuri could feel his cheeks get hot as guilt rose for being intimidated earlier by Conrad's statement that he would be able to kill Sara out of revenge.

“Sara seemed to be very concerned, and yet his guardian was content to watch from across the room. Without making so much as a move to draw his weapon.” Conrad waited for recognition to dawn on Yuuri's face before continuing. “I will protect you, Yuuri. I've made mistakes-- but nothing I've ever done has been without the need to ensure your safety at the forefront of my thoughts. Sara is, if not dangerous, at the very least hiding much of what he wants from us. If he does wish to do you harm, the first thing he would do is find a reason for me not to be there. For me not to be able to protect you. And since you are the king, who's mind should he change of that first?”

Yuuri's head seemed to swell with too many thoughts, aching and piling on top of one another in unbalanced stacks. He moved away from Conrad to sit in one of the abandoned chairs and put his head in his hands. Conrad let him go but stayed close. “This is all so much.”
“I know. I'm sorry.”

Yuuri tightened his fists by the side of his head until strands of his hair got caught between his fingers and tugged painfully at the roots. It was alright, though. For some reason the sting helped him focus. “I'm going to talk to Sara tomorrow. I can't-- think about that right now.” Yuuri took a deep breath and made himself look up. “Tell me more about Wolfram. He's going to Lesser Gael... But that's through human territory. South... He'd be going through the areas that are being affected by the plague.”

Conrad sat in the chair beside him. “He's going to be traveling along an ancient path. One that has been protected and hidden by mazoku over the years even though it leads through human territories. It avoids major cities, and in those places where it goes near humans, the people there have always thought those particular patches of forests haunted. Wolfram shouldn't be near many people-- and people are what spread disease.”

Yuuri nodded, but he didn't feel much better. Wolfram was... gone. He had seemed so happy the last time he'd seen him, so real and alive. It was surreal that he would go to bed tonight alone. That there would be no more sneaking around to do homework. No more--

Yuuri blushed and was horrified with by his own train of thought. How could he think about missing something like that when his friend could be in trouble? That was hardly the most important part of their relationship. Then another thought. “Greta.” He stood. “Greta will be worried, I should tell her before she finds out he's gone on her own.”

“Wolfram told her before he left.” Conrad stood beside him.

“What?!” Yuuri spun to face him. “He said goodbye to Greta and not to--”

“He wanted to see you,” Conrad interrupted. “Why he wasn't permitted is a question for Gwendal.”

Yuuri was silent for a moment. "If Wolfram really wanted to say goodbye-- He wouldn't have listened."

"Wolfram was..." His friend paused to collect himself. "I imagine after such a nearly fatal experience Wolfram would be eager to do what was needed to return to your side as quickly as possible. I'm sure he thought he would be better able to protect you if he didn't have to worry about not being able to use his magic."

Yuuri nodded dimly again. And then he didn't move, he just let the thoughts and feelings run over him in waves. His head throbbed and he rubbed his forehead.

"A lot has happened." Conrad's hand found it's way to his back again. "Maybe you should get some rest. You said you were tired earlier."

"Alright." Yuuri allowed himself to be led out of the conference room, down the hallways, and into the royal suite. It just seemed big and dark and empty. He sat numbly on the bed and waited for Conrad to move around the room and light all the candles. All that did was make Yuuri's chest throb and the image of Wolfram lighting up the room with a wave of his hand replay over and over in his mind. Yuuri tried to think about the last time he had seen Wolfram use his magic. It was strange, Wolfram always seemed to use his power for everything. It was so much a part of the other boy that imagining him without it seemed impossible. But the more Yuuri thought, the more he realized that Wolfram really hadn't been using his maryoku lately. In fact, Yuuri couldn't remember him using it ever since the Winter Formal when... When the lights went out and Wolfram hadn't been there...
How could he not have noticed something like this? Especially with how much time the two of them had been spending together lately. Though, Yuuri admitted, his mind was... elsewhere during most of those times. But still, why would Wolfram keep such a secret from him?

"Yuuri." Conrad's voice.

He started. Yuuri had been so lost in thought he had forgotten the other man was in the room.

"I'm sorry about all of this, but if you need me anytime tonight I'll be right outside." Conrad bowed slightly before closing the door behind him.

Once again Yuuri was struck by how large-- how cold this big room was. *I'll be right outside.* Yuuri stared at the wooden door. Conrad was outside-- to make sure he didn't try anything stupid.

Like follow Wolfram.

Yuuri knew it was a stupid idea. Irresponsible. He was needed so much here. Yuuri was Maou and there was all this complicated business with Sara and the plague. But how wonderful it would be to escape it all. To have an adventure with Wolfram and see the countryside again. To sleep under the stars and breathe the fresh air of the fields. He sighed and lay back on the bed.

It was a stupid idea.

Yuuri got up and walked out on the balcony. After all... this air was fresh, shouldn't that be enough? He looked down at the gardens below, a few guards making their rounds among the hedges and the half-melted snow covering the flowerbeds. Yuuri remembered jumping out of balconies, escaping stuffy parties and taking care of Wolfram when he got drunk. The other boy's lips on his neck. His own temporary horror.

In some selfish way Yuuri felt cheated that Wolfram had left now. When he seemed on the verge of... something. He knew he was doing things with the other boy because it was what everyone wanted. What would make everyone else happy. What would be best for their daughter and family. Yuuri shivered. It wasn't uncomfortably cold, really. Spring seemed to be on the edge of everything, but the wind was starting to pick up and he could hear the trees rustling in darkness. There was a low buttress sticking out from the side of the castle to his right, a slight slope two stories down to the gardens.

It was a stupid, selfish idea.

Maybe he could just catch up with Wolfram-- see him for a few hours and find out why he had left so suddenly... then come back before anyone missed him! Wolfram couldn't have left all that long ago and Ao was the best horse in the stables... And he would get to see Wolfram... Yuuri bit his lip. He would probably get caught anyway. And then Gwendal would lecture him.

But Yuuri was the king! Shouldn't he be allowed to do what he wanted?

He took a careful look at the guards down below. None of them seemed to notice he was even standing on the balcony. Yuuri moved over to his right and lifted himself over the railing so he could stand on the small edge on the other side. Then he made the small jump over to the buttress.

The buttress was a good four feet wide, and he had to spread his arms uncomfortably to catch each edge enough to hold himself. The stone was cold and rough beneath his fingers and he could feel it scrape his skin as he slowly let himself slide down the castle wall. As his feet touched the ground Yuuri was amazed he had been able to get this far without getting caught.
A small tickle of guilt rose in his mind. Conrad-- everyone-- must have had faith in him not to try something like this. It was the only explanation. But there was no way Yuuri would be able to climb up the way he'd come, and there was no way he could get into his room again without Conrad seeing him. If Yuuri was going to be punished he might as well commit the crime. Besides, hopefully he would be back before too much trouble had been caused.

It probably took him half an hour to get to the stables. The night was cloudy and the moon and stars were hidden beneath total darkness and Yuuri imagined his black uniform helped him avoid detection on more than one occasion. As he slipped through the large wooden doors his senses were assaulted by the smells of horse and hay. Yuuri's chest was close to bursting with excitement. He began to count the stalls on his right, eager to get to his trusted Ao, when suddenly he was pulled to the side and a firm hand covered his mouth

********

********

His.

Wolfram had always felt possessive about the boy he now held, or at least he had from the first week he'd known him. But this. He pushed his squirming ex-fiancé against the wall with a thump that echoed dangerously in the too-still stables. A few horses snorted and whinnied in annoyance, most already asleep. Wolfram kept his hand on the boy's mouth, watching as shock flew from Yuuri's eyes, replaced by grateful recognition and followed abruptly-- by guilt.

He narrowed his eyes as he slowly pulled his hand from Yuuri's mouth, dragging against soft flesh he knew had been tainted.

"Wolfram!" Yuuri gasped in an excited whisper-- at least the wimp had the mind to stay quiet.
"Conrad said you'd left!"

"I did."

"Then when--"

"Gwendal would have watched us leave to be sure-- I snuck back. Because I know how much of a wimp you are," he hissed, refusing to mimic the joy in the other boy's features.

Yuuri licked his lips nervously, obviously put off by his manner. "Wolf-- I-- I'm so happy to see you! I thought you had left without saying goodbye. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried to. Several times-- You distract me." Wolfram moved closer, bracing his hands against the wall on either side of Yuuri's shoulders-- Insistent that his hissed whispers be louder, more threatening. How dare Yuuri do what he'd done. "The most recent time being this afternoon. But if you'll recall--" Wolfram leaned in, so he could be right by Yuuri's ear. "I was... distracted." He could hear Yuuri swallow.

"Look, Wolfram... I-- I'm sorry--"

"I saw you." Wolfram kept his face where it was. Hidden. Too close to be seen. It was enough that the wimp cause him to feel this but he would not let him see it. "I saw you... you cheater." He paused, listening to Yuuri's rapid breathing, feeling his body shake against him. "How dare you."

You're not who I knew you were.

"I didn't-- I didn't--" Yuuri's voice trembled and he could somehow feel he was close to tears. "I
didn't want to-- I didn't. Wolfram you have to... You have to believe me."

It hurt.

Wolfram buried his face in the other boy's neck as Yuuri whimpered-- apologizing. Saying all the things Wolfram knew he would. After all, Wolfram knew him. He knew that Yuuri would never do anything to hurt his friends. To hurt anyone. Which is why when that filthy prince had touched him he wouldn't have known what to do. Would have been so very Yuuri about it all. The wimp would hurt himself for this. Worse than Wolfram ever could and more than Wolfram could ever really want. Because really, hurting this other person-- so close to him, so far-- was the last thing that he could ever want to do.

Wolfram had been stupid. He had let his emotions take control. And for that he had almost lost everything.

"Wolfram... Wolf-- Please say something!" And then Yuuri's arms were around him, holding him, as the other boy hiccuped and Wolfram could feel Yuuri's tears slide onto the side of his face. "Oh god. Did you really almost die? You can't die. You can't die. You can't. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Please-- Please say something, Wolfram."

Wolfram moved his head to the side, rubbing the wet from Yuuri's cheek with his own. And because he had almost died, and the thought of doing anything other than exactly what he wanted seemed all kinds of stupid, Wolfram started to kiss his Yuuri's tears away.

Yuuri hushed and seemed to hold him tighter. Allowing Wolfram to do whatever he wished.

And because he wanted, Wolfram allowed himself to pretend that there was something inside Yuuri besides guilt that let him.

Wolfram let his eyes fall shut and focused on how impossibly warm and smooth the other boy's skin felt against his lips. How the salt of his tears felt against his tongue. How Yuuri's breath felt on his face. When he got close to the other boy's mouth he could feel Yuuri tilt his head toward him. He pulled away, forcing himself to hover just above where he was drawn most. "You let him touch you."

"I'm sorry--"

"It's unclean."

"I'm sorry--"

"Do you want me to make it better?"

Yuuri's fingers dug into his back. "Yes."

And so Wolfram kissed him. Hard. Hard enough to ease the ache in his chest, to make their teeth hit clumsily, and until he could taste blood. He pressed Yuuri against the wall with as much force as he could, using every part of himself. He needed to feel him. To own this. Yuuri was his. He had to be. Wolfram couldn't live in a world where it wasn't so. Wolfram made sure that every piece of soft flesh that made up Yuuri's lips had been breathlessly devoured, that his mouth was clean, and that his tongue was un-tarnished. Wolfram needed. And he didn't stop until he could feel that Yuuri needed too.

Even if it was only a physical response.
Yuuri broke free to breathe, leaning his head back against the wall. It took all of Wolfram's willpower not to simply move his desperate kisses down the other boy's neck. But things like that could lead to other things-- Things that could wait until he wouldn't drop dead the moment his emotions got the better of him.

"Yuuri." Wolfram moved back, and even in the dim light he could tell how red and swollen the other boy's lips had become. "I'm lucky to be here-- in this world. I want to be lucky enough to return to your side and because of that I do have to go." He waited for his words to sink in. "And you have to stay."

"But--"

"You know I'm right." Wolfram put his hand under Yuuri's chin, forcing him to look at him even though Yuuri tried to look at the ground. "The only reason you came was to say goodbye."

For a moment it looked like Yuuri was going to argue, but then he only pouted. "I don't like this."

"I'm glad you don't." Wolfram leaned close again. "It gives me something to want to come back to."

This time Yuuri met the kiss half way and it was much more gentle, but no less desperate. Wolfram wanted to memorize everything. Every taste and every flutter of his heart. The little whimper Yuuri made when he held him close. This was bliss. This was worth everything.

As always, Wolfram pulled back before he would have liked, but for a while was content to rest his forehead against Yuuri's, eyes still closed, and wait for their breathing to slow.

*I love you.*

Useless words to say, but Wolfram felt them so much they had to be there. Stupid to say them now, when he was sure they would ruin this. Yuuri wouldn't know what to say back-- and this goodbye would be sullied. And more than that, if Wolfram didn't return, it would only add to any burden his Yuuri would feel.

"When will you be back?" The heat of Yuuri's words bounced off his face.

Wolfram moved away a bit. "Shouldn't be more than a month."

"A MONTH--" Yuuri's eyes widened as his own hand shot up to cover his mouth after the shout. "That's so long!"

"The journey should be longer, we'll be pushing the horses hard." Wolfram could feel the corners of his mouth twitch up. It made his chest swell to see that Yuuri would miss him so much. "Lucien is good with camping and the like, and we'll have enough supplies that we shouldn't have to stop at any villages along the way. Don't worry too much while I'm gone. I expect you to have gotten the truth out of that sneaky prince by the time I come back so that I can kick him back to Shou Shimeron."

Yuuri gave him a warning look. "Everyone picks on Sara."

Wolfram glared. "He is dangerous Yuuri. I want you to promise, whether you trust him or not, that you'll be careful. Don't let him get you alone again. I fully expect you to allow Weller to look after you while I'm gone."

Yuuri nodded reluctantly. "The only thing is... I feel like he would tell me if we were alone. He's
started to mention things, about how he didn't have a choice to come here. If it could help with finding things out, shouldn't I be able to take a little risk?"

"It's not a little risk." Wolfram grabbed him, holding him close for possibly the last time. "You are so important. You are our king. If something happens to you, every sacrifice we've made-- Gwendal, Conrad, everyone-- will be useless." Wolfram could feel himself blushing, so he put his face into Yuuri's shoulder. "Don't do anything reckless. And--" He squeezed his eyes shut. It was mortifying, but he knew if he didn't say it he would regret it. "Don't let anyone else... touch you... the way you let me."

Wolfram knew, as jealous as he was, he had no right to the wimp, but he couldn't help himself.

He felt Yuuri twist to press his lips against Wolfram's head as he spoke. "I don't-- I don't really know... about any of this. But... I don't want to do those types of things with Sara."

Wolfram just held him for a moment. Basking in the feeling of Yuuri's arms around him, in so much closer to a declaration than he had allowed himself to hope for. He forced himself to let go, pausing to place one last kiss on Yuuri's still-swollen lips. "I have to go."

Yuuri, who still had a hand on Wolfram's hip, squeezed once before releasing him. He nodded. "Come home safe."

"Don't look so worried, Wimp." Wolfram made himself huff, needing to put some semblance of normalcy into this unfortunate parting. "It's just a little trip. I'll go and preform the rites and head straight back. There's nothing to worry about."

He could see Yuuri forcing the smile onto his lips. "Alright, then."

"Don't spoil Greta while I'm gone."

Yuuri pouted. "That's your job."

"She's my daughter," Wolfram whispered defensively. "Remember, though, it would be best if no one knew what happened. The story is I'm going to Belefield. Don't let on you know otherwise, especially to Prince Pervert."

"What did you call him?" Yuuri's eyes got wide.

Wolfram's cheeks reddened. "That's not important. Just remember to stay on your guard about everything."

This was it. Goodbye. Wolfram wanted to drag it on forever, but he knew he really did need to leave. Staying this long hand been reckless and who knew how much luck he had left in his future. "You should be escorted back to your room. I'm going to watch you until you contact the nearest guard and then I'll go back the way I came. Lucien is waiting out of sight with the horses."

Wolfram paused, drinking in the sight of him one final time. "Take care of yourself."

For a moment Yuuri seemed not to know what to do with his hands before shoving them into his pockets. "You better take care of yourself, too."

They walked together to the door, arms and shoulders brushing occasionally along the way. Before he left, Yuuri tried to give him an encouraging smile, but Wolfram would treasure the light hand that fell on his shoulder more. "Really, Wolfram. Come home soon." Yuuri's eyes narrowed for a moment and the hand moved to touch the bottom of Wolfram's hair, tugging lightly on a lock. There must have been enough light for Yuuri to tell the color had changed.
"I'll do everything I can," Wolfram breathed.

And then Yuuri turned to walk away, towards a sentry standing a few yards off by the castle wall. As he walked, Yuuri looked over his shoulder at least five times, and Wolfram's feet felt stuck to the filth-covered floor. It wasn't until after Yuuri made contact with the guard and the two of them turned the corner back towards the main part of the grounds that Wolfram was able to move at all.

********

********
Two days later.
Shin Makoku: Blood Pledge Castle.

It was a cool morning. Most of the castle had been up for hours, servants tending to meals and chores, soldiers training on the grounds, their hard muscles gleaming with exertion as swords clashed in the early light.

Cold air slipped beneath the high slit of her gown with every step as her new pair of Voltarian heels clicked gloriously against the stone floor of the drafty hallway, every footfall making her perfect cleavage bounce provocatively over the rim of her fitted black gown. Ohh how she would never tire of the royal colors!

Once a queen, always a queen.

Cecile von Spitzburg smirked to herself as she made her way through the North Wing. It was a pity the soldiers were off training, she was sure more than a few would be eager to entertain her this morning.

After all, it hardly hurt to look.

What she wouldn't give to be on the sea again! Pursuing more viable love conquests throughout the continents! But occasionally the duties of motherhood called, and Cheri took great pleasure in administering the Divine Justice of Love when opportunity struck.

Her poor baby! Her darling child! It made her heart ache to think of him traveling practically alone on such a dangerous quest. Her precious Wolfram who looked so much like herself—like his poor father. She had always wished the very best for him. He was so beautiful, always the most sought after in court—after herself of course. Cheri's smile widened with fond memories of her Wolfram's society debut. It had been right before the war, one of the last happy times before the world went dark. There had been seven duels that evening and at least twice as many tousles among the girls.

She had been so proud that night, to see her darling sought after by so many. Loved by so many. No matter what she did he had always seemed to be a lonely child. And Cheri remembered, too, how the night had been bittersweet. How seeing so many fight over her youngest son had reminded her of her third husband's death.

They had only been married for two months. It had been a whirlwind romance— the most beautiful man she could find to ease the pain of Dan Hiri's disappearance. But the downfall of such a handsome face, such a devoted heart, was that it occasionally brought out a terrible darkness in the souls of others.

But such things were in the past. What mattered now was doing whatever she could to ensure the happiness of her youngest son.

Cheri slowed and ran a hand through her curls before turning the last corner, a knowing smile on
her lips as she approached the guards. Sometimes getting what she wanted was too easy.

"Your Majesty!" The two men on either side of the ornate door jerked themselves into a formal salute.

Her smile widened as she closed in on the man nearest to her, making sure to lock her gaze on the other as she pressed her palm against the soldier's chest. "I just need to pop in and get something. You'll watch the door-- protect me?"

"Yes!" the two men squeaked, almost at once.

Cheri leaned closer, pressing her chest against him. "Thank you so much." And after a final, longing glance at both of them she slipped through the doors to the suite.

The room was lavish enough for foreign royalty to be sure, but it wasn't nearly as large as her own chambers. The windows were open, letting in a frigid breeze, and morning light streamed across the ornately carpeted floors. Both of the beds were freshly made and a dozen or so trunks and parcels were stacked against the far wall.

She walked into the middle of the room, close enough to the king-sized bed to sit down for a moment, pondering her next move.

Where could it be?

Her eyes wandered to the adjoining bathroom and she smirked. A likely place, to be sure. Cheri stood and made her way to the marble-covered room, pausing for a moment to adore her marvelous reflection in a large mirror above a small chest of drawers, upon which perched a freshly filled pitcher and empty basin. There were a few unfamiliar boxes in the room, and so she started with them.

Several combs, hairpins, and unmentionables later, Cheri still hadn't found it. She leaned against the silver tub and pouted, eyes running along the shelves near the door. All of the liquid soap and perfume bottles were familiar. The type of thing that lined the walls of upscale boutiques in town.

But perhaps...

Cheri stood, pulling the bottles from the shelf one by one, pausing and opening each of them before moving on to the next. None of them smelled out of the ordinary. She took one last look around the room, even opening the door to the freshly cleaned privy. Nothing.

It was time to start on the trunks.

The young king Saralegui didn't seem to be much of an unpacker. Cheri herself always took great pleasure in moving into the suites she was offered in various castles. There were so many drawers to open, so many things potentially left behind to tickle her curiosity. But most of Saralegui's things were still packed away in trunks stacked neatly against the east wall. She tapped her fingers together in anticipation as she approached.

On top of the trunks were a few wrapped boxes and Cheri picked up the first, holding it next to her ear as she shook. A crunching, rattle of a sound greeted her and she was tempted to open the fairly light parcel. But, if she could avoid it, it was best not to give away that someone had been in poking about, so she set the box aside, along with its multiple copies.

The trunks were filled with clothes-- fine clothes to be sure, but nothing out of the ordinary. She let the lid of the largest trunk fall shut with a loud thump before sitting on it. This was becoming
difficult. Cheri's eyes wandered around the room, lingering on the smaller bed in the corner. Beneath the bed-skirt the square corner of something stuck out.

Upon closer inspection the small corner of something turned out to be another one of the small boxes, but this one was open. Cheri delicately slid the lid from the top of the box. A perfectly trimmed eyebrow rose. Cookies? Rows and rows of small black disks half-filled the box. Each little delicacy was topped with an artful white smear of what appeared to be sugar frosting. Cheri plucked one from the box and raised it to her lips, pausing to smell it.

Her nose wrinkled. It smelled like dirt. Tentatively her tongue slid between her lips, touching the edge of the cookie briefly. It tasted like dirt with sugar. She never imagined the confectionery preferences of humans could be so appalling. Perhaps it was a sort of cultural delicacy. After all, she never had been fond of the little stuffed sea-creatures they were so fond of in northern Christ, or Kabelnikov's sour pickles. Cheri placed the cookie back into its box and closed the lid. As she slid the box back in its place it bumped the leg of the bed, causing a suspicious rattling clink to sound from the single drawer on the bedside table.

Cheri's heart leapt a bit to see the two glass bottles inside. The first was the quality oil left in guest rooms for intimate purposes, half empty-- Cheri smirked-- but the other bottle was of a unique shape. As soon as she opened it, Cheri was sure she had found what she was looking for. Her body hummed and her nose and lips tingled. Quickly closing it again, Cheri rose and started toward the door feeling thoroughly satisfied. The situation was complicated enough without the aid of lusty perfumes and potions. Besides, there was already a love mistress of potions in this castle, and hardly room for another.

Before she touched the handle, Cheri froze. There were voices outside the door. The young king and his Reyes must have finished breakfast early. She could hear the guards outside making pathetic attempts to stall.

Well, she sighed, it was best not to look caught. Cheri stored the procured bottle down the front of her dress and crossed the room once more, sitting on the king-sized bed facing the double doors. She barely had time to toss a few curls over her shoulder before king Saralegui and his handsome guard entered the room.

"Good morning, Gentlemen," she purred. "I've been wanting to speak to you-- both of you-- and I just couldn't keep away..." Cheri stood and gestured to the chaise. "Why don't we all sit down for a chat?"

For a moment, light hit king Saralegui's glasses, reminding her of the Sage, before he nodded. The tall, dark Reyes looked on-edge as he followed his monarch into the room.

The guards outside seemed hesitant, so Cheri added, "I just need a moment alone, I promise I'll be good." She made sure to let each syllable drip with something extra to encourage their hands beneath the sheets at night.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" The two soldiers blushed, and closed the doors.

"To what do we owe the honor of your visit, Your Majesty." The young king spoke like noble he was.

She smiled. "Please, call me Cheri."
"As you wish, Lady Cheri." The young man nodded and sat on the chaise, tossing some hair over his shoulder before folding his hands in his lap. "You won't mind if my time for this meeting is short; I have to change before another meeting with my charming fiancé."

"Not at all." Cheri glanced up at the still-standing Reyes. A pity. Stern faces always led to early wrinkles. "To be perfectly honest, I had just planned to take something and be on my way. But now that I've been given the opportunity to speak to you, it would be a waste not to put it to good use."

Light hit king Saralegui's glasses again, obscuring his eyes. "And what exactly, Lady Cheri, did you intend to take?"

She reached into her dress, pulling out the tiny bottle. "This isn't the way to a man's heart." As she spoke she opened it, just enough to get one last whiff to be sure. "Suberela tea flowers. I've used them myself in more than a few perfumes. Such a sweet smell, don't you think? It mixes nicely with the cinnamon." She closed the bottle. "However, Frankshire poppies are a dangerous ingredient, illegal in a few human nations, including Dai Shimeron if I recall. If eaten or smoked--Well, they would make anyone quite pliable."

The king's knuckles had gone white. "If you knew, why did you wait this long?"

"Ohh well, it was entertaining to watch. I'm sure you meant it for His Majesty, but that is a smell that carries. Quite nostalgic, it mixes with memories, and when you wore it at the winter formal it was the first time in a long time I could recall perfectly the smell of my second husband." She almost giggled. "And my dear Gwendal, he was looking over his shoulder every five minutes-- But no matter. Suffice it to say that no harm was done, and I thought since you had come in so late to the game it was a fair advantage."

"Are you saying--" Saralegui's eyes had gone wide, "that you would try to help me, even when I took your son's position?"

Cheri caught the king's gaze and held it. "I wish my Wolf, all my sons, only happiness."

"Then why?"

She stood. "I believe you have confused my son's happiness and his relationship with His Majesty." A sad smile ghosted her lips. "I am a warrior of love. This--" Cheri put the bottle back between her breasts, "is no aid to true love. It is a fun distraction, an intensifier, when used properly. But His Majesty is not one whose heart can be swayed by such things. Let love guide you, and I'm sure everything will turn out fine." She moved forward, touching his cheek for a moment before heading for the door.

On her way out, Cheri was sure to hold the eyes of the handsome bodyguard. For once there seemed to be an interesting playmate within her own castle walls. She would have to find a way to get him to herself.

That was, after all, if his body didn't already belong to his master.

********

********

"But you say the problem is little. Surely you can handle it."

Murata was back in the garden. The sun was too bright-- clouding his vision even in dreams. He was there, across the table, blue eyes piercing him. His teacup hovered before his lips. The liquid was sweet and fresh, a better version in its memory. "I've been trying to handle it."
Shinou only smirked, left side of his lips curled up. The way it always used to before-- Murata stiffened. Beneath the white silk tablecloth, what could only be a bare foot trailed up the inseam of his trousers, coming to rest above his crotch. "But my pretty Sage, I’ve already taken care of it. Stop worrying and enjoy the tea."

He couldn’t move. Murata knew he was sleeping-- dreaming-- in his bed at the temple, but that phantom foot kept brushing him, toes pressing into him. "What do you mean you've already taken care of it!" he ground out, but his lips didn't move, his eyes didn't open.

Blue eyes teased his thoughts as he jerked upright in bed.

********

********

Yuuri tried to keep his hands from shaking as he stood outside of Gwendal's office. He had convinced Conrad to let him do this alone, but now... Even after going through numerous awkward conversations with Sara about how it would be best to remain Just Friends despite the engagement, this was somehow more difficult.

He'd simply had enough of it all. Being the last to know things. He was supposed to be king! How could he be a good king if everyone kept hiding things from him? If his *advisers* kept hiding things from him?

And Gwendal... Well, Gwendal seemed to know the most about everything.

Yuuri swallowed and raised a hand to knock twice on the heavy wooden doors. Gwendal's terse order to enter made him jump, but by the time he turned the handle his righteous indignation had returned full-force. Why had Wolfram waited so long to leave if he was in danger, and how close were they to discovering a cure for the mysterious illness? Yuuri puffed out his chest and tried to take forceful strides into the office, door swinging shut behind him with a startling *crack*.

Gwendal didn't even look up. "I've been expecting you, Your Majesty."

"What?" Yuuri blinked, surprise taking away some of his momentum.

"You should have come sooner." The older man finished writing on a document and looked at him with hard eyes.

Anger again, rising from his toes and making the back of his neck tingle. "I was *busy* dealing with Sara. Isn't that my job-- the only thing you allow me to do at a time like this!"

"And two nights ago-- instead of doing your *job*-- you climbed the scaffolding and escaped to the stables, where I can only be thankful you came to your senses and returned. You showed improvement, Your Majesty, but you never should have left."

"I'm supposed to be KING! How can I make any correct decisions if no one tells me what's going on? If I'd only known that Wolfram--"

Gwendal stood, chair scraping abruptly against the stone floor. "Your Majesty, first let me assure you that I had no knowledge of my brother's *situation*--"

"It doesn't matter! You know everything that goes on and it seems like I know nothing! I make mistakes because I--" Yuuri paused, an idea forming in his flustered mind. "I'm your king! I *order* you to tell me things!" Yuuri swallowed, not wanting it to be as harsh as it sounded. "Please, Gwendal, as my adviser, as my *friend*."

Gwendal glowered. "As your adviser it is my job to protect you. It is not that I believe you to be incapable that I choose to withhold certain details of politics. You are a good king, Your Majesty. You have done things for this country that few could imagine before you arrived. Someday you are sure to become a great king." He paused, seeming to search Yuuri's face for some kind of recognition. "As your adviser it is my job to protect you, to teach you at a manageable pace what it is to be a king in this county.

"You grew up in another world, a world you have chosen over this one in the past. In many ways, your experiences there have enabled you to leave such a promising mark on this world. And as someone with experience with the politics of this world, I have done what I think is best to ensure the best for Shin Makoku. If Your Majesty believes that I have not--"

"Wait." Yuuri sat heavily in a chair opposing Gwendal's desk. "I know everything would fall apart without you... But, I only wish you would explain your decisions. I think everything you do is amazing-- I just want the chance to really learn from it."

Gwendal sat and laced his fingers together, laying his hands on the desk as he looked at him. "A surprisingly reasonable request I will try to honor from now on."

Yuuri could have sworn Gwendal almost smiled. "So--" he began, feeling much more optimistic about this whole meeting. "How are things progressing with the plague?"

"The Sage has orchestrated a team to research possible cures and causes. Lady Gisela has brought back samples from her trip to Caloria and Anissina has come up with another one of her confounded devices." The bottom of one of his eyelids seemed to twitch for a moment before the older man continued. "There has been little success so far, but there will be another meeting in a few days to discuss potential steps forward. Spring is becoming a deadline for action, as we are already getting an influx of people fleeing into the city. If things do not improve in a month, I will need you to issue a statement encouraging the people not to panic."

"Well..." Yuuri couldn't think of anything else he could do. "Okay." This was so bizarre. Sure, it was what he had asked for... but somehow he felt more responsible for everything. It was a more than a little scary. "Can I come to the meeting?"

"If Your Majesty requests." Gwendal nodded, removing a small amount of tension from the air.

Yuuri shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Well, then... I request."

"Very well." Gwendal looked at him expectantly from across his desk.

"Erm..." said Yuuri, before another thought struck him. He could feel his cheeks heat as his fingers dug into the arms of his chair. "Conrad said-- or rather he didn't say why Wolfram wasn't--"

Memories of the night in the stables flooded his senses and Yuuri was sure even the tips of his ears were red. "Why he didn't stay long enough to say goodbye."

Gwendal didn't answer at first. He just stared, wrinkles carving dark lines into his forehead. "Your Majesty, today you have asked me to speak as your adviser, but will you allow me to put rank aside in order to answer your question in a way, as your adviser, I think it would be best for you to hear?"

Yuuri swallowed. "Of course... I want you to say things as clearly as possible from now on."

Gwendal's laced fingers tightened until his nails dug into the skin on top of his hands. "Earlier I praised you for the work you have done to make this country a safer place for all its citizens. You are gifted with people, Your Majesty, in a way I have never before had the privilege to witness.
"You change people, perhaps my brother most of all.

"At first I allowed your engagement to continue for political reasons. And then I watched both of you grow up. Wolfram has matured more in the past three years than he has in the past decade and I'm sure if you were to look at yourself before you came to our world, you would hardly recognize yourself. But then, all good things must end." Gwendal's voice remained level, but Yuuri had never heard his tone quite this harsh. "And Wolfram's aid became your crutch. I'm sure now that the two of you have been separated your improvement will only increase."

"But..." Yuuri tried to swallow the unnamed feeling that rose to choke him. "What does that have to do with Wolfram having to leave without a word?"

Somehow in its pause Gwendal's voice had become harder, laced with a venom Yuuri wasn't entirely sure could be all for him. "Over time, your circumstances began to hinder more than help. My brother's greatest fault has always been his feelings. He has yet to learn to push them aside when necessary. I'm sure Your Majesty realizes the effect you have had on my brother's judgement."

Yuuri's ears had begun to ring.

"I have been informed he was staying on your behalf."

"What?" His mind raced. "I would never want Wolfram to stay if it was dangerous! If I'd known I would have made him leave! I would never do anything to hurt him!"

"Indeed," Gwendal snapped. "As I said, the only benefit to the current situation is that it has finally separated your circumstances. I'm sure a little time apart will do both of you some good. Perhaps by the time my brother returns he will have come to his senses."

Yuuri was numb.

Gwendal finally removed his gaze to re-stack a few of the papers on his desk. "I'm sorry if you believe I have spoken out of turn, Your Majesty, but if you don't mind I have a lot of work to do."

"Of course." He stood. "Of course." In what seemed like an instant the door clicked shut and Yuuri was standing outside of Gwendal's office. He couldn't even remember walking out.

"I would never do anything to hurt him--"

"Indeed!"

The sound of his own heartbeat echoed in his ears, and bottled thoughts and memories broke free from every corner of his mind.

"If you fall, I will fall with you."

"They're saying that Sir Belefield isn't suited to be the kings whor--"

"Cheater!"

"What do you mean? We're both boys! That's disgusting!"

"Wimp."

"But Papa! He was acting strange for so long! I should have noticed, it's my fault!"
"I've been having nightmares, I'll sleep in my room."

"What are you wearing? Why are you in my bed? Get out!"

"There's nothing terrible or worthless about you-- Don't be anything else."

"Wolfram, I'm so sorry! I never wanted--"

"Don't let anyone else touch you... the way you let me."

He couldn't breathe. Yuuri took a few steps down the hallway before his shoulder connected with the cold stone wall. It was too much, too difficult to stay on his feet, and so he slid down the wall onto the floor, knees to the ground and fingers splayed against the cracked stone. He had never wanted to hurt Wolfram.

But he had.

And everyone else had known.

And maybe... Yuuri had known too, but he had never let himself really believe it. The more he thought about it the more he realized he shouldn't feel this way. So shocked. Hadn't he known before? Why did it suddenly feel like the world had been pulled out from under him?

Indeed.

He had been so stupid. Made so many mistakes. Run off time and time again without explanation. Made everyone worry. No wonder Gwendal didn't tell him things.

Yuuri focused on the beating of his own heart, trying to figure out his thoughts. He missed Wolfram. He wished he was here so that he could apologize, but what could he possibly say? Yuuri didn't know-- didn't know how he felt about anything. It hurt. It hurt so much he might be sick, here on the floor outside of Gwendal's office.

If Wolfram was here Yuuri would probably say the wrong thing, hurt both of them more. Maybe Gwendal was right. By the time Wolfram came back he was sure to have figured things out. But... how was he supposed to figure things out when Wolfram wasn't here?

Gwendal was right. He did rely on Wolfram. But... it wasn't entirely his fault. After all, Wolfram had always been there. But in part, was Wolfram always there because he didn't believe Yuuri was capable of handling things himself? If Yuuri had been more capable... would Wolfram put himself in danger trying to stay?

If something had happened... Yuuri realized with a sharp twist in his gut, it would have been entirely his fault.

But it was worse than that. So much worse. If even Gwendal, who was always talking about how he tried to ignore matters of the heart... insinuated... It was so much harder to pretend that... that...

He had been _using_ Wolfram. Yuuri was confused about so many things... but he never should have-- touched-- allowed-- _wanted_. It wasn't right. Especially if in the end he didn't have any intention of...

What if that was all it had been? Him being terrible... worthless. Using his best friend to sort out some teenage hormonal mix-up. Wolfram was older... decidedly unconfused. Except for the whole... interested in him part. If he even was! Which Yuuri still couldn't be sure of... Ohh, but if
he was, then Yuuri was the worst kind of person. The kind of person who took advantage of friends in the worst possible way.

But really... he had only wanted to do what was best. Shouldn't intentions count for something? Yuuri only wanted to make everyone happy, to do what was right for their family. But was pretending really what was right? If Yuuri wasn't so terrible he should have... Yuuri choked, a half-bitten sob that sent a splatter of wet between his fingers. Wolfram deserved someone who would make him happy, someone who would love him.

Not a wimpy king whose advisers had to keep secrets and tiptoe around him. Not an imitation friend who touched when he never should have looked. Not him.

No.

Yuuri forced himself to breathe. This was panic. Once you panic you've already lost-- he could remember his mother's voice-- You can't focus on the panic, you have to focus on what you can do to fix the situation.

He drew his hands into fists, tight, until he could feel his nails digging into his palms and his knuckles went pale. No more. He would do better. He would make Wolfram, everyone, proud of him. He would figure out what was going on in Shou Shimeron. He would stop being so... incapable. Yuuri's face was hot, with determination and something more. For once he was going to figure out how he felt about things.

And this time he would do it alone.

This time when Yuuri stood, even though the motion was the same as always, it seemed like he was a little taller. He walked that way, down a few hallways, nodding at guards as he passed and trying not to feel awkward like he usually did when they snapped to attention at his approach.

Yes, Yuuri was sure of it. By the time Wolfram came back... things would be different. He would do what was right, even if it hurt.

The door to the library was open, and as he passed, Yuuri was surprised to see Greta inside. He smiled. With all the strangeness surrounding Wolfram's sudden departure to "Belefield" and managing relationship politics with Sara, it seemed like he had barely gotten to see his daughter at all. It would be such a relief to finally spend time with her again.

Greta looked up as Yuuri entered the room, and looked back at the pile of books and maps she had accumulated. "I don't want to talk to you."

Yuuri's smile faded, and then the false confidence he had been trying to make real was gone, too. "What?" He blinked and squeezed the doorknob. "Why?"

"Because," she snapped, and moved a large parchment aside so quickly it nearly ripped. "It's too convenient for you."

"Greta..." Yuuri started. "I'm sorry." It made sense that she would be mad. He deserved it. Yuuri turned to leave.

"Wait." Almost too soft to hear. "Don't go."

Yuuri's heart leapt and he forced himself to walk up behind his daughter, rather than simply running across the room and wrapping his arms around her. She was starting not to like that kind of thing anymore, and Yuuri didn't want to do anything that would alienate her further. He settled for
putting a hand on her hair. "I'm sorry. I haven't spent enough time with you lately, have I?"

Greta shook her head. "No, but I understand. It must be hard being responsible for everything."

Yuuri could feel prideful tears beginning to well in the corners of his eyes. He had such a smart daughter! She seemed to understand things even he didn't. He wondered how he could ever be the sort of father she needed.

"Yuuri," she started, somehow more sad than serious. "I'm responsible for everything."

"What?" Yuuri balked. "How-- What? Greta, are you sure--"

"I should have known. Wolfram... Wolfram..." Her shoulders started to shake. "He fell down when he came to tuck me in after the winter formal... I should have known he was sick. I should have said something!" Hands came up to cover red cheeks. "He said it wasn't my fault... But-- but--"

"Of course it isn't your fault!" Yuuri's mind reeled. "How could you think something like that? Don't upset yourself when there's nothing anyone could have done! If anything... it should be my fault!"

"I know." Greta sniffled. "But you're expected to be oblivious about things like this! I should have known better!" Another sob fell from her lips and she pulled Yuuri's hand from on top of her head, maneuvering him close enough to hug from her seat. "I'm scared, Yuuri. Wolfram said he was going to Lesser Gael to get better, but it's so far away! He wouldn't... He wouldn't promise me he'd come back."

"Greta..." Yuuri pulled back from her hug enough to kneel, holding her tighter. "I'm sorry I let everyone down again. I promise I'll be better from now on. Wolfram... Wolfram will be alright. He'll come home. He has to." His eyes fell on the stack of maps on the table. "Wolfram's following a very safe path. Do you want me to show you? I made Gunter explain it twice this morning so I'm sure it's right."

Greta nodded against his shoulder. "I tried to think of the best way." She wiped the last of her tears on his shoulder and pulled away. "Wolfram doesn't like boats... but even so... it looks like the fastest way would be by crossing the middle sea, and then go east from Calbacade." She stood and hovered over the pile of maps.

Yuuri nodded. "That way would probably be fastest, but the safest way is to use an ancient path made by mazoku thousands of years ago to protect those who had to travel to the mountains in Lesser Gael to affirm-- or in this case reaffirm their flame rites." Yuuri let the explanation flow out of him without thinking. Thinking now was too difficult, so instead he repeated what Gunter had told him that morning, hoping the words would help Greta the way they had helped him to lighten the heavy pull in his chest only a few hours before. "It curves around towns and goes through the deepest parts of forests. It's possible that Wolfram can make it all the way to Lesser Gael without seeing another person-- besides Lucien."

Greta pulled one of the larger maps closer. "So starting here..." She pointed to the castle right in the center of the capital city of Shin Makoku. "East on land... through Spitzburg, and then Calbacade?"

"Almost," Yuuri corrected, letting his hand trail along the now-memorized trail. "It curves north a bit, around a few villages. Wolfram should actually enter Lesser Gael here... through a mountain pass on the border of Habalogue."

"Humm..." Greta paused for a moment, thoughtful. "If the path is so ancient why does it have to
Yuuri coughed. Gunter had gone into more detail, but Yuuri had been distracted... and his mind had wandered a bit once he was convinced the path Wolfram was taking was reasonably safe. Still, he remembered most of what his teacher had said, even if the details were a bit fuzzy. "How much have you learned in your history lessons? Do you remember learning about before all the countries were set up like they are today?"

Greta nodded. "Gunter went over that there were three main countries at first, but didn't stay at that part for long. He mostly had me concentrate on recent history-- after Shinou."

"Well, then you'll remember that a very long time ago, Shin Makoku-- all the demon nations-- and the land that is now Frankshire, Calbacade, and Habalogue-- Lesser Gael too-- was originally the northern demon kingdom of Gael." Yuuri started to smile as he explained it. It always seemed like he forgot most of the history Gunter had taught him-- there was just so much! It was surprising how much he had learned since he'd come here. He was even simplifying things for his daughter! Yuuri's smile widened. Good student. Good parent. Improvement!

"Yes." Greta drew her finger in a line along the border of Calbacade and Caloria, below Lesser Gael and running east along the northern edge of Suberela. "It used to just be Gael, Suberela, and Shimeron." She paused, stretching out her fingers to examine her hand. "Both Shimeron and Suberela were human countries-- but Suberela-- we're darker-- and humans care about stupid things like that. Wolfram always said it was stupid-- but good for Mazoku... Gael wouldn't have lasted as long as it did if Shimeron and Suberela had united."

Yuuri patted Greta's head. "Exactly right. So in the beginning, even though the path was sacred, it was still in what was considered safe territory. The reason it stayed to the woods was part of the spiritual journey. Mazoku get their magic from the four elements-- ancient gods of nature. The path cuts through the deepest parts of forest so that those who walk it will remember and appreciate what gives them their gifts. When the old wars began and the humans started moving north, the mazoku had to do everything they could to keep the path-- and the territory that is now Lesser Gael-- protected. As the humans moved north a few mazoku stayed behind to guard the path itself-- scaring off humans who got too close. And Lesser Gael-- the sacred lands for fire-- was never taken, because whenever the humans tried, the mazoku would hide in the mountains, slowly picking off the humans who stayed." It was odd in a way. Telling history about humans and demons. And he was on the side of demons-- Demon King! It had never really stopped sounding a bit surreal. Like a video game.

His daughter sighed. "I wish I could go with Wolfram to Lesser Gael and get magic too..."

For a moment Yuuri forgot how to breathe. They had told him-- he'd known-- lifetimes were different. Greta was eleven. She'd been eight when he'd adopted her-- he'd already missed time, precious time, when he had been on Earth. He forced his mind to stop racing-- his lungs to breathe. There were only so many world-shattering revelations he could handle in one day. And so he forced himself to smile again, and move on like it never happened. Greta certainly didn't need to know his worries about things years and years away. "Yes, well look at all the trouble magic can cause," Yuuri said just a little too quickly. "I guess you're stuck with me until Wolfram comes back."

Greta over-pouted. "But Papa, you spend all your time with that wretched King Saralegui these days. I can hardly even eat with you without him and his looming guard man being there."

"Sara really isn't that bad, Greta." Yuuri tried to ruffle her hair, but she pulled away.
"I don't care. He's... he's... trying to take Wolfram's place." Greta looked down at the maps, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Greta..." Yuuri wished she would let him touch her. To comfort them both. "You know the engagement to Sara... isn't like that. And even if I had to marry someone else-- No one can take Wolfram's place." He ran a hand through his hair and knelt to look at her. She was getting taller, and even on one knee he had to strain his neck to look up at her. "I even talked to Sara about that today-- he knows we're just friends. That's all we'll ever be."

Sara had actually seemed a bit... weird yesterday afternoon when Yuuri had spoken to him about it, but in the end the other boy had agreed it was for the best. Wolfram's departure had still hung heavily in his mind, and Yuuri was afraid he'd come off more abrupt than he'd intended. But all things considered... maybe it was better to be abrupt than unclear.

After all, wasn't that what had gotten him into all this trouble with Wolfram in the first place?

Greta still wouldn't look at him. "But..." She started to put her books in order, shuffling the maps into piles. "I thought you and Wolfram were just friends, Papa Wimp." And then she turned on her heel, books in arms, and headed for the door.

Yuuri blinked once before sitting abruptly in the now vacant chair. How many times in a day could words make a person's heart skip a beat? Yuuri wasn't sure he could take much more of this.

Before leaving, Greta turned. "I'll see you at dinner... and... I'm not trying to be mean-- just--" She sighed and tried to smile. "Don't be mad. I love you, you're a wonderful Papa Yuuri. I'll see you at dinner."

And it was all Yuuri could do to nod as she closed the door.

********

********

Shin Makoku.
Border Region:
Early Next Day.

********

It was cold.

Night still hung damp on his blanket as Wolfram rolled over for the third time since the birds had started to sing. Dawn was breaking through the canopy of branches above, and the new light only intensified the aching in his head and limbs that had kept him up most of the night. He sighed. Wolfram knew he should just get up, but instead he adjusted the makeshift pillow his jacket became at night and tried to will himself to sleep, if only for five minutes longer.

Wolfram hated camping. Always had. Of course he realized that camping and boats were unavoidable evils of travel, and he liked to think that he held up admirably against the occasional necessity of sleeping on rocks. Why people enjoyed this kind of thing was beyond him. Yuuri was absolutely incorrigible-- running around half the continent on numerous occasions. Wolfram had actually started to warm to the idea, managed to sleep whole nights on the ground, but these three days of riding, and riding, and riding, and sleeping on rocks had convinced him that any notion of warming to camping was simply another one of those things that inappropriate Giddy Feelings made seem right. Being around the wimp was well worth sleeping in dirt... and not much else was.
He almost groaned as he heard shifting beside him. Lucien was awake. Soon he would start packing and poking the fire and making all kinds of racket. Again, why anyone would be here if it wasn't a matter of life and death was beyond him. Lucien wasn't out of magic-- and Wolfram would have felt much more comfortable having his most trusted man back at the castle. Protecting Yuuri.

Gwendal was being unreasonable. Wolfram could have made this journey alone. And worse was making Lucien wear nicer clothes on the "off-chance" they were captured... As if anyone would mistake Lucien for him. As if Wolfram would allow it!

Things just weren't adding up. Lucien didn't even attempt to protest, seemed almost eager to travel all the way to Lesser Gael for no pressing reason. Of course, Wolfram could understand the desire to be loyal to a commanding officer-- but Wolfram had...

He could still taste him. In dreams he didn't understand-- in a desire to finish what he had started that was as terrifying as it was desperate. A desire that fatigue and sleeping on rocks did absolutely nothing to help.

"Lieutenant..."

Wolfram's eyes snapped open, already focused in the other man's direction. He seemed to know where Lucien was without looking since they had started their journey. "Don't worry, I'm awake."

Lucien frowned. "You couldn't sleep again, could you? We shouldn't keep going like this when you're not sleeping--"

"Don't be ridiculous." Wolfram forced himself to sit up. "Every day matters. We should cross into Spitzburg before sundown-- get new horses."

It would be their third pair of horses since they'd set out from Blood Pledge Castle. Hildemans had done well the first night and day-- but no horse could continue at such a grueling pace forever and Wolfram hoped his white stallion would enjoy a well-earned rest for the remainder of his month away.

"Yes, Sir." Lucien nodded, obedient but uncomfortable. Ever obedient. "I'll make some tea, then-- and we'll probably finish with Lady Karbelnikoff's cakes this morning."

"Finally," Wolfram huffed, thinking of how the cakes had seemed to harden impossibly since yesterday evening. They would need the tea to eat them. Still, it was... strange to say the least. The Old Maid seemed to feel at fault for the whole thing-- and in some ways she was-- but it had been his stupid idea. His wishful haze of a desire to act on a stupid Earth tradition the Sage had mentioned in passing. He hadn't even meant to tell anyone about it, but Greta had been spending so much time in her lab and she was the only one who didn't look at him with regret-- or worse. It had sort of slipped out and the next thing he knew he was sitting in a chair with straps and letting everything drain away.

He had never even really worked out what she was doing. All he knew was some portion of his magic had been put into the ring. At the time he had been too blind to even think of repercussions. It had been romantic, the idea of having a part of himself with Yuuri all the time-- even if the wimp never had to know about it. He wondered if any of his magic was still there, now that it seemed to have left him.

Wolfram missed it. His fire. It was distinctly wrong, the unfamiliar familiar of Lucien's flame. And even though it was wrong he wanted more. To feel flesh fall apart in his mouth-- sinew slide between his teeth. Swallow hot liquid until it choked him with raw power. To devour the vessel of
the foreign magic that now fluttered uncomfortably in his chest. The dreams wondered if when he finished the flutter would remain... uncomfortable. He swallowed and willed such thoughts away. Vile. A result of trauma and lack of sleep.

Wolfram watched the other man pour some water into a pot over the stove and take out a small bundle of roots he used for the tea. The stuff was painfully bitter, but at least it would keep him from falling off his horse before noon. He shivered, and picked his jacket off the ground. It had already lost the heat from his head. After a few shakes he put it on, fumbling with the buttons as he waited for his hands to wake. It was such a pity he hadn't managed to rest properly yet, while he could still sleep through a whole night if he was able. Once they crossed into human territory they would have to start splitting nights to keep watch. "Corporal--" Wolfram started without meaning to, pausing as the other boy looked up. "Lucien... why are you here?"

"What?" The blond stuttered. "Sir Voltaire--"

"I know what Gwendal said-- You could have argued. This is potentially a dangerous thing-- not to mention an uncomfortable journey." Wolfram stood and started to shake out his blanket. "If you'd asked-- I could have found someone else."

Lucien's eyes were now fixed on the pot of almost-boiling water. "I suppose you could have-- found someone else."

Wolfram ran a hand through his now-brownish hair and sighed. "It's not like I don't think you're suited for the job-- It's just, I hate this... and if I could I would have tried to--" He stuffed his blanket forcefully into his bag. "Why are you here, with me, after what I did to you?"

"Well, it's not like I died." Lucien pretended to laugh for a moment, then stopped. "And it's not like it was really you... Or that I didn't owe you..." He trailed off and started pulling off tiny chunks of root and dropping them into the steaming pot.

He blinked. "What in the world are you talking about? You don't owe me anything. Every rank you've earned-- you've earned."

Lucien shook his head. "That's not what I mean... and I'm sure you don't think of it like that-- Your place then... I didn't have anything. But... I was called at the same time as you and Marques. I was terrified when it happened-- almost set the barn on fire... Mother-- we didn't even live in the city then."

"Still, I hardly think--"

"No." Lucien looked up. "It was everything. Your mother was the Maou, Marques' father is a lord in Voltaire... and me. I was able to join the capitol forces with you once we returned-- not just the volunteer brigade. I made enough that my family was able to move inside the gates of the city."

The other boy's cheeks went red. "Sorry, I'm sure you didn't need to hear all that... It's just always bothered me I've never gotten to say a proper 'thank you'."

"It's alright." Wolfram tried to smile through his surprise. "I just wasn't expecting it. You shouldn't thank me, back then we were just friends. I didn't do anything for you out of pity."

Lucien grinned as he poured the tea. "Friends. I think that's what did it. Wouldn't do for the prince to have such a friend-- easiest thing was to fix the status of the friend."

Wolfram tried not to look as apprehensive as he felt as Lucien handed him the cup. Bitter, but awake, he reminded himself. He looked up when Lucien snickered.
"You don't have to drink it, you know. I could get His Highness something from the carriage..." Lucien mimicked in the voice of Sir Tannen, the man who had taken them on their first journey along this path all those years ago.

Wolfram smiled for a moment, remembering the kind-hearted Captain. He had been one of the first casualties of the war. Then he threw a small stone playfully in Lucien's direction. "Stop that. It wasn't that bad."

"Ohh really?" Lucien retaliated by throwing him one of Anissina's cakes. "Why was there a carriage? So the prince wouldn't have to sleep on the ground?"

"We only slept in the carriage once!" Wolfram huffed. "And that time it was all three of us! The mud was so deep we'd have drowned!"

Lucien dipped a chunk of cake into his tea. "Of course, how could I forget..."

They talked for a while, laughing and chatting until it was time to prepare the horses. It was almost like they were young again, back on that first trip. For a while Wolfram had forgotten what it felt like to just talk like this. He had been so concerned when he was younger, especially after he had returned from his rites, about acting grown up, about his need to prove himself to his family, to everyone, that he hadn't really allowed himself to do anything that wasn't directly related to his goals.

Friends.

Wolfram was sure there was a time when he had thought of Lucien as a friend. Lucien, Elizabeth, Marques. Friends. Until Marques had taught him that friend was only a pretty word for means to an end. A goal.

He shook his head to clear it. There was no use dwelling on the past. Besides, he had started to learn in recent years another stance on the word. Yuuri really was a wimp from a strange place. To him, "friend" seemed to mean something entirely different-- and as foolish as it seemed at times, Yuuri really did seem to mean the word in a way that was detrimentally sincere.

Wolfram frowned. And Yuuri managed to become friends with almost everyone.

********

********

Shin Makoku.
Border Region:
Spring, Fifty-two years earlier.

********

Despite the pleasant cool of the early morning, the places where shapes of sun striped his cheeks felt wonderful. Wolfram smiled and rolled toward the light, startled for a moment when his knee connected with the wheel of the carriage. He had decided last night that sleeping beneath it would be the best way to prevent another Early-Rain Incident, but now he wasn't too sure about the decision.

"Finally." Marques' voice from above him. "Sir Tannen was about to pack up breakfast, you wouldn't want to miss it again."

Wolfram frowned and opened his eyes, then blinked. Marques' head was upside down, hair hanging wild at gravity's mercy and grinning as usual. "What are you doing like that?"
The head disappeared for a moment, returning, after some clunking, with an arm and the greater portion of a biscuit. "Eating your breakfast."

Wolfram sat up so fast his head nearly connected with the underside of the carriage. "Well that's enough of that!" he huffed, snatching the offered biscuit and glaring at the other boy.

Marques only laughed, disappearing again as he presumably sat up in the driver's seat of the carriage over his head. "Lucien," he shouted. "You were wrong, a week like this doesn't make everyone a morning person."

"His Highness is awake, then?" Sir Tannen's leather boots approached as Wolfram tried to put what was left of his biscuit in his mouth at once. "Get out from under there before I attach the horses."

Wolfram groaned in protest, but crawled out from under the carriage, dragging his blankets behind him. He squinted as the early light struck his eyes at full force, hardly hidden by the canopy of green. Marques must have moved to the other side of the seat, because all at once there were hands in his hair-- ruffling violently.

"Aww, it's all messed up! Poor prince, no more presents for being cute," Marques teased.

Wolfram slapped away the hands, turning to glare at his opponent who sat-- grinning-- on the driver's bench. "Stop it!"

"You shouldn't fight so early." Lucien, who was carrying a few bags, approached. His words were mumbled, just under his breath, but it was enough to distract both Marques and Wolfram from their minor quarrel.

"We're not fighting, Lucien." Marques slid off his seat and onto the ground. "How could I fight with my pretty Wolf." He patted Wolfram's head one more time as he walked past to help Lucien finish loading the carriage. "We wouldn't be friends if I didn't give him a hard time. Just wait, Luke, you'll get your turn."

********

********
Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle:
Present

********

Greta held the bag of cookies in one hand as she balanced on the top edge of the pen, gripping a wooden beam with the other. She was still too short to get on the larger stallions without help-- especially without a saddle. And more importantly, she couldn't let anyone know what she was up to.

Hildefuns snorted nervously and moved closer, pressing his side against the thin edge on which she now stood. Ao whinnied, and tapped the front door of his pen with a hoof.

"Quiet, Ao," Greta whispered as she bent her knees, making it so too much of her weight wasn't placed on the white stallion at once as she moved onto his back. The black horse shook his head, but stayed silent.

Wolfram's horse was so big-- warm-- and as she pushed her face into his mane she could pretend, just for a moment, that he still smelled like her second father. That's when the tears started. She had cried three nights ago when Wolfram had come to her room at night and told her he had to leave,
and again when Yuuri had interrupted her yesterday in the library, but these tears were hers and she
didn't want anyone else to see.

Each inhale was followed by a silent push of wet, streaming down her face as her hands shook and
her legs gripped the strong body beneath her. She bit her lip and counted each breath, until she lost
count and had to start again.

She had always felt safe here, at the castle. Even when Yuuri left for Earth, even when she had
started to think he never would return, she had still felt somehow safe. Wolfram had been here
then. And even when Wolfram and Yuuri would both leave her, sometimes for months at a time,
and she had been a little scared, even then it had been nothing like this. Wolfram had almost died,
was going far away to get better, and Yuuri hardly had time for her anymore.

In the beginning she didn't understand. Yuuri was her father-- he was big and wonderful and took
her from a terrible life into a real family. But somehow, seven years between them had become
five, and Greta had started to realize things. Yuuri was older, and he loved her, but he wasn't really
a grownup. What if he got tired of her? Wanted a real daughter someday, who wouldn't die when
he was still young and make him feel sad all the time. And Yuuri said he was only friends with
Sara, but they were always together.

Maybe by the time Wolfram came back Yuuri wouldn't want either of them anymore.

A sob made its way past her lips and Hildedefuns shifted his weight, rocking her for a moment. She
had to grab his mane to stay on. The shift startled her enough to sit up and wipe her tears on the
back of her long-sleeved dress. Greta looked at the small bag of cookies still clutched in her left
hand. Prince Saralegui had given them to her this afternoon when they were all having lunch with
Yuuri. Her father wanted her to be nice to this wretched prince, and so she tried to be nice, she had
told him, for his sake. But really, it was only so she had an excuse to keep an eye on them-- make
sure Yuuri kept a safe distance.

It was almost dark out, she had slipped away a few hours ago-- during time she normally spent up
in Anissina's lab. Someone would probably notice she was missing soon. Greta waited until her
face was dry and no longer felt over-hot and then she started back the way she came, standing for a
moment on the horse's back before stepping over onto the railing of the pen. Hildedefuns whinnied
loudly in protest and looked at her with large eyes. "Don't worry, I'll come visit you again soon."

"You shouldn't bother him today."

Greta nearly fell, catching herself with one hand on a wooden beam for a second before she really
was falling-- landing-- half-caught before two small frames collided on the dirt floor.

Wilfrido groaned beneath her. "I've killed the princess-- ow-- she's killed me too. It will save them
the trouble of an execution."

Greta blushed, and pushed herself off her friend, wincing at what was sure to become a large bruise
on her arm. Ao and Hildedefuns were both sticking their heads over their doors to look down at them
and snort. "Don't be silly. You're fine."

"You're welcome," the boy huffed, climbing to his feet. "What are you doing here anyway, besides
pestering a tired horse?"

Greta looked away. "Nothing."

There was a pause. "He won't be gone long you know-- and what with politics-- I'm sure he would
have wanted you to go with him if it wouldn't cause a commotion."

"What?" Greta turned to face him, arms crossed.

Wilfrido ran a hand over the top of his head-- a likely attempt to tame the few stray strands that had come out of his ponytail from the day's work. "Well, Princess, in case you've forgotten, you're a human-- like me-- I'm sure Sir Belefield would have liked to take you with him on a visit to his home country, but Belefield in particular from what I've heard... I'm sure he was just trying to spare you that."

Her cheeks grew hot. That's right. The lie. "I'm sure..." she muttered. Then she bent over to pick up the bag of cookies that were probably only crumbles now. It hardly mattered. She wasn't really planning on eating them. Her eyes widened as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Look, it's not like I care-- because I don't-- and it must be fun to play princess, but how long do you think it will last? They're not human, your parents, even if the king is mixed." His voice was low, nothing more than a hissed whisper.

"You don't understand anything!" she growled back. "You think you're so--" Greta had to stop and collect herself. There was just something about Wilfrido sometimes that made her more angry than she could remember. She also felt bad for yelling when he was only trying to help. Wilfrido was her only real friend in the castle, whether he was stubborn about it or not. He was the only one who, despite the teasing, treated her like a person more than a princess. She eyed the ladder leading to the loft-- the space Wilfrido and his father shared so they could be near the stable at all times. Wilfrido never let her up there.

Greta walked over to the ladder, leaning against it as she looked at him. Hard.

"What are you doing?" Her friend followed, nervous. "Look, don't be mad. I'm just trying to look out for you-- Don't know why I bother."

"And why would I need you to look after me?"

"I'm older--"

"Two years!" Greta snapped.

"Still!" The boy fumed. "You don't understand anything! You'd rather cry over not getting to go with your father on his little vacation than think about the real world! And you... always thinking about your father. Aren't you getting a bit old for that-- or do you just like him more than you should--"

"Take that back!" Greta screamed. Her entire body felt like it was on fire. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever-- I HATE you!"

Wilfrido's face was dark. "Good." And he refused to look at her as he turned to go stuff hay angrily into a few of the feeders.

Greta's skin still prickled. Tears started to sting the corners of her eyes. She would not cry. Not in front of him.

Had he been watching her before?

How much worse could it get? Greta bit her lip to stop the tears. Wolfram was gone, might die in some far away place. Yuuri was here-- but not, Wretched Prince taking up far too much of his
attention. Gwendal was more occupied with politics than ever and Anissina had all but locked herself in her lab for the past few days working on a new project that she couldn't help with. Hube had left her to live with Nicola and their real child. Beatrice was a sea away. And now Wilfrido had to be so-- stupid and ruin everything she had left.

She didn't want to be alone. She used to be alone-- but then Hube and Yuuri-- Wolfram-- they had spoiled her. Made her forget.

Wilfrido had come with his father right before Yuuri had gone back to Earth for a year. It had taken ages, but eventually he had started to play with her a bit. At first it was because she was "too little" and "he shouldn't be talking to the princess", but she was very mature for her age, everyone told her so. She had started to hope that their gap wasn't so big anymore. With all her growing recently, they were even the same height now.

Wilfrido was good at his job helping his father. Strong hands and always smelling of horses. Always in need of a proper bath, too. He frowned a lot, and always tried to get her to leave-- Maybe that was it. Just another trick to get the little princess out of the stables and back to the castle. He was so sure that she didn't belong here... but like he said, she was human. He was human too, and she hadn't always been so pampered in this royal life. He never talked about his life before coming to work at the castle, and she was sure that if she could just get him to talk more he would be convinced they were even more the same. She didn't want to stay mad at him. Why did he always have to make it so difficult?

"You're wrong." Greta spoke just loud enough for him to hear. "You're wrong because you don't know anything."

Wilfrido had his back to her. "Then why don't you go and bother people who do? I have to work. You shouldn't be in here."

Then an idea. "Where's your father?" She tried to speak as casually as she could, already smiling with her plan.

The boy turned. "He's at the market, the shipment of-- Why?" The question was dark, warning.

"No reason." She smiled, and started to climb the ladder as fast as she could.

Shock must have given her a few seconds' head start because she was halfway to the top before she could feel his weight shifting the bottom of the ladder. "Don't-- don't-- stop it! Princess-- Greta. My father will--"

His words were cut off as she pushed at the wooden door to the loft, wood cracking against itself as it clattered open. She stood as quickly as she could, taking in the room as Wilfrido cursed at her from the ladder. Greta didn't know why he was making such a fuss, there was nothing unusual about their loft. Two small beds, a table and chairs, a trunk against the far wall.

"You're trying to have me killed, I'm sure of it," Wilfrido huffed from the top of the ladder.

She looked down at him. "Why are you being so dramatic? Come up here so I can talk to you."

Wilfrido gave her one last look and grumbled, sitting on the edge of the small opening to face her. "We could have talked down there-- or maybe it was all just an excuse to show me your drawers."

Greta kicked him-- nearly sending him over the edge. "You really will have to worry if you keep being such a pervert! You're lucky Wolfram isn't here!"
Wilfrido stuck his tongue out at her and pouted, rubbing his chest where she'd kicked him as he moved to sit in one of the chairs. "You're so annoying."

Greta stuck out her tongue out for a second and sat in the chair across from him. "Don't be such a wimp. Do you want me to tell you or not?"

"Tell me what?" Wilfrido humped.

Suddenly she was nervous. Wolfram had made her promise not to tell anyone-- but she didn't want to be alone in this. But then again, it wasn't as if she was going to tell him everything. "You have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Why are you telling me, then?" Wilfrido leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

Greta looked at him. He had a large smudge across one of his cheeks and his ponytail was coming loose. "Because you're my best friend."

Cheeks went red. "Well that's just stupid-- I'm..." He stopped and looked down. "Maybe you should think about who you tell things to, is all."

"Look," Greta started, still feeling a bit unsure. "I just-- I don't want to know this alone all right-- you're my best--"

"Okay," Wilfrido interrupted, his hands clenched as he stared at the tablecloth. "I'll keep your secret."

"You don't have to..." Greta worried her lip.

"It's just... secrets are big things. I know how to keep them. If this is something you shouldn't say to me then don't." He looked up at her-- blue eyes clear.

Greta swallowed, rethinking one last time. Then she leaned on the table toward him. "Can I trust you?"

A pause. "I won't tell your secret," Wilfrido answered.

She looked at him for a while before making up her mind. "Wolfram isn't on vacation. I'm not sad because he didn't take me with him. He's going somewhere dangerous. He's my father-- the only one I'm sure won't have to give me up over politics. Please, don't tease me about him being on some stupid vacation. Not now."

Wilfrido watched her for a moment. "If you wanted me to stop teasing you, all you had to do was ask."

"Liar!" Greta stood and slammed her hands on the table. "If you tell ANYONE I swear I'll--"

"I won't." Wilfrido stood too, and walked toward her. A hand on her head. "I won't."

She smiled, wide enough that her cheeks hurt. "Good."

"Let's get down from here now, alright?" Wilfrido took his hand away. "Father will give me a hard time if he finds out you were up here." And then he turned and headed for the ladder.

A shudder went through her as she thought of Wilfrido's father. He reminded her of her uncle, and was always stern with Wilfrido no matter how good he was at tending to the horses. "Alright." She followed him down, making sure to close the door on her way. "Just no looking up this time."
"Yes, Princess," Wilfrido teased.

When she stepped onto solid ground Wilfrido was looking at her, holding the bag of cookies. "You dropped this."

"Thanks." Greta half-smiled. Now she would have to figure out what to do with them. Throwing them out in her room was not an option, the maids would be sure to find them and tell Yuuri. "Do you know where I could get rid of it?"

Wilfrido raised an eyebrow at her. "What is it?"

She opened the bag to show him. "Sara gave them to me. A peace offering." Greta huffed. "But that won't change that I hate him. I don't want anything to do with his stupid--"

Wilfrido jerked the bag out of her hands-- half of its contents spilling onto the ground. A black and white circle crushed under the heel of his boot.

"What are you doing?" she managed, eyes wide.

"Getting rid of it." His voice was dark. "These aren't good for you."

Greta blinked. "Why?"

Wilfrido stepped toward her, until her back was pressed against one of the pen doors. "They're not good for you--" Eyes that were so clear suddenly looked away. "They'll only make you more fat."

Greta pushed him. "You're so terrible! I don't know why--"

"Oh? I thought we were friends now," Wilfrido interrupted. He put the rest of the bag in his pocket. "Don't worry, I'll get rid of them." When his hand came back out of his pocket there was a single cookie trapped between two fingers. "They're common-- these things. For those who can afford them." He moved away, freeing her from the wall. "But if you ate them--" He picked up an empty bucket, probably heading out to get more water from the pump. "You'd get so fat you'd start squishing horses-- and then you'd never find anyone to marry you."

"You don't even know how to act like a person, do you?!" Greta fumed, kicking a nearby stack of hay, sending the individual pieces flying. "I wish you weren't-- Arg!" she screamed, too mad for words. "If you tell anyone about earlier I really will have you executed!" And then she ran-- as quickly as she could-- away from the barn and that stupid, stupid boy.

It was all his fault. Everything.

********

********

Anissina back-handed a stand full of empty beakers from her desk. Glass shattered-- tiny shards reflecting the light of candles and the occasional blinking glow from her devices.

Nothing.

Nothing.

All of her samples showed nothing. No reason for any plague-- any disease. There was no relevant difference between any of her samples and the control.

She sighed, sitting and burying her face in folded arms. Anissina hadn't managed a decent night's
sleep since the Boy Wolf had left. Now the fourth night had fallen and she still hadn't found a cure- 
- hadn't even begun to figure out what was causing any of it.

Maybe the Sage had lied to her-- given her spoiled samples. Or maybe he and Gwendal were just 
playing with her, keeping the real samples for themselves and giving her these so she would stay 
out of their way.

Anissina groaned and rolled her head in her arms. That was just the sleep deprivation talking. She 
knew both of them-- everyone-- wanted this thing to be done with. Even if they ignored her 
brilliance, they wouldn't ever do anything to sabotage her. Besides, she had watched the Sage 
separate the samples herself, with his impossibly delicate hollow earth needle. He had even let her 
keep it! Once there was time, she had a few ideas on how the design could aid in her inventions.

Humans really were such fragile creatures. The Sage had talked for hours about Earth concepts for 
the causes of human sickness. She had learned a lot from his strange theories, as human and 
mazoku medicine were completely different. The human body was so weak. Incapable of housing 
any form of natural magic themselves, they fell ill from the presence of tiny things that invaded 
their blood, whereas when demons fell subject to disease it was almost always a result of magical 
complications.

All mazoku were connected to the world's magic. Some were only gifted with longer life, while 
others were called by a particular element-- gaining the ability to not only take that power into 
themselves, but also channel it out using their bodies. And there were even those like the Sage, 
who could go beyond feeling and manipulating the magic that was tuned for their own bodies. 
They could re-channel the very power at the core of everything, adding their magic to others and, 
more than that, being able to sense the places where magic was inherently strongest. It was the 
most advanced form of magic. Gisela and other healers could use their magic to fix tears in others-- 
mend flesh and bone-- rearrange torn magic that led to illness-- but to divert the very sources that 
hovered in the world around them-- to do so on such a large scale-- was a rare gift, one that didn't 
occur every demon generation.

She had developed What's-wrong-with-this-kun before knowing much about human disease. Since 
the plague was affecting both humans and mazoku, she had hoped to find something in the samples 
that would reveal something that would hurt their magic-- something that would cause such fatal 
symptoms in demons. But this human blood-- it had no connection to magic at all.

Her machines were useless.

Hopefully the Sage was having better luck searching for vi-races and back-teria on his glowing lap 
device. And maybe once he figured it out he would let her take it apart and see how it worked. It 
was definitely the most intriguing Earth device she had seen yet.

Or perhaps Gisela was having better luck? The Sage had insisted they all work alone for a week-- 
or until someone was sure they had a breakthrough. What if she was the only one who was unable 
to come up with any results?

Anissina stood. There was no way she was going to let the Sage humiliate her. Maybe Gisela had 
found something by now...

* * *

Gisela wasn't in her room. Anissina had to ask a few guards until she was directed to the south 
infirmary. When she arrived, the door was open, and Gisela was kneeling by the only occupied 
bed.
"What happened?" she asked, soft enough not to startle the other woman.

Gisela didn't look up from her work. "I'm not sure. He says he fell--"

"Not falling, flying..." the boy mumbled, pupils wide. "Second... second class after all."

Anissina raised an eyebrow. "Is he going to be alright?"

"I think so..." Gisela stood. "Try to get some rest, alright?" she spoke to the boy and then turned, gesturing to the door with her eyes.

Anissina nodded and soon they were standing on the other side of the closed door. "What's wrong with him?"

Gisela's voice was low. "He'll be fine. His leg was broken-- but it should be fine in a day or two. That's not what worries me."

"Was he drugged?" Anissina wondered aloud.

"Worse." Gisela licked her lips. "He's showing symptoms. I don't know why it's so sudden... I should isolate him here... find out who's been into the stables--"

"But how?" Anissina took a moment to lower her voice. "No one in the city has shown any--"

"I know!" Gisela hissed. "You don't think I-- Look, I'm hoping I'm wrong. The boy could have gotten into his father's liquor... gotten something disreputable from town... it's true the delirium is his only symptom." She sighed and leaned against the wall. "I'm probably just paranoid."

Anissina looked at the door. "Has he done that sort of thing before-- going into his father's--"

"I doubt it." Gisela shook her head. "Very obedient. I've seen him before for things... bruises... For a while I was convinced his father might have had something to do with it, but it's been a while-- there were no reports of him being seen while I was away."

"Greta is fond of the boy-- if something was happening of that nature with his father I'm sure she would have told me." Anissina wished she was more sure of her words.

Gisela nodded, looking more exhausted than anything else. "I haven't found anything, either-- after all that time there-- in Caloria-- I thought I would have found something by now."

"I haven't found anything yet, either," Anissina admitted. "Let's hope the Sage has something."

"Let's hope." Gisela moved away from the wall. "I'm sorry-- I should take care of this. The fewer people who--"

"I understand." Anissina smiled as reassuringly as she could. "I should be getting back to work anyway. Maybe there's something I've overlooked..."

Gisela returned her smile. "Goodnight, Miss Anissina."

"Goodnight."
Yuuri watched Sara out of the corner of his eye as he took another sip of tea. Things had been
going remarkably well, considering. He wasn't sure if it was his recent increase of determination,
or the reality check that since Wolfram had gone he really did have to figure things out on his own,
but lately it seemed like he could think more clearly.

Especially around Sara.

The other boy had been mostly quiet since their discussion on the rules of Just Friends, and every
day Yuuri worried he had hurt his new friend's feelings more and more. But it was strange. Sara
must have decided on their engagement for political reasons, and they had only even known each
other just over a month. Sara couldn't have gotten those kinds of feelings for him in such a short
time. Right?

He was pulled from his thoughts as Sara cleared his throat. Yuuri took another sip of tea.
Inappropriately blunt questions aside, Yuuri was running very, very low on conversation topics.
"It's a lot less cold these days."

Sara put down his cup with an audible clack. "Fascinating." And crossed his arms.

Yuuri bit his lip and couldn't help looking at Conrad for reassurance. A glance was enough to put
some of that new determination back in place. He had to do this alone. So when Conrad opened his
mouth to say something helpful, Yuuri spoke first. "Is there anything you'd like to do?" He rubbed
the back of his head nervously. "I've never had a guest so long... I'm sorry if I'm not being very
entertaining."

Sara looked at him. "Well, what do you normally do all day? I'm your fiancé, not your guest. As
much as everyone hates me here, you'll have to let me into your life eventually."

_I'm your fiancé._

Yuuri missed a breath. It was so-- He hoped Wolfram was safe. And then he noticed the pause--
laughing nervously. "Well, that's pretty boring sometimes. I run in the mornings with Conrad, but
most of the day I'm normally just signing papers... What about you? Is there anything you do in
your country that we could do to make you feel more at home?"

Sara's eyes wandered and he picked up his teacup. "Not really."

Ah! Failed again! This was getting to be ridiculous. Yuuri did his best not to show his
disappointment. Maybe he was just incapable of being sneaky. "Sara," Yuuri tried again. "You
haven't really told me anything about your life or why you proposed--" He had to stop for a
moment-- Sara's knuckles had gone white on the handle of his cup. "I won't force you-- so don't
worry. I just wish you could trust me, we are friends after all. If there's something wrong-- Please
just tell me and I'll do everything I can to help."

Silence stretched. Sara kept his eyes down. "Thank you... Yuuri." The cup he held started to clatter
with the shaking of his hands. "But not today."

********

********
Recipient,
I have been informed of an opportunity.
You may have the pleasure of dealing with a particular obstacle personally after all.
Find him.
~Sender

Sender,
I am honored.
The truth will be wrested.
~Recipient

Shin Makoku:
Blood Pledge Castle

It was the tenth day.

Two kings and their trusted guards inhabited the familiar tea parlor in the East Wing. Having discussed the weather and all things appropriate to exhaustion, Sara's lips seemed to be set in a permanent pout and Yuuri was quickly running out of patience.

Conrad had warned him against being too blunt again-- didn't want to stir up anything potentially dangerous. And while Yuuri was convinced his friend was being overprotective, for the moment he continued to indulge him. Besides, as much as he wanted to believe Sara's intentions were pure, he was the only one who seemed to think it was even possible, and part of being a Good King-- Yuuri had decided-- was paying attention when his advisers... advised.

But how could he find out what he was supposed to without being blunt? What exactly were they expecting him to do? Gwendal said he trusted him with people, Murata said that if anyone could figure out why Sara was here it was him, so why shouldn't he go with his first instinct?

Still, no matter how blunt he was it wouldn't matter if Sara refused to tell him anything. So clearly the first thing he had to do was figure out why Sara wasn't telling him anything.

Yuuri had started on this new and improved Plan of Tact a few days earlier, and after adding a few more failures to his collection he had at least started to put a few things together. First, the most information he had ever gotten from Sara was during their brief moment alone. While that time had been the cause of Terrible Things and he had promised both Conrad and Wolfram on numerous occasions that he wouldn't under any circumstances try anything like it again, Yuuri had started to wonder if there was a way around it.

Lying to Sara wasn't an option. If the other sovereign was ever going to trust him he couldn't risk
doing anything that could be found out later and potentially ruin everything. So having Conrad hide somewhere while they talked wouldn't work. Sara really did seem to be truly scared of his friend--the result of tales of Ruttenburg likely blown out of proportion by the "losing" side. But lately he had been trying to get Sara to trust Conrad as well. Yuuri had had a good time explaining baseball to his royal guest, and as soon as the weather got better Sara had agreed to try playing with them.

Yuuri had also been trying hard to learn how Sara reacted to different things-- when he was more likely to shut down and look into his lap for minutes at a time. Being blunt seemed to always result in things like that. Sara was just so difficult sometimes! Yuuri wished there was another way to help... How could Sara even stand to be here? He was a king too, had his own country full of people to take care of, why wasn't he more concerned about the encroaching plague? Gwendal had said that there were no signs in Shou Shimeron as of yet-- but that could have changed. How could the other boy stand to be so far away from his country during such a dangerous time?

Or perhaps that was the reason he'd left? It was one of the more likely scenarios Yuuri had come up with over the past few days. It would make sense given the time frame that Sara had come--proposed-- in hopes that Yuuri would be able to help with the plague, but if that was it, why hadn't Sara said anything even after all his pleas for more information? Doing something to help one's country was an honorable thing. Why would Sara be ashamed to admit it was why he had come?

But then there were the suspicions everyone else seemed to harbor that Shou Shimeron was the cause of the plague. That all this was just a method to distract him and Shin Makoku at best, and at worst an attempt on his life. Yuuri refused to believe it. Sara was secretive and unexpected, but it just wasn't right to assume the worst in someone.

Maybe the bluntness had been too vague before? Maybe if he just kept asking things that were socially unacceptable he might catch Sara by surprise?

Yuuri tried to contain his grin as he set down his tea cup and took a breath in preparation. "Sara."

His friend turned and raised an eyebrow.

"Did you come here because you wanted help dealing with the plague that is taking place in the South-- In Caloria, Dai Shimeron? If you didn't, would you mind telling me why the sickness doesn't seem to be affecting Shou Shimeron?" Yuuri could feel Conrad go tense behind him as the words left his mouth.

Sara didn't move.

"Aö... Štrom da ĉratolo." Reyes put a hand on his king's shoulder, narrowed eyes never leaving Yuuri's face. Conrad must have moved because the grip only tightened until Sara raised a hand to cover it.

"Ňaš. Lo da." Sara looked down, hair slipping from behind his shoulders to hang limp over his face. He bit his lip for a moment, tears beginning to well in his eyes. "Yuuri please... Don't."

It hurt. Watching someone hurt. "Sara... I'm sorry, but I have to know... Please. Anything you can tell me-- anything--"

Sara shook his head. "I can't."

He had to think of something-- "Conrad, would you mind stepping a few feet back-- If you and Reyes both-- just a few steps back-- Sara you could just tell me. If you could just tell me--"

"Štrom da--" Reyes started, voice harsh.
"Pwar." Sara sobbed. "Štrom da Ŋaš... Pwar ũgg ŕO..."

Yuuri looked up at Sara's guard-- pleading-- "I won't do anything... please."

Slowly, Reyes removed his hand from Sara's shoulder and took a step back. Yuuri could hear Conrad moving back too, until both uncomfortable-looking men were standing several feet away by the far wall. Yuuri looked back at the young king-- scooted closer. "Sara--"

And the other boy threw himself into Yuuri's arms. "I can't-- not with him here-- I can't." The near-silent whisper barely met his ears before Sara kissed him on the mouth-- just for a moment-- before both of them were pulled in opposite directions.

Conrad's grip on his shoulders was unexpectedly tight. "Your Majesty, I--"

"It's alright, Conrad." Yuuri tilted his head back to look straight up at his friend. The older man's face was dark-- he probably thought Sara was going to try something bad-- overprotective as always. Yuuri smiled to reassure him before looking back at Sara.

The other king's eyes were wide-- darting between Yuuri and Reyes. "Yuuri... forgive me... I know you said--"

"It's alright, Sara." Yuuri smiled. Suddenly it all made perfect sense! "I'm sure everyone was just surprised."

Sara seemed to relax a bit and smiled back. "Well then... I'm glad we understand each other." He paused. "I'm glad to see you smile, Yuuri. It suits you."

Yuuri blushed. He hoped they understood each other. Yuuri certainly didn't want to lead his friend on... but they had agreed to be just friends-- so Sara wouldn't have kissed him because he liked him. It was so clear now! Sara kissed him this time for a distraction-- His words were what mattered. Sara had never liked him at all, it was just a reason to get him alone without anyone thinking it was anything suspicious-- just fiancés engaging in romantic things. Sara wanted to tell him things, but for some reason couldn't unless they were alone. This proved it!

They had been alone once-- or so he thought-- but it turned out they hadn't! Sara went on about being afraid of Conrad even after all this time-- sitting with him-- having somewhat normal conversations... But just now-- Sara didn't say Conrad... He said him.

Reyes.

Yuuri would need more time to put all of this together-- but it made so much sense-- it had to! No one was at fault this way. Even Reyes-- who knew why Sara couldn't speak in front of him, but it didn't necessarily have to be because of anything malicious. Yes! Yes! Yes!

He had figured something out! Yuuri had to struggle to keep his hands from shaking as he tried to sip from his teacup as casually as possible. Wolfram would be so proud!

He paused.

Well, not about the kiss-- but really, it wasn't like Sara had stuck his tongue in his mouth like last time. It was all part of Sara's Secret Plan! It wasn't important because both of them knew it didn't mean anything--

Yuuri had to stop his thoughts as guilt rose from the pit of his gut and attempted to choke him. Later. He could justify his actions and think about that more later tonight, after he'd figured out
what to do with the current situation. He still had time before Wolfram came home.

When Yuuri emerged from his thoughts, Sara was still looking at him. The other boy smirked and reached into the small bag that hung on his waist—sliding one of his little black cookies past his lips and pausing to lick a bit of frosting from his finger.

Well, at least for once he wasn't leaving while Sara looked like he was about to cry. Yuuri cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to cut our time short for today-- but as you can imagine, circumstances to the south are keeping my hands busy with paperwork. I hope you will forgive my early retreat." Then he stood and looked at Conrad, whose face was still set in the same dark expression it had been in the last time he'd looked.

"Not at all," Sara purred. "Troubles to the south... I can only imagine how tired your wrist must get after taking care of so much... paperwork all alone."

"You don't know the half of it." Yuuri sighed, thinking of all the stacks that were waiting for him in Gwendal's office, even if he really wasn't planning on taking care of them immediately. "Some days I get cramps in my hand from all the paperwork I have to do."

Sara's eyes widened. "Really... You know--" He stood and ran a hand through his hair. "We'll be married eventually... even if it's outside of decorum for me to help you presently... I'd be more than happy to... lend a hand."

Yuuri blinked. "That's alright. Thank you for the offer, but I don't think Gwendal would like it. He just gets more wrinkles when anyone tries to help me besides him or Gunter. Wolfram tried once--but then--" Yuuri paused. Sara's face was red. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," He squeaked before sitting and crossing his legs. "Just when I think I know you... You're full of little... surprises."

Yuuri tilted his head to the side and wondered what he could have said to give Sara such a reaction. In the end he just had to smile. "I could say the same about you, Sara."

********
********

After making sure the young king Saralegui and his guard were secure in their North Suite, Conrad accompanied Yuuri down the hallways and stairs. Silently. The same stairs where just over a week ago he had found his little brother slumped like a marionette on the railings. Each step was tense, forced, and he just wanted to go to the training grounds, use his strength—hurt something. And for entirely the wrong reasons.

That-- Conrad's nails dug into his clenched fists as he walked-- That snake had touched Yuuri. More than touched. And Conrad had wanted to do more than just pull them apart.

But the most confusing part of it all was the fact that Yuuri hadn't stopped smiling since it happened. Yuuri was-- if nothing else-- much too young to be--

"Conrad?" Yuuri's hand touched his sleeve, just above the elbow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he managed, trying to sound normal in a situation that was impossibly not. "Your affairs are your own, Your Majesty."

"What..." Yuuri's grip tightened, stopping their walk. "You can't think... that... that with Sara was
serious?" He gave a forced laugh. "It was just a big distraction-- he told me something right before it... Besides, Sara and I are just friends. You were there when I talked to him about that-- made things clear."

Conrad had to force the feelings from his face as he turned. Yuuri sounded so concerned. Then he tried to smile. "Yes, I remember." And started walking again.

"Besides," Yuuri continued, falling into step behind him as if nothing was wrong. "It was just a kiss. It's not like I've never kissed anyone before."

Conrad nearly tripped.

********
********

Yuuri threaded his fingers through Ao's mane absently as he rode along the winding path to the Temple. Conrad was on his right and a few of his stony-faced men trailed along behind them. He took a deep breath and smiled. Even though the air was cold it was wonderful to be outside. All this politics with Sara meant Yuuri had to spend even more time inside the castle walls than he normally did. Thank goodness Conrad still ran with him every morning.

His smile faded a bit as he stole a glimpse at his friend out of the corner of his eyes. Conrad was still quiet. Eyes dark. And the longer they rode in silence, the harder it became for Yuuri to ignore the reason why.

In doing what was necessary... for politics-- in doing what was necessary for people and the plague and Sara-- Yuuri had forgotten about keeping other secrets. It was one thing to know he was terrible, to be able to push the terrible things to the back of his mind for later, later, later. But Yuuri had made a mistake, forgotten about other secrets, and now he was terrified that Conrad had put it all together.

What he had done to Wolfram. What he had done to Conrad's little brother.

Conrad-- Yuuri had always always wanted to make him proud. Conrad was so strong and brave and true. What would he ever have done here-- in the beginning, especially-- if it hadn't been for him? Yuuri had always thought that when he did have a girlfriend-- even if it was on Earth-- that he would be able to talk to Conrad about it. That Conrad was the one who had the answers to everything. That Conrad would know just what to say to make the world right again.

That was before. Before Conrad tricked him-- even if it was only to protect him. Before Yuuri started thinking about Wolfram seriously enough to realize that he could probably never have a proper girlfriend-- not without damaging a friendship he didn't completely understand.

Yuuri had tried, really tried, to talk to Conrad about what was happening with Wolfram in recent months, but he had always been too vague, always been too afraid of what Conrad might think of him if he really knew what Yuuri was doing. Yuuri was terrified of what that would mean-- how he would need to think of himself if he were to say the words in his head aloud-- forced to peel away the shadows of his twisted mind. Dark thoughts that made him feel sick and want to soak himself in boiling water and scrub until he forgot he even had skin.

But even through that paralyzing fear, the hope, whether he deserved it or not, remained that Conrad would have a magical answer to his problems. Conrad was older and good-looking and had experience in relationships. He would know what to say.
Yuuri opened his mouth. Closed it.

He had to figure this out alone. He could do it! Besides, if he did it alone he wouldn't have to worry about knowing for sure that the dark look in Conrad's eyes was the loathing he must feel for how wretched Yuuri had become. But maybe he was being paranoid? He couldn't worry about everything at once. Conrad was older and good-looking and had experience in relationships. He would know what to say.

His lip twitched.

Conrad always knew what to say. He had probably been in loads of relationships. After all, he was over a hundred! Sure, the only one Yuuri knew about was Susannah Ju-- Julia.

Awkward.

His mind screamed. As if he needed any other thoughts. He had more than enough thoughts...

Yuuri forced himself to ponder the scenery instead. There was hardly any ice left on the hill leading up to the Temple. He wondered if Murata could see them coming up the path already. Was that a cloud? Yuuri had always been fond of clouds.

The silence stretched until they reached the gates of the Temple where Murata and a few of the female guards seemed to be waiting for them. The women bowed to greet him, armor clinking with every motion.

"It's been a while since you've come here, Shibuya." Murata grinned. "I was beginning to feel neglected."

Yuuri laughed a bit as he dismounted. "Well, I have something important to discuss-- I couldn't wait until you decided to come to the castle next."

"Well then," Murata's glasses caught the light of the setting sun. "I'm sure we'll have a lot to talk about." Then he looked up at Conrad. "Sir Weller won't mind returning for you tomorrow? Around midday? His Majesty will be safe as long as he's in the temple so there is no need to worry."

It took a moment for Conrad to nod. "Of course, Your Highness."

"Really?" Yuuri blinked. He'd never spent a night at the Temple. Maybe now he'd get to see what really went on between Murata and all those shrine maidens once the sun went down. Suddenly there was an inappropriate amount of blood in his cheeks. Blasted thoughts. Always getting him into trouble.

"Why not?" His friend smirked. "You are king, in case you'd forgotten."

"Yeah, well..." He laughed and rubbed nervously at the back of his head.

After waving goodbye to Conrad and greeting what had to have been every maiden and guard in the entire Temple, Yuuri finally found himself standing atop the Temple ramparts with Murata, facing the city. The sun had finally set and streaks of color were beginning to melt into black. He shivered and tightened the blanket he had been given over his shoulders, watching with a warm glow in his chest as torches and candles began to light the windows and streets of his city.

He had to do this. Stop ruining things. For them.

Murata stood beside him, waiting with nagging patience for him to begin.
Yuuri sighed. "I was so excited. I was so sure I'd found something important-- but now... it doesn't seem like nearly enough."

"Nothing ever does." Murata took a step closer, looking out with him over the land.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows in one of the lower spaces. "There's so much going on in my head... like if I lose track of one thought-- everything runs together until nothing makes sense."

"Why don't you start with the reason you came?"

"Sara told me something-- After I asked him why Shou Shimeron didn't seem to be affected by the plague."

His friend chuckled. "Really?"

Yuuri winced, thinking back on what had happened immediately after. "I begged him to tell me-- I've been getting nowhere and I just had to do something. I made Conrad and Sara's guard-- Reyes-- move back so he could lower his voice." He licked his lips. "And then Sara whispered-- sounding very upset-- that he couldn't tell me... not while he was there."

"And what makes you so sure he didn't mean Sir Weller?" Murata answered, as if already knowing what Yuuri was going to say.

Yuuri's face darkened in mortification and he looked down the brick slant leading towards the ground. "I've been alone with him without Conrad before-- but not Reyes."

"Ahh-- How could I forget?" Murata seemed to take pleasure twisting the knife deeper into his stomach. "You have been rather popular with all the pretty boys--"

"I'M NOT INTERESTED IN SARA IN THAT WAY!" Yuuri stepped back and turned to glare at his friend, as if that would somehow make his words stronger. Why did everyone seem to give him a hard time about this?

Murata didn't move. "How specific," he said, before turning to face him. "Anyway, what makes you think you can believe King Saralegui? What do you think he will do when he gets you alone, Shibuya? I find it very unlikely he will tell you everything we need to know. He is here because he wants something, and I do not think he will leave easily without it."

"But what if he's not?" Yuuri lowered his voice a bit. "What if Reyes is forcing him to be here? What if Reyes is controlling him somehow? What if--"

"What if indeed. It would be a lie to say that such a thing has not crossed my mind-- but there is no way to be sure."

"But the way he looked when he said it! And besides, even if--" Yuuri was sure he must be glowing red. "Even if he's only here because he wants something-- he's been hinting-- it could just be me." The rest of his words spilled forth in a rush. "Not that I'm interested in him, but he's made his intentions-- clear-ish and so have I! And he agreed to be friends, too-- but then after he told me today, the thing about Reyes, he kissed me again, and now Conrad is acting weird and it's all so pointless. I don't feel like I'm helping at all and I hate it."

Murata just looked at him for a while. "You seem alright that he kissed you. After throwing a fit every time anyone mentioned you had a male fiancé."

Yuuri turned away. He couldn't even face his friend. The shame pulled his chest, making him lean
forward, resting his arms on the lower edge again and bowing his head. "It's not like it was the first
time." Yuuri didn't want anyone to know. He didn't. But now that he could be weak... let his
thoughts past his lips... he realized that maybe Murata was the best person. After all, he wasn't
related to Wolfram. Wouldn't have an obligation to look at him with the same degree of betrayal.
But then again, Murata had grown up on Earth, in Japan, like him. He would have other reasons to
disapprove. But if Yuuri really was so disgusting-- it was better to let people know-- better not to
lie. He swallowed. "That day-- when Wolfram..." Yuuri could feel tears beginning to well in his
eyes. It was hard to get the words out, hard to breathe. "When he almost died-- Sara called me out
alone-- We went to his room-- Wolfram must have followed-- Sara kissed me-- more than like it
was today-- and I couldn't make him stop-- I was so confused-- not myself-- Wolfram must have
seen." Yuuri's fingers trembled against the stone-- nails unable to get a proper grip against the
smooth surface. "I didn't know about Wolfram's magic-- that it was low-- I nearly killed him! If
he'd died it would have been my fault!"

A warm hand pressed against his shoulder. "Sir Belefield chose to stay. He understood the
restrictions of his condition."

"But he couldn't have known that something like that-- That I would betray him. That I would
make him lose control." Yuuri shook, tears falling freely to create little dark circles on the stone
beneath his hands. "I lost control of myself. I couldn't even stop it. I didn't even stop it." He twirled
the ring absently on his finger. "It was almost like Wolfram did-- even if he wasn't there-- even if--
during that time he was probably in pain. Because of me."

"What did stop you?"

Yuuri shook his head. "My ring. The one Wolfram gave me-- it burned. I was on the floor because
of it before I made a decision to stop what Sara was doing."

"Interesting," was all Murata said, hand moving from Yuuri's shoulder to rub comfortingly against
his friend's back. "But you cannot do this to yourself, Shibuya. You cannot tear yourself apart over
something in the past, something you no more meant than directly caused. What you are doing to
yourself does not help anything."

"But I can't help anything." Yuuri managed. "I feel like I've just been given some menial task
while you and Gwendal take care of things that really matter."

"You are taking care of something that really matters," his friend reassured. "You."

"But--"

"We cannot protect you completely from King Saralegui and his guardian if they choose to do
something-- poison you, stab you while you're close-- Sir Weller can only do so much. This is
delicate politically. We don't want to do anything to upset the humans right now-- they already
blame us for the plague-- and having you in such a position with a human king has actually worked
to our advantage in some ways. But since the situation is necessary, the last line of defense for
yourself has to be you. In the end, it will be Saralegui's decision whether or not he will do what he
came to do. If that involves harm... he must decide to cause it. He can't be more than a year or two
older than you, he is still young. There is a chance you will be able to charm him with your shining
personality, and a chance is better than nothing."

Yuuri nodded. It made sense. He just wished he could be helping people... It felt... useless to waste
time protecting himself when he could be doing something for someone else, but at the same time
he was the Maou. If he was wrong and Sara did kill him, it would cause even more trouble for
everyone else. He braved a look at his friend. It was nearly dark now and shadows curved against
Murata's features. If having tea with Sara every day was the best he could do for his kingdom, then he would drink tea.

********

********

Murata watched his friend come to terms with himself in the dimming light as a large half-moon and a spattering of stars made their way onto the cloudless sky. The stars were always the same, no matter how many worlds he'd lived his life in. Shibuya however, was special.

In the beginning, he had thought Shibuya was for him in this life. Moon and Sun. He had been almost sure of it once it was clear that Shibuya would be the Maou. His lives would come full circle-- an end to match the beginning. But there was one thing he hadn't been expecting.

A ghost.

And at first a ghost was all it was. Sir Belefield's features were strikingly similar, as was his passion, but more than anything else it was Murata's own memories that had haunted him. After so many lives they had faded, feelings dampened and mixed with the feelings and memories of over a dozen loves-- though none quite so great. And to think how he had wasted his time then-- stubborn for so long... He sighed. When he had first seen Sir Belefield it was, for a brief moment, like walking through a thick surface of water-- tension bending, breaking as cold shattered and splashed against his skin. *Feeling* returned. And he knew that this life was really not for him. Not when the memory of something so long past felt more alive than living. He was here to fix things-- make sure Shinou did not destroy the world he gave everything to protect. Train Yuuri to become the king who would welcome in the new era-- allowing him to finally rest.

He was too tired to live like a young thing-- drowning and burning in the *new* and overwhelming death of one's self that first love is.

And so Murata was happy to watch. Happy to feel the ghost of a touch in his memories and dreams combined with all the frustration and pain and love therein. And had even been *before* Shinou had stayed-- seeming to cling to the last of his own last life to taunt him in half-dreams and wink from the corner of his eye.

But a few weeks after returning to Shin Makoku, the day he had first seen Sir Belefield's eyes on Shibuya... Murata would deny no one the chance of having that stupid, drowning, lost kind of love he saw burning in green returned. Especially not when he had already felt its touch.

It was still to be seen who Shibuya would choose, however. There was no shortage of candidates after all, though after this conversation Sir Belefield's odds seemed to be improving. Perhaps it was finally time to place a bet with the maids.

After all of Shibuya's complaining about having Sir Belefield as a fiancé and the problems of gender therein (Murata was sure this wouldn't have been a problem for Shibuya if Sir Belefield were in possession of breasts), he made no remarks about how terrible it had been to have King Saralegui-- a boy-- take his first kiss. Murata had to suppress a smirk. Clearly he hadn't.

Now he was only missing the details. Perhaps someday... And then he really did smirk.

Shibuya was too absorbed with himself to notice, however, and seemed to be intent on chewing a hole through his bottom lip. Probably feeling upset with himself for the same reasons Murata had smirked.
"Shibuya." He sighed, waiting for dark eyes to focus on him. "I promise you-- you're the only one in the country who worries about being 'gay'. The notion is even rare in most human nations here. It is such an Earth concept. Love is love. Sure, it's common to have preferences-- but having lived as both genders and loved both genders-- really, if you feel something-- what does it matter what people call it? If it is what you want."

"Why..." Shibuya stammered and even though it was now too dark to see it, he was sure the other boy was blushing scarlet. "What does that...Why--"

"No reason." Murata smirked. "Just been meaning to say it for a while is all."

"Well... well, fine..." the other boy managed, fidgeting awkwardly in place. "But besides telling you my thoughts about Reyes, I also wanted to ask how things were going... with the plague."

Murata adjusted his glasses. "There was a brief scare a few days ago. We thought a child here might be suffering from the disease, but it turns out we were wrong. Lady Gisela needs to take a few days rest, she's driving herself into quite a state worrying over this. Lady Anissina, too, is frustrated. We're not getting as far as I'd hoped, in all honesty. I got a bunch of programs and devices from Bob before we came this time-- state of the art equipment-- solar powered. I haven't been able to find anything conclusive that is either bacterial or viral. Of course, it takes time for the programs to run through all possible compounds and cross-check them to known pathogens-- but it's been running for more than a week and is more than halfway finished. If only my laptop were more powerful-- We could have finished by now."

Shibuya looked helpless. "There's nothing... really nothing I can do... to help? What about spring-- What will we do--"

"There is still a chance to find something in the next few days. And save that, we know it is coming-- We can inform the public, try to minimize panic and set up as many facilities as we can. We--" Murata tried to put it as delicately as possible. "If we run out of options, we might return to Earth. To wait."

"Impossible! I--"

"It is unlikely to come to that. I am hopeful it won't." He touched the other boy's shoulder to calm him. Murata knew Shibuya would hate the very idea, but at least their king had matured enough to not let loose his emotions completely over the mere suggestion. If it came down to it, even if Shibuya refused, he was certain enough that he and Ulrike would be able to send him one way, even though the power necessary would likely kill them both. But that wasn't something Shibuya needed to add to his worries today. "But enough of this for tonight, let's get down from here. I imagine your room has been made up by now." Murata groaned inwardly to think of all the chores he would have to do to make up for it tomorrow. Life surrounded by pretty shrine maidens wasn't turning out as pleasantly as one would expect. Shibuya nodded, and turned to head for one of the ladders down to the inside of the temple courtyard. That side of the wall and the ladder itself were well-lit by torches, so the pair had no trouble climbing down. Most of the maidens had disappeared to their chambers for the night, but a few guards lined the walls, firelight flashing in repeating shapes along their armor. A room had indeed been prepared near his own and they walked to it in near silence. Shibuya's brow was set in a seemingly permanent crease, a storm of thoughts plain in every feature. All things he must work out on his own.

And after their talk on the ramparts, there was yet another thing for Murata to figure out as well. "Shibuya," he pressed, as they reached the room. "Let me know if that ring of yours does anything
The afternoon air was almost pleasant. Wolfram wasn't sure if it was the seasons changing or that every day they were riding farther south, but winter seemed to be loosening its grip on the forest. He tightened his hands on the reigns as his horse shook its head, almost tripping on a root along the trail. This new horse had been giving them trouble since they had picked it up from a guard station a few hours back, which is why they were forced to trot along the trail instead of pushing forward at breakneck speed with only the occasional walk between to let the horses catch their breath. Still, a steady trot was calming after so much rush. Surely the next horse would be more suited to their mission. Gwendal had all the small guard stations along the trail alerted to their approach to prepare new horses and better expedite their journey. Some of the men there had been interesting to say the least-- left alone for so long in the woods to scare off any humans who happened by their trail.

His horse stopped. Wolfram cold hear Lucien halt his own horse behind him. Frowning, he urged it forward-- it reared. Wolfram barely managed to stay on in his surprise as the mad beast took off down the trail at full gallop. The brown stallion neighed-- made sounds he had never heard from a horse-- careening down the forest trail. It was almost like the time on that snow-covered mountain when the horses went mad from the miasma on their search for the stupid flowers. Damn.

Wolfram tried to let go with one hand-- to get his saddlebag off-- but was knocked from his seat by brush as his horse left the path, hitting the ground as the beating of hooves faded into the woods. He stared at the sky-- colors swirling around black-- as he heard another set of hooves fast approaching.

"Lieutenant!" Lucien shouted upon seeing him, slowing his horse to a stop and nearly leaping from the saddle. "Are you alright?"

Wolfram grabbed at a small tree to try to right himself. The impact had knocked the wind from his lungs and it took a moment to get in enough air to speak. He was definitely going to have a few bruises. "Well enough... Damn horse," he wheezed. Wolfram looked around and realized he was lucky to have landed on a wet and half-decomposed pile of leaves left over from last autumn, only recently uncovered from snow. Nothing seemed to be broken.

Lucien didn't look convinced. "You should have let me take the troubled one. We only entered Habalogue a few hours ago, I should still be able to do something to help--"

"NO!" Wolfram snapped, batting the other man's hands away. He didn't like the thought of what he might do to Lucien if he touched him with his magic. "No," he said again, more calmly. "You need your strength. It doesn't matter if the humans have corrupted the ground with their stones-- no-- I'll be alright. Let's just rest a bit-- take an early lunch."

"If you're sure..." Lucien tentatively agreed as Wolfram allowed the other man to help him to his feet.

There was a wooden bridge covering a small stream a few yards up the trail, and Lucien left him
sitting on the edge to recover while he tethered their remaining horse to graze and prepared them something to eat. Half of the food and water had been on Wolfram's horse along with his blanket, but Lucien carried the rest as well as the cooking supplies, so they wouldn't starve. The next guard station was a few miles off, and it would take them a day longer to get there at least, walking or sharing the horse in turns. It was inconvenient, but they would just have to make due. Wolfram winced and touched his arm and back lightly where he had fallen. He would probably have a solid bruise all down that side to his thigh. He took a deep breath. His chest ached, but there didn't seem to be anything seriously affecting his breathing. It seemed like he had cheated death again. Well... maybe not death, but serious injury at least.

Wolfram willed his muscles to relax as he looked down at the clear stream below his feet. The water was far enough below that even if he wanted to he couldn't quite reach it with his feet. It was no more than five feet wide and he watched the tiny rocks roll for a while before an unexpected sound met his ears. It was almost a squeak-- like an ill-oiled door or wagon wheel, and it seemed to have come from under the bridge. It would be just his luck if the thing fell apart while he was on it. He stood-- slowly-- and walked back to the path, but just as he stepped onto ground he heard the sound again. Familiar yet not.

"What is it?"

He had been listening so hard for the foreign sound that Lucien's voice took him by surprise. "I'm not sure. I heard a noise."

*Meh.* The sound again, closer now that he had come to this side of the bridge.

Wolfram moved down, to the edge of the bank where shadows obscured the short wooden supports of the bridge. Then he blinked when a shadow moved, squeaked *meh* again, and looked up at him with green eyes.

"It's a kitten," Lucien stated, sounding as perplexed as Wolfram felt.

"It's so... black. What's it doing here?" Wolfram asked, reaching down to fish the kitten out of it's hiding place. It stumbled a bit, too young and starved to properly run away. "Why is there only one?"

"If it's alone at this age it's probably been abandoned."

*Meh!* the little kitten cried as Wolfram picked it up with one hand, bringing it close to his face to examine. It was very cute. Black. Royal. "We'll keep it."

"Sir?" Lucien questioned.

"It's the royal color. My daughter will like it." Wolfram smiled-- they'd been traveling too fast for him to send her anything back. She would be glad to know he was alright. "What should we feed it?"

Lucien reached out to take the squirming ball of fur from his grasp, and its little claws took a bit of his skin with them as the tiny animal changed hands. "It's too young-- already weak. It probably won't make it to the next guard post, let alone how long it will take for someone to be sent for it."

*Meh.*

Wolfram frowned. "There must be something we can do. Just look at it. Black as night. Perfect for the princess."
"Well... I can try to heal it a bit, but I just don't want to draw it out." Lucien considered the little kitten with a sad look before green light sprung up around it.

Wolfram nearly lunged.

More.

His entire body burned for it. Each heartbeat pounding raw need through his veins. Wolfram took a step back, breathing hard, and moved away to sit on the bridge. He couldn't watch. It was disgusting. This obscene need for flesh and blood. Magic. Power.

"Lieutenant, are you alright?" Lucien's voice seemed far away. His presence, however, was much too near.

"Fine," Wolfram snapped, focusing on the water beneath his feet. "How is it?"

"Much more lively," Lucien answered, coming closer to hand him the tiny creature.

Wolfram took it, hoping Lucien would go away and make lunch-- not stand there. "Thank you." Then he focused on keeping it on his lap, not looking up until Lucien had walked away and started going through his saddlebags again. Wolfram waited for the perverse hunger to fade as he tried to hold onto the now-playful cat. Its tiny claws were making a mess of his pants, ripping up stray threads. "Stop that. That's no way to behave," he mumbled, trapping the kitten with both hands instead.

Meh meh, it protested, chewing on his thumb.

Wolfram jumped as the little thing drew blood, dropping the kitten, who took its chance to run into the woods. "Hey!" he shouted, rushing to follow and wincing at the pain in moving so fast. "Come back!"

"Lieutenant!" Lucien called, rushing to follow as Wolfram followed the tiny black thing through the trees. "You left the path!"

"I know I left the path!" Wolfram shouted back, eyes focused on the little black blur. "The blasted cat escaped."

"Maybe it wants to be escaped!" Lucien, who could run faster and was uninjured, was right behind him. "This is madness!"

Wolfram ignored him. "It's for Greta. I already decided, so just--" He stopped. The cat had led them straight into a village. It couldn't have been far from the path at all-- half a mile at most. Human.

Empty.

There couldn't have been more than a dozen houses. A few doors stood open. Silent. A chicken looked up at them in surprise before returning to its task of pecking at the ground. The humans had left. Quickly.

"Lieutenant, we should go back."

"Wait." The kitten looked at him from a porch railing a few yards off. "No one's here. Just let me get it. Maybe we can find some food and lure it." He stepped forward into the village, keeping his hand on the sword at his hip and his eyes and ears open for any lingering humans.
Lucien fell into step behind him as he walked.

When Wolfram reached the porch the kitten was on, it simply rolled onto its back and looked up at him with innocent green eyes. *Meh.*

"Yes," Wolfram stated in response. "Meh." And then he scooped up the troublesome thing.

"Demons! Ghosts! Intruders!"

Wolfram turned, pressing the cat to his chest with one hand and drawing his sword with the other.

An old man had stepped out from one of the houses. He walked with a cane and one of his legs was half wooden peg. His hair stood up wildly and it looked like he hadn't bathed in days. His nose and lips were black in places. "Get off my boat! Stole-aways! Whores! You're the ones who took my gold!"

"Erm," said Lucien.

Wolfram raised an eyebrow and tried to ignore the small claws pressing into his chest through his shirt. "He's insane."

"Insane. IN SANE!" The man scoffed. "That's what they said! But I'm the only *sane* one! The rest are dead-- dead or run off!" Then he smiled a wild sort of smile. "But now I've got this big ship all to myself, which, my boys, is a pretty good deal when you look at it."

"Gods." Lucien's voice, suddenly scared. "The plague. That's why they're gone. That's why he's crazy. We have to get out!"

"Come inside," the old man interrupted. "Have some bread and chat with an old sailor. I've had some women in my days-- stories you won't want to miss, such strapping young lads." He chuckled. "You don't have to worry. I have all six of my fingers left. Only four gone."

Wolfram nodded in agreement. Getting away was sounding better by the minute. But the old man was between them and the woods they had come from-- and crazy as this old human was, killing him seemed unnecessary. Besides, his blood was probably dangerous. It was a shame though, a whole village full of left food and supplies, perhaps something for Greta's new pet to eat. "Lucien," he whispered. "Find something for the cat to eat while I take care of this-- maybe for us, too."

"But, Sir--"

"Now," Wolfram snapped, and a few seconds later he could hear Lucien moving away behind him. He kept his focus on the old man, though, unsure of what he might do.

The old man simply tilted his head to the side and spat onto the ground.

*Meh meh.* The thing in his hand was intent on creating holes in his shirt and chest. *Meh!*

Wolfram tried not to hold it too tightly, rubbing his thumb along the kitten's back as well as he could without dropping it in an attempt to calm it.

"Cats do well on boats," the old man informed him, taking a few steps forward. "Take care of the rats-- not that a rat won't make a fine meal once it's dead."

There was still a good distance between himself and the man, no need to back away quite yet. "Most things tend to taste better... dead," he offered, trying to keep the crazy old man entertained.
"My daughter is dead." The old man's eyes were sad then. "She's inside, pretty thing." He gestured for Wolfram to come forward and smiled a crooked smile. "You could meet her if you like? She's just inside. I could use a healthy young son-in-law on this new boat."

For the first time, Wolfram felt pity for this old human, instead of just thinking he was in the way. "I'm sorry," he said, as sincerely as he could. "I'm sorry, but I'd be no good on a boat. I have terrible seasickness."

The old man nodded. "Just as well." Then he slowly maneuvered himself until he sat on the ground, peg leg scratching a line in the dirt. "I'm afraid this isn't a real boat."

"No," Wolfram confirmed, "it isn't." And then he turned to the sound of footsteps. Lucien seemed to be finished gathering things and so together they headed forward, passing the old man with plenty of room between them. The man seemed to be ignoring them now for the most part, looking down at his lap and running his fingers back and forth along the ground as if he were touching the surface of water.

As soon as they entered the woods, he started to scream. "Man overboard! Man overboard! Two fallen to the sea! Man overboard!" His voice had almost faded completely by the time they reached the path.

Lucien gave him a strange look. "A lot of trouble for a cat."

"What? It's perfect!" Wolfram held up the kitten for emphasis, and resisted a wince as it clawed him. *Meh!*

Lucien shook his head. "You're so stubborn once you want something."

"I am no such thing." Wolfram huffed and looked away. "Still... I might not have followed had I known-- You don't think there's any danger of... from that short a time?"

"No way to be sure-- I don't think so. I don't know much about this thing, but it isn't as if we came in *direct* contact with anyone. But, I didn't bring us any food. It's bad luck to take from a ghost town-- not to mention one affected by the plague." Lucien reached into the small sack he had brought from the village. "I just got some goat's milk for the cat-- and some rope to keep it from running away again."

Wolfram sighed. "I suppose you're right. And either way it's best to err on the side of caution in this case. I'll be sure to tell the guard to watch the cat-- if it shows signs of anything it shouldn't be sent."

"Probably a wise decision." Lucien reached out to take the cat from him-- handing Wolfram the bottle of milk for a moment so he could use both hands to create a little harness for the kitten.

Wolfram was surprised to find the bottle warm. "Where did you get this?"

"From a goat-- it wasn't lying out or anything-- the animal seemed healthy so I just milked it." Lucien continued struggling to secure the kitten.

"You *milked* the goat?" Wolfram tried not to show how appalled he felt. He liked to think of his soldiers above such things-- but then he remembered what Lucien had told him about his upbringing and he felt embarrassed for having said anything. "Well done, then..." he managed weakly, looking away.

Lucien seemed not to notice his uncomfortable moment. "Well, that should keep him in line." He
smiled.

Wolfram looked at the kitten. Lucien had made loops for each of its legs and neck, and a line of rope up the animal's back that held all the loops together. The extra rope was tied near the middle of the kitten's back and was a few feet long. "Is it comfortable?"

"As much as it can be," Lucien answered. "The knots won't tighten and this way it won't pull too much on any one place if it does try to run."

"Thank you." Wolfram smiled. "You really are great at this kind of thing."

Lucien's cheeks colored a bit as he looked away. "Don't mention it."

It didn't take them long to eat lunch, and after their little adventure Wolfram's side was feeling a bit better for the distraction, though it was sure to trouble him for the next few days. Still, it was more comfortable for him to walk than ride, so for the next few hours he walked, holding the cat while Lucien rode, until late afternoon when they switched places. Once they made it through Habalalouge they would reach Lesser Gael, and Wolfram was very much looking forward to reaffirming his rites so he could turn around and go home.

Go home and take care of his daughter and the wimp.

*******
*******
Western Habalouge
Border Region:
Spring, Fifty-two years earlier.

*******

Rain thundered against the top of the carriage. Wolfram was still soaked, clothes sticking to his skin as they refused to dry in the warm, humid air. It was completely dark, except for when sudden flashes of lightning broke through the thick canvas covering. The occasional drop of wet dribbled on his head and blanket. This carriage was simple, nothing like what he normally rode in with his mother or uncle when they traveled, and the floor space was just big enough for Marques, Lucien, and himself to lie down lengthwise as long as they didn't move.

Wolfram sighed. This was absolutely miserable. He wanted to go home. After so much time sleeping on the ground it actually seemed softer than the wooden floor of the carriage. He didn't understand how Marques was able to sleep and he was annoyed because now the other boy's snoring was keeping him up-- when he could hear it over the rain, that was. Lucien had been asleep for longer. Wolfram was a little amazed how well the other boy was taking this whole Camping Experience. Nothing seemed to upset him.

Wolfram and Marques had been up whispering for at least an hour, wondering what it would be like to meet the flame. Wolfram had said he was excited, but hadn't admitted that he was actually a little scared. Meeting a god. Alone. In a dark mountain. Wolfram shivered and tried not to think about it.

Eventually he must have fallen asleep because he woke to being shaken roughly and Marques' voice. "Wolf!"

"Shh!" Lucien hushed. "You don't have to wake him like that!"

"I don't care! He nearly killed us! I've never seen anyone sleep like that!" Marques shook him
again.

Wolfram growled. "Stop it!" And tried to bat Marques' hands away.

"Finally, the beast awakens." Marques laughed. "Or were the beasts chasing you in your dream? You certainly seemed to have it out for us, right Luke?"

"I think he's always like that," Lucien defended softly. "We were just in range this time."

Wolfram pouted. "I don't know what either of you are talking about. Why did you wake me up?"

"Well, first you just seemed to want to be sideways," Marques started, voice full of mirth. "I didn't mind your head on my stomach-- but then you started kicking Luke, and that hardly seemed proper so I tried to wake you up-- You punched me. I shall have a black eye and you're lucky we're not back at the castle or you'd be in trouble."

"Oh don't be a baby. I couldn't have hit you that hard," Wolfram humphed, feeling doubtful that they were even telling the truth. Probably just a big joke.

Marques managed to shove him in the dark. "Who's the baby? Little prince had to sleep in the carriage--"

"It wasn't my idea!" Wolfram fumed.

"That's true," Lucien added. "Sir Franklin insisted-- the mud is rather deep and the three of us wouldn't fit in the hammock Sir Franklin set up--"

"Lucien," Marques snapped. "That's not helpful. I rescued you from the Prince of Violent Sleeping Patterns and you side with him."

"Sorry... I just... I thought this would happen. He's been doing it the whole time. It's not my fault it rained and we all ended up 'in range'."

"Ohhh! You've been watching him sleep have you--"

"It's sort of hard to miss!"

Wolfram had had enough. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here!"

Marques scoffed. "It's as good as you're not here-- I can't even see you--"

"Enough!" All three boys were silenced by the imposing voice of Sir Franklin. "It's nearly dawn. I don't care how grown up you little ones feel-- getting your rites-- it's a long fall from the saddle for ones so small and you will not bounce. Get some sleep, we're riding all day tomorrow as usual."

The boys waited a few moments for him to leave before trying to find their blankets again in the dark. Wolfram had been in the middle before, but he made sure to move over Marques to sleep by the far wall, pushing his side into the corner. How was he supposed to know he kicked in his sleep? It wasn't as if he'd slept in a bed with anyone besides Gwendal's stuffed animals before. Stupid Marques, always laughing at him. Stupid Lucien, good at camping. Wolfram bit his lip to stop the tears. He wanted to go home. To go back where everyone just left him alone.

********

********

Western Habalouge
Tai held the reins as he walked alongside the horse. His little Frith hummed lightly as she rode, white dress reflecting the sunlight that filtered through the branches covering the path. He had wrapped her feet in young rabbit pelts to keep them warm, and a green blanket covered her shoulders, knotted together above her lap. The color matched her eyes and made her crimson hair stand out more brilliantly in the sun. Yes, his Frith was by far the prettiest child he had taken in—the closest to the cycle, to death. She had touched prophecies that had rested for centuries.

As much as there was a need to make their way to the castle in Shin Makoku as swiftly as possible, Tai allowed himself to enjoy their journey. The woods were old, strong, and most of the surrounding lands had been untouched by humans and their wretched stones. The stones were scavengers of magic and the humans who used and planted them were vile—thieves taking what the gods had denied them. Magic was the mazoku birthright. The gods had chosen them. But then humans had discovered the terrible stones.

The stones stole magic—corrupted the land by sucking its life. And then humans had the audacity to turn that corrupted, stolen magic against them in wars and violence. A violence that was wholly unnecessary when the stones' very presence would pull the magic, the life, from any mazoku close enough to feel its agony. It was the reason mazoku couldn't use their magic in human lands. Any power offered was stolen by the stones poisoning the ground beneath their feet.

Tai looked up, startled to feel eyes upon him. He stopped the horse and Frith's humming ceased as they paused to look and to listen. Two men had left the path, their single horse tethered several yards into the woods. Watching them through the brush.

The young men seemed more concerned by their presence than Tai was of theirs. This was a sacred trail. All those who traveled it were friends. Still, best to respect their wishes and continue on. He tugged the reigns to urge the horse, passing the unknown travelers in peace.

Tai filled his mind with thoughts of his mission as he walked. He had high hopes to meet this king of their prophecies— their legend— their king. This double black maou of mysterious origins, traveler of worlds, held promise.

Still, he worried for his Frith, what would happen if the king was corrupted and must be killed before he deemed this world unworthy and destroyed it all in cleansing. Even if that was the case—that they must attempt to remedy the broken king— it was likely they would fail. It would be unwise to use more force, tip the scales of fate more than they were already attempting. The elders had picked their chosen prophecy. The better of two. Hope from ashes over ashes from hope. Even the great Shinou had feared the second prophecy enough to destroy it years ago, when in his vanity he feared it spoke of him.

"Did you see them?" Frith spoke, and Tai looked up to see her face alight with joy.

Tai smiled back, resting a hand on her thigh as he looked upon her. "Yes, two travelers. Too cautious to come and say hello."

"A ghost. He was hiding, covered in what wasn't his," she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes. "King."

"What king?" he breathed, looking back along the trail.
"Two in one," she answered, and was silent.

********

Eastern Habalouge
Village Center:
Present

********

"Have I told you you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen?" Maxine slurred for the fourth time that evening.

Yozak forced a delicate blush to his cheeks. "You're too kind."

The tavern sat under the only inn in town and served bacon sandwiches and ale past midnight. He had gotten a job as a bar maiden a week ago since it was the place Maxine came after working all day at his mother's small farm. Maxine was a good son, returned home to help his mother after his country denied him. Yozak had heard tales from the man's childhood, stories from when he trained in the army of an "unknown" kingdom, but why he left-- and why he and his old mother were two of the few people in the village who were not showing symptoms of the mysterious illness, remained unknown. Luckily, Yozak was included in that minority as well.

For now.

"So tell me again," Yozak started, voice coated in sweetness, "how such a strong soldier like you ended up in a little town like ours. Shouldn't you be off commanding armies?"

"Mistakes aren't always... forgiving," Maxine answered into his elbow, ponytail moving from side to side as the man rolled his head into his arm. Then he started to sob.

Yozak managed not to roll his eyes. The man always cried after his third pint of ale. A fourth and he would be asleep on the counter. "I'm sure it wasn't that bad," he soothed.

"I should have just left the first time!" the man wailed. "I thought I could fix it-- but it wouldn't have mattered. Second class-- only afforded one mistake."

The social structure of Shou Shimeron was turning out to be quite the puzzle in itself. Maxine went on about being a "second class" citizen often, but what exactly that entailed Yozak still had to figured out. "Well you certainly seem first class to me." He lay a comforting hand on the man's shoulder.

"You're too sweet to understand. Can't understand anyway-- not that it's your fault-- pretty thing." Maxine would have slid from his chair if Yozak hadn't caught him. "Bad blood. Can't be helped. Pretty-- pretty thing." Seconds later he was asleep.

********

********
Two weeks.

It had been exactly two weeks since Wolfram had left for Lesser Gael, which meant that Wolfram must be at least halfway finished with his journey and should be reaffirming his rites at any moment. Yuuri gripped the napkin in his lap nervously as the conversation around him seemed to fade away. He had used half his time already. If Yuuri was going to fix everything-- figure out Sara-- the plague-- Reyes-- himself-- he should be at least halfway finished.

But Yuuri felt like he had gotten nowhere.

Lady Cheri and Greta had joined his now-common group of four for a late lunch, and the party of six was currently seated at the usual round table eating the usual fair. His daughter seemed to be finally warming to Sara, though if her polite presence was anything more than an effort to please her father Yuuri couldn't be sure. Either way, Yuuri was grateful that she was no longer pouting constantly or trying to throw bits of pastry into his new "fiancé's" hair. For the most part she seemed content to sit quietly and eat a second helping of cake rather than finish her proper lunch, sharp brown eyes hardly leaving Sara or Reyes. Yuuri felt that he could hardly scold her since she was upset with him already, and worried that he would be in for quite a lecture from Wolfram when he returned to find his little princess completely spoiled.

The best part about his lunch so far was that Lady Cheri was completely dominating the conversation, smiling and leaning onto the table in such a way that had Yuuri convinced she must use magic to keep her breasts from falling out of her low black dress. He forced his eyes away for the third time. That was Wolfram's mother, he reminded himself abruptly, and even though the blond pretty-boy was miles away, fear of his wrath remained at the forefront of Yuuri's mind.

Wolfram.

What was he going to do about Wolfram? Yuuri missed him. As much as he dreaded the possibility of admitting his own failure at the blond's return, Yuuri longed to have him back. The castle simply wasn't the same without him. Yuuri wasn't the same without him. Somehow through their time together Wolfram's presence had started to give Yuuri a confidence in himself that he had only noticed missing once Wolfram had left. Yuuri was trying. He was trying so hard to do what Wolfram would want him to, what Yuuri thought he should do, but every day increased the weight of failure on his shoulders and he was running out of strength to do it alone.

Talking to Murata had helped the other day. Admitting some of his shameful secrets made them seem frighteningly real but somehow more manageable. Once he admitted the problem, put it in words, it had begun to seem like something that he could overcome, rather than just a painful shadow he willed his mind to forget. Yuuri had to decide how he felt about Wolfram. It seemed like it should be an easy task, easier than figuring out why Sara and Reyes had come to Shin Makoku at least. After all, Yuuri had a good idea of how he felt about everyone else, why should his feelings for Wolfram be so impossible to decipher?
Wolfram was his friend, his best friend even. Yuuri had no trouble admitting something like that to himself; the notion even made him feel pleasantly warm. There was no denying the loyalty that Wolfram had for him, and that such person as Wolfram seemed to hold him in such high regard was as wonderful as it was unbelievable at times. Of course, Conrad was his best friend too— it was just that he seemed too far away sometimes. Yuuri still didn't completely understand what had happened with Big Shimeron, and Conrad was so much older and full of mystery and a history that Yuuri knew he could never be a part of. Yuuri looked up to Conrad more as someone he aspired to be like, rather than Wolfram, who Yuuri felt was experiencing the world beside him, at a similar pace. Maybe it was easier with Wolfram because he at least seemed to be his own age, though Yuuri knew he was years older. At any rate, Wolfram was his friend, a beautiful friend, and Yuuri was fine with that.

Yuuri was even fine with admitting Wolfram was beautiful, or handsome, or pretty. He looked like the type of chiseled foreigner who only came to Japan to film commercials and endorse products bought by multitudes of girls his age wearing too much makeup and clothes they couldn't afford. The type of girls that, once upon a time, Yuuri would have done anything to date. Sometimes Yuuri had caught himself thinking his friend’s features were too perfect, too beautiful, and Yuuri had to look away. But did appreciating that another boy was attractive make him... gay? Certainly most people could tell that a male singer or drama star was better looking than a normal person. Someone like him. At any rate, Wolfram was his friend and Wolfram was attractive in a way that Yuuri could appreciate.

But was he attracted to Wolfram?

Yuuri could feel heat spread to his cheeks almost at once. There had been things. Yuuri couldn't deny Certain Things that had happened between Wolfram and himself--

"Yuuri?" Greta's voice. "Your face is all red. Are you alright?"

Yuuri took a bite of a dumpling on his plate, barely tasting the cheese and butter flavor, and swallowed loudly now that the conversation at the table seemed to have stopped. "Fine, Greta. I just-- there was some pepper in the-- soup." He coughed. "I'm fine now. Sorry to interrupt-- please continue."

Greta seemed hardly convinced, but Lady Cheri seemed happy enough to lay a hand on Reyes' shoulder as she continued to regale him and Sara with stories from her time at sea. Yuuri ate another dumpling and willed the flush from his cheeks. Perhaps now was not the time to think about Certain Things. Besides, thinking about all the times Sara had kissed him didn't cause embarrassing physical reactions at all. If he was gay it would mean he liked kissing boys, and Yuuri definitely hadn't enjoyed kissing Sara, who was a boy. Yuuri felt a little better after that thought and tried to let his mind fade back into the conversation around him.

"--I still can't believe you don't have someone special waiting for you back in Shou Shimeron."

Lady Cheri toyed with the end of Reyes' ponytail. "No wife? No boyfriend..." She trailed off, eyes flicking over to Sara when the dark haired guard seemed hesitant to answer.

Sara and Reyes exchanged a few words in their strange language before Sara answered. "Lady Cheri, I will answer for him as you have been speaking rather quickly and my guard is not as schooled in your tongue... In Shou Shimeron it is... inappropriate for personal guards to marry. Your insinuations are... discouraged."

"Lady Cheri managed to blush. "In that case you both have my apologies, but you can hardly blame me for the mistake with how little you've indulged us about your home customs. Please, I've talked too much for the afternoon, would you honor us with a few tales from your home?"
Yuuri blinked. Lady Cheri was... He was way out of his league with all of this political tiptoeing... This woman-- even though she had been overpowered by Stoffel during the war-- knew what she was doing. Yuuri had never been so grateful that he'd started paying attention.

Sara was silent for a moment, while he took a sip of his tea.

Yuuri knew what \textit{that} meant! Thinking time! He was finally getting the hang of this!

"Well," Sara began carefully, "my experience growing up as a prince and then being so young a king is hardly representative of life in my country. It was all about education and decorum and I spent most of my life within the castle walls. My time with Yuuri is the longest I've spent outside the castle-- perhaps even cumulatively. I hope my words did not offend you; I am enjoying my time here more than I can say." Sara's hand found its way on top of Yuuri's, which had been resting near his glass. "I hope you will all come to forgive my sudden intrusion into your home."

It was amazing. Lady Cheri had gotten more out of Sara in one lunch than Yuuri had managed in over a month! It was almost all Yuuri could do not to gape. This was his chance! He had to say something, keep Sara talking. So to encourage his words, Yuuri took Sara's hand and squeezed.

"Well I'm glad you came, too, Sara. I think I've learned a lot from meeting you-- and all of the friends I've made make my life brighter so I'm always happy to make more friends. I'm also happy you've gotten to come here, if it means you get to leave your castle... I couldn't stand being shut up here for my whole life. I can barely make it a week before I want to run down to the market or even visit friends in other countries-- How did you stand it?"

Sara looked up from their linked hands and into Yuuri's eyes, then smiled. "It wasn't so bad. My castle is stunning."

"Oh?" Yuuri smirked. "And mine isn't?" Yuuri could hardly keep this up. His hand must be pouring sweat. Was this lying? He felt dirty in this-- it wasn't him.

"Of course it's... it's lovely, Yuuri. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise-- My castle is simply... home to me, filled with familiar things-- you understand."

"Still," Yuuri pressed. "Don't you worry about your people? How can you do what is best for them without getting to know them?"

All the comfort left Sara's body at once. His smile faded and his grip on Yuuri's hand went still. "Not all kingdoms are like yours, Yuuri."

"Eep!" Greta's startled voice drew Yuuri's eyes from Sara's guarded features.

"Greta, what's the matter?" Lady Cheri tried to get the girl's attention but the princess's eyes stayed on Yuuri.

"Papa..." Tears started to well in her eyes. "I bit my tongue..."

Yuuri raised his eyebrows. It wasn't like Greta to cry over something like that. "Greta--"

"It hurts!" She sobbed and leaned forward until a little stream of blood-filled saliva dribbled down her chin.

"Oh!" Yuuri's voice rose in alarm, and he pulled his hand from Sara's grasp to scramble for a napkin. "It's okay... here." He knelt beside his daughter to dab at her chin. "Are you alright?"

To his surprise, Greta only cried more. "Papa... will you take me to see Gisela?"
"Erm," Yuuri managed. "Now isn't the best time, Greta... It's just a little thing--"

Greta only cried louder and clung to him.

"Don't fret, Your Majesty," Lady Cheri soothed. "I can take her; I've finished my meal anyway. Come along, Dear--"

For a moment Yuuri didn't think Greta was going to let him go. "I hate it when you touch him--Don't," she whispered nearly silently in his ear before allowing herself to be led away by Cheri. She glared at him over her shoulder once before the two of them left the room.

"I'm sure she'll be alright, Your Majesty." Conrad's voice snapped his eyes away from the door. "It was only a small thing."

Yuuri smiled at his friend before moving back to his seat. "I suppose you're right, Conrad. It's just hard not to worry."

"It must be hard," Sara started. It seemed like their chairs had gotten closer together while he had been on the floor. "For you to raise a human child."

Yuuri sighed and nodded. "She's wonderful, but she can be a handful sometimes. I wouldn't change it for the world, but I don't think I knew what I was getting into when I adopted her. Wolfram surprised me so much, too-- I think he turned out to be the better father, to tell you the truth."

Sara tilted his head to the side. "Isn't it hard, I mean... that she will look older than you in a few years?"

Yuuri felt like the floor had been pulled out from under him. It was one of those things he pushed to the back of his mind and never allowed himself to really think about... let alone say anything out loud. "I don't like to think about that." He breathed and tried to focus on his plate to keep the room from spinning. "It shouldn't be too bad-- I'm only half-- Conrad--" Yuuri looked up to seek comfort in his friend's familiar face. This was terrible. His chest tightened and his eyes started to sting. "It won't be too different--"

"Yuuri. It's a long time away." Conrad's voice was solid, something for Yuuri's mind to grab hold of. "It's no use to dwell on things we cannot change."

Yuuri nodded, forcing the thoughts back into the dark corners of his mind.

"I'm so sorry, Yuuri." Sara lay a hand on his shoulder. "I did not mean to upset you."

"It's alright, Sara." Yuuri blinked a few times and took a deep breath. "I know you didn't mean to. It's something I should be prepared for, but at the same time she's-- it's not something I like to think about."

"I had hoped--" Sara looked into his lap. "I had hoped there was a way around it. That mazoku live so long and humans live such comparatively short lives has always been a cause for dispute. Your reputation of bridging the gaps between the two races-- I thought perhaps you had found a way to circumvent the issue."

"I wish there was..." Yuuri trailed off, lost for a moment in how wonderful it would be if it were true.

"You don't--" Sara's eyes were still downcast, and he had removed his hand from Yuuri's shoulder in favor of fiddling with the napkin in his lap. "You don't see it as weakness-- it's the mazoku gift
after all-- long life, magic. You would marry me in spite of such a fault?"

Yuuri had to pause. He hated leading Sara on like this. It was hard to choose his words. "People are people. I don't care if someone is mazoku or human or both. Things like that shouldn't matter."

"You may say such things shouldn't matter," Sara looked up with a small smile. "But they do."

********

********

Gisela had just finished reading over the journals she had made during her stay in Caloria for the seventeenth time when there was a knock on her infirmary door. A knock was good. It meant it wasn't an emergency. She would prefer a knock any day to all the times people barged in, carrying friends or alerting her to a tragedy somewhere within the castle. Gisela took a moment to tidy her desk before standing up to answer the door and was surprised to see Lady Cheri accompanied by a very red-faced Greta.

"Good afternoon, Gisela," Lady Cheri smiled. "I hope we're not interrupting you; the young princess absolutely insisted on paying you a visit."

"I did not," Greta huffed. "You could have fixed it. It's nothing at all."

"Now, now, I'm sure you didn't interrupt your father during an important lunch for 'nothing at all', Greta. My son at least has raised you better than that."

Gisela forced a smile and beckoned them inside. There was no need for her visitors to argue in the hallway.

The princess' face had gone from bright red to a deep pale in a matter of seconds, and she shuffled her feet a bit as she walked into the infirmary. "I'm sorry... But Yuuri shouldn't let that man touch him like that. Papa Wolf--"

"Wolfram is not here and there are things at stake greater than a mere holding of hands," Cheri chided. "You need to--"

"No!" Greta shouted. "Wolfram isn't here and I have to take care of our family while he's gone!"

She blinked, seemingly surprised by the volume of her own voice before running to sit on the bed farthest from the door with her back to them.

Lady Cheri sighed and looked at Gisela, speaking in low tones. "I'm sorry, I really hope we're not a bother. Greta bit her tongue during lunch and caused a bit of a scene."

"Don't worry," Gisela tried to be as reassuring as possible. "I wasn't making any progress anyway. I must have gone over everything in my head a hundred times."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out-- You've just been working too hard lately." Lady Cheri lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I should be getting back-- please take care of Greta. I hope I wasn't too hard on her, she just doesn't understand how important His Majesty's discussions with King Saralegui are." "I'll make sure she's alright. It will be good for me to spend some time with her-- take my mind off things." Gisela smiled. "Try not to worry."

Lady Cheri nodded, but hardly seemed reassured. "I hope she won't be upset with me-- I didn't mean to be too hard on her..." Then she turned and headed for the door. "You'll let me know she's
healed later? And if there's any change-- with anything?"

"Of course," Gisela assured, smiling when Lady Cheri turned to her one last time before walking down the hallway. After closing the door, Gisela went to sit on the narrow cot that Greta had chosen in the back of the room. The little girl's head was bowed, and her feet swung slightly where they didn't quite touch the ground. "Greta--"

"I'm fine," Greta mumbled, clutching the cot tight in both hands and looking away.

Gisela lay a tentative hand on her back. "Even so, why don't you let me see, since you came all this way?"

"No, I-- It was wrong to do what I did. I should deal with the consequences." Greta worried her lip for a moment. "I just-- I hate watching them together. I hate that Wolfram's not here."

"Wolfram will be back soon-- he should be halfway done by now." Gisela sighed as she started to rub the little girl's back. "I know it's hard, feeling like your parent's will leave when you're not really theirs, but Yuuri loves you so much-- and so does Wolfram."

Greta looked up at her, eyes wet with unshed tears. "How..."

"I was adopted too, so I know it can feel scary at times." Gisela smiled a bit. "But Yuuri is only trying to get close to Saralegui for politics, you shouldn't take what he does personally."

"But he's Yuuri! He could never trick anyone! He does what he thinks is right. He doesn't lie... not when he knows he is... I know... I know why it's important. I know about the disease. What if Saralegui was going to tell Yuuri something... and he didn't because of me." Tears slid down her face. "What if because I hate seeing them together... Wolfram gets sick while he's away... And then no one can help him." Words dissolved into sobs, and Greta fell forward into Gisela's arms.

"Shh..." Gisela soothed. "Wolfram is going on a special path-- disease spreads from one person to another, and as long as he is on the path he's safe from seeing anyone who could give him the disease." It was mostly true, but Greta didn't need to hear anything about the possibility that the sickness could be caused by animals or things living on them. Besides, there was no evidence to suggest that was the case.

Greta's tears slowed and she nodded. "I just miss him."

"I know." Gisela squeezed the girl tight before letting go and un-sticking some hair from a damp cheek. "And I'm sure he misses you too, but he wouldn't want you to be sad and miss him too much." Her hand moved from Greta's cheek down to hold her chin. "Now why don't you stick out your tongue so I can see how bad it is?"

The girl hesitated for a moment before sticking out her tongue enough to reveal the tiny wound. "I only did enough to bleed..." she mumbled, words hampered by her tongue.

Gisela frowned a bit. "You really shouldn't hurt yourself." Then reached up with her other hand to quickly heal the wound.

"I'm sorry," Greta managed once she was mended and her tongue was back in her mouth. Then she started to fidget. "Miss Gisela... Is there anything I can do? To help everyone... I'm not that little anymore. I'll be twelve soon..."

Gisela smiled sadly and patted her on the head. "I wish there was. I'm not even sure there's anything I can do right now. I just need some more time-- and I'm getting help from Miss Anissina
and the Sage-- Once there's something for you to help with I'll see what you can do. I can always use an extra pair of hands around here."

Greta looked thoughtful for a moment, before breaking out into a wide grin. "Alright, just let me know soon, okay?"

"Sure thing." Gisela smiled back.

"In the meantime, I'm going to go see if Anissina needs any help. She's been promising to teach me the basics of magical device construction-- maybe I can help her build something to figure everything out!"

Gisela hardly managed to say goodbye before Greta was rushing out of the infirmary with a hastily-remembered curtsy and thank you that reminded Gisela of Wolfram's influence on the girl. Gisela smiled to herself, happy that Greta seemed to be feeling better, for the moment at least. Greta was normally such a happy child-- But then again, these were quickly becoming dark times. For everyone.

Whenever she looked through her journals, Gisela could feel it. The growing hopelessness that crept in to swallow her rational thoughts. Thoughts that might help those affected by the plague. Every day Gisela wished she had done something differently, looked at something from a different angle, seen one more patient before exhaustion forced her to bed. So much grief had befallen the people of Caloria in recent years, it was terrible to witness such widespread despair there now. Her old teacher, the man who had taught both her and Suzannah Julia the art of healing, was long since past, but his teacher had been a young apprentice during the horrors of the Blue Storm. Thousands had died. Humans blamed mazoku, but the source must have been to the south as the earliest reported cases had been in the southern regions of Dai Shimeron. Gisela could remember being told about mazoku healers who had disguised themselves as humans and snuck beyond the borders of human nations not only to treat the sick, but also to study it in case it were to affect mazoku as well.

The man who had taught her teacher had accompanied one such mazoku healer, and he had kept detailed journals of all his travels and experiences combating the illness. Gisela had read them all during her training. It was a pity the symptoms of the Blue Storm were so drastically different from the plague they were fighting today. Differing symptoms aside, the most important thing was that mazoku had been immune to the Blue Storm. There would be no aid in the writings of a dead man.

But, Gisela had followed his example and kept detailed journals of her time in Caloria. She had catalogued symptoms and theories and filled one blank tome after the next. Gisela wondered how many more people she could have helped if she hadn't wasted time writing-- or being affected by distraction.

Queen Flurin was a truly remarkable woman. She was a wonderful ruler whose love for her people rivaled even the Maou's. She went above and beyond the role of other sovereigns-- staying down in the hastily constructed infirmary camp for days and nights on end. But the bitter-sweetness of it all had been... It hadn't been the time-- it had been a distraction. And as every day went by that there was no cure for the disease she knew it was a distraction she could not afford.

People had been dying. The stench of death and burning bodies was permanent in the air-- sticking to clothes and flesh and hair. And more than death there had been madness-- missing limbs. Brilliant minds, kind people, driven to horror and violence, trapped in a world of dreams-- perpetual nightmares.
It had not been a time or place where distractions could be afforded.

********

********

Anissina von Karbelnikoff had re-discovered that she was not a woman of patience. She was a woman of beauty, of brilliance, of charm and grace-- but patience at this very moment was an unattainable enigma that taunted the edges of her every thought. Anissina had been teased by this very fault for other reasons, when she had been in her Seventies-- young and idealistic-- but had never before been quite so vexed by her professional specialty. Her inventions, her machines, always worked-- or they weren't meant to be made. Since this device was quite clearly necessary, and designed and executed flawlessly, it was infuriating that it had yet to preform the purpose for which it was designed!

And to make things worse, something had contaminated her samples. A few of them at least.

But the contaminant was foreign. Her machine hadn't detected anything amiss with those particular samples before they had been out in her lab for a few days. When she had swallowed her pride and talked to the Sage about it, he had explained that things in her lab could have fallen into the uncovered samples and grown. He had been short with her, obviously upset that the samples were ruined, but not as upset as Anissina had been with herself. She was supposed to figure this out! What was the point of her mechanical brilliance if she couldn't even do this?

What good was any of it?! Anissina growled in frustration and kicked one of her older inventions, but all that did was create a dent and a sore foot. She was considering admitting defeat and starting on a whole new device when a soft and familiar knock came from the door. "Come in, Greta." She sighed. At least talking to the girl always cheered her up.

Greta smiled hopefully as she opened the door. "Anissina, is there anything I can help you with today? Miss Gisela said she didn't need help, but I really want to do something useful..." She trailed off, once-hopeful eyes falling to the floor.

Anissina had to pause. Her first instinct was to say she was sorry, but there was nothing for her to do. How could she give Greta a task when she herself was having such a difficult time finding something of use to do? But saying that would hardly help. "Perhaps..." She pondered vaguely, cupping her chin with one hand. Children could be useful in times like this, they weren't held back by as many things they had been told, imaginations unhampered by instruction. "I'm thinking of starting on a new invention."

"Is it something to help with the plague?" Greta looked up again, eager to help.

Anissina nodded. "My previous invention isn't giving proper results, so--"

"But you're inventions always work!" The little girl's eyes were wide.

"Well I'm glad someone appreciates that-- but I suppose even brilliance must be flawed on occasion so that it is more greatly appreciated," Anissina mused.

Greta frowned. "What's not working?"

"Well," Anissina explained, "it's designed to tell what's wrong with things, and since sickness is carried in the blood, the device is designed to tell me what's wrong with the blood. If we know exactly what's causing the sickness, it will greatly help us try to treat it."

Greta looked thoughtful for a moment. "How does it tell... what's wrong with things?"
“It's very complicated... but basically, because the disease must be at least partially magical in order for it to affect mazoku, my machine examines what's put inside for magical abnormalities—”

“Why does it have to be magical? I thought the biggest problems were with humans getting sick?”

“Well,” Anissina sat on one of the work benches. “Humans and mazoku get sick for different reasons. The things that make humans sick don't affect mazoku because our magic protects us. It has never before occurred in our history for any sickness to so similarly affect both humans and mazoku.”

Greta came to sit beside her, and then looked down at her lap. “What if it's not magical... and that's why the machine doesn't work?”

Anissina grinned. It was the same conclusion she had come to a few days before-- this girl had such potential! It was such a pity she was human and would have so little time to benefit from it. “That's exactly what I thought too, Greta. You'll make a wonderful inventor someday.”

Greta beamed. “So what do we do now? Build something new? But what should the new machine do exactly?”

“That's the challenge.” Anissina stood, crossing the room to look down through one of the windows at the courtyard below. “How do you look for something without knowing what it is you're looking for?”

“Well...” Greta started softly behind her. “It has to be something mazoku and humans have in common-- that the plague is hurting... It seems like people are worrying about what's different, instead of thinking about what's the same.”

“That's why the Sage had me looking at blood...” Anissina murmured, her mind still racing for possible conclusions. “But perhaps I can modify what my device looks for-- physical differences in the blood-- if only those few hadn't been spoiled...” She frowned. There was still so much work to be done. “I'm glad you came, Greta.” She smiled and faced the girl. “It's easy sometimes to waste time being frustrated. You've helped me a lot-- Just coming to talk like this.”

Greta smiled brilliantly, the biggest one Anissina had seen since the Boy Wolf left. “Really?”

“Really.” Anissina nodded. “But I'll have to use some dangerous compounds to do the modifications. Why don't you go visit your stable boy for a while?”

The smile faded. “Boys are stupid. I don't care if I never see Wilfrido again-- he's wretched!”

This was new. Anissina raised an eyebrow, slight smirk gracing her lips. “Oh? I thought you were quite fond of him. What changed?”

Greta's face had turned red, and the girl refused to meet her eyes. “He... He's rude.”

Anissina went over to the workbench and sat down beside her. “Well, most men are rude. What happened to make this one unbearable?”

Greta looked up and worried her lip. “He said... He said I'd get fat... and that no one would want to marry me.” Her voice rose. “And that was after I trusted him!”

Anissina shook her head. Greta was very attached to her little human stable boy. Whether or not she was old enough to recognize it as anything greater than friendship the inventor couldn't say. Humans grew up so fast! Was it time for her to even discuss such things-- matters of the heart--
with Greta? Anissina was sure neither of the girl's father's had spoken to her about such things yet. The Boy Wolf's head would likely explode-- not to mention His Majesty... So perhaps it wouldn't hurt for her to enlighten the girl about a few small things. “You know, Greta, sometimes boys-- young boys in particular-- get intimidated by girls they like, and sometimes they deal with those feelings by being rude.”

“But that's stupid!” Greta pouted. “Why would they do something like that?”

“Because most of the time boys *are* stupid.” Anissina hoped her advice wouldn't get the girl in any trouble. The stable boy was Greta's best distraction while her fathers were being stupid-- or dealing with the consequences of previous stupidity in the case of the Boy Wolf. Greta deserved to enjoy time with her little friend. After all, human or not, Anissina was sure they were still much too young to get into serious trouble. “I'm sure he was just intimidated and trying to hide it by saying rude things.”

Greta's cheeks had gone a bit pink and she worried her lip. “Do you really think so, Anissina?”

“It's certainly possible.” She nodded.

“Well... things do make more sense now-- It's like when Gwendal's rude about helping you with your inventions!”

Anissina blinked.

“Thank you!” Greta jumped off the bench and ran for the door. “I'll let you know if your theory was right!” Greta turned and smiled before vanishing behind the closed door.

Anissina had to stand and take a breath before the feeling of shock fully faded from her extremities. That was past. She shouldn't feel like this, after so long.

Besides-- there was important work to be done.

********

********

As Cheri made her way down the twisting hallways of the North Wing, her steps lacked their usual tastefully provocative bounce. The only downside to having three wonderful sons was having no experience at all with raising a girl. Of course, she had gotten to play dress up with her Wolfie when he was small-- but it was hardly the same. Cheri hoped she hadn't been too hard on Greta for the little stunt she pulled during lunch, but there was simply too much at stake now to take chances, especially with spring quickly approaching. Thankfully, His Majesty was finally learning how to play his part.

Still, Cheri had to do something. Worrying about Wolfram... it was driving her mad. Her baby boy-- Cheri clenched her hands into fists as she walked. She had to do something.

As it turned out, her self-imposed *something* held the potential to be pleasantly... distracting as well. Cecile von Spitzburg had never needed a reason to lure an attractive man into her bed, but in this case it was hard to ignore the sparkling ulterior motive. She smirked. Besides, it wasn't like he wasn't going to enjoy himself as well.

Cheri paused a moment before turning the final corner. This was the perfect occasion for one of her most special concoctions. Cheri smiled as she pulled the tiny glass bottle from between her breasts. It was the very same mix that had gotten her youngest into such trouble all those years ago. She poured a small amount onto the tips of her fingers and dabbed a bit onto each wrist, then her neck,
before depositing the last of it on the top of her breasts for good measure. After giving her hair a
final tousle and making sure her cleavage was positioned for Maximum Impact, she slinked around
the corner and made her way for the guards.

The two men stationed outside of the North Suite didn't stand a chance.

"Your Highness!" they squeaked, hands shaking on their swords.

Cheri donned her most unattainable smirk. "I'll only need a minute. Open the door." She left them
no time to consider, approaching the heavy wooden doors without slowing her pace. She also left
them no time to try to pin her to a wall and convince her of their nightly valor.

The key word being try.

As expected the doors were opened before she could reach them, and Cheri smiled at each man in
turn to watch the sweat begin to bead upon their brows. This was her chance. Cheri had returned to
the dining hall that afternoon after dropping Greta at the infirmary to learn that His Majesty and
Conrad had gone for some sort of sportsman's bonding-- whether it be swords or the earth sport
Cheri hardly cared. What did matter was the maid's remark that King Saralegui had requested hot
water be brought to his room so that the young king might bathe before their evening meal. Cheri
imagined the fair boy preferred to smell of flowers as he draped himself over His Majesty. Fool. If
her Wolfram couldn't turn the maou, this effeminate human child stood no chance.

And so Cheri had come to the North Suite in hopes of finding the king from Shou Shimeron
detained behind his bathroom door and his handsome guard less detained outside of it. For the
moment at least.

At first she was disappointed; the room seemed to be empty. She turned to face the men at the
door. "Are they in?"

"Yes, Your Highness!" squeaked one, gaze focused on her chest.

It was all she could do not to roll her eyes. "Well, fine," she huffed. "Close the doors, then."

"But--"

"Now," she snapped, turning on her heel. Cheri didn't let the tension out of her shoulders until she
heard the doors click shut behind her.

And suddenly there was a wire around her neck.

"It is inappropriate for you to keep entering my king's chambers unannounced, my lady ex-maou."
Reyes' voice was deep and to her left, but she was afraid to turn her head to look at him.

She swallowed once, to test the severity of her restraint, before speaking. "And this is appropriate?"

The wire loosened, but not by much. "It is my duty to protect my king from threats, and you barge
in here without warning. It would be a tragic accident-- a movement before a thought." His voice
was closer, now behind her-- between Cheri and the door. "Such things are not uncommon."

There was time for her to take a few breaths and foster a growing concern. Cheri could defend
herself admirably with a whip or sword-- even in hand-to-hand combat, but one wrong move and
something thinner than sight would have her in pieces. "You must forgive a woman with a silly
hope-- I'd heard your king was indisposed-- I'd hoped for a moment with you. I do concede more
proper ladies might have left more subtle hints and waited for you to come if you so chose, but I
had hoped..." She gathered courage and slowly, carefully turned to face him. "That when seeing me your first thought was not to see me as a threat." She licked her lips.

The wire went slack, no more weight than a strand of spider's web against her collar. "You really are a silly woman."

Cheri tilted her head and smirked before trailing a few fingers down her neck to find the thread. Then she let her eyes go wide. "If that's what you'd like for me to be," she purred. Then slowly removed the weapon slack against her throat, confidence building as he made no move to stop her.

Reyes truly was a handsome man, dark and dangerous with sleek brown hair pulled into a ponytail that hung above his waist. The perfect look for this sort of game. Cheri's smile widened as she took a few steps toward him. His grey eyes were guarded-- seemingly hesitant. She remembered the words of his king earlier this afternoon. Guards weren't permitted this sort of thing, if the sovereign's words were to be believed. Perhaps he feared some sort of punishment, or perhaps he had yet to feel the heat of a woman and his nerves kept him from her. Either way, Cheri excelled at being persuasive and soon had Reyes' back to the wall beside the door, and no more than a foot between them. Even in her heels he towered over her in inches. How wonderful. "Now I suppose I must ask you to forgive this silly girl for being bold..." She trailed her voice away, eyes wide and wanting and locked against his. "Or teach her how better to behave."

He growled, and suddenly it was her back pressed against the wall, wrists pinned above her head with bruising force. "You presume too much," he hissed, voice low and only for her ears.

"Do I?" She arched into him, breasts pressing against his chest and one thigh between his legs. There was part of him, at least, interested in her proposition.

His fingers tightened on her wrists. "Yes."

Reyes' breath was hot against her lips and she leaned toward it. "Then what would you have me do?"

"Leave." His voice was cold. "Or I will take what you offer and give you none of what you are seeking. I will betray nothing. You have failed at playing the temptress, my lady. Leave before I make you play the whore."

There was a moment of fear before a small voice from across the room distracted them both.

"Ex." The young king was standing by the bathroom door, a towel draped around his waist. His silver hair hung wet and straight, sticking to his skin and making him look younger than he was.

Cheri felt the hands gripping her wrists let go and in a moment Reyes had moved to stand beside his king.

"I'm very sorry." The quiet voice again, wet and shaking. "Forgive him-- forgive us-- I--" The king's eyes were on the floor. "You've kept something silent for us once before. I'll beg you to do it again."

Cheri nodded absently, rubbing the abused flesh of her wrists as a wave of shame settled on her cheeks. "Of course, no harm done. Just a misunderstanding."

"Thank you." King Saralegui's eyes were large and brimming with unshed tears. He looked so small, shaking and half naked beside his tall dark guardian whose eyes now seemed to burn her skin. "Thank you."
Cheri nodded again and turned toward the door. There was so much to be done. Plans to be revised, a story for her eldest son. "You're welcome," she breathed, and escaped beyond the door.

********
********

Yuuri sighed as he sat on the courtyard steps. Even though the air no longer showed his breath, the stone was cold beneath him. He had tried playing catch with Conrad, hoping it would help him think, but he still felt guilty-- distracted-- by what his friend had seen-- had possibly figured out. And, even though he should be worrying about what Sara had said about having practically no connection with his people, and what that meant about his dynamic with Reyes, Yuuri found himself worrying most of all about Greta. What it meant that she was human, he was half, and Wolfram was a pure-blooded mazoku.

"Conrad," he started, surprised that he had spoken aloud. Yuuri was just so used to telling Conrad everything, asking him anything.

The older man was sitting on the stone steps beside him. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Yuuri swallowed. It would be more awkward now to stop. "It's just... Greta... me... I still don't understand this aging thing completely. But it's something I should know. It's really something I should have known along time ago, but..."

Conrad nodded, sad smile on his lips.

"I mean, " Yuuri continued, "I'm supposed to be half, but I've aged like a human my whole life... Does that mean I'll still age relative to Greta, forever?"

"It was because you were on Earth," Conrad explained. "Earth has less magic than this world-- I aged more quickly the year that I was there-- which is why Bob is the only one with a strong enough connection to that world's magic to live what is considered to be a normal demon life."

Yuuri nodded. "So that's why I didn't notice anything strange about my father... He aged normally on Earth." A pause. "So in Shin Makoku I'll age slower... How much slower than a human?"

"Two to three times--"

"Two to three times!" Yuuri's mind raced... That would mean... before his life was half over he would have to lose Greta-- Nicola-- Flurin-- Histo Crife and Beatrice-- Sara-- all the human friends he had made here. It was another one of Those Things, things he should have prepared for, things he already knew on some level. He just had never really accepted it before. "Conrad... That's terrible-- I don't want to see-- watch my daughter, my friends die before me..."

Conrad touched his shoulder. "Life is a complicated thing, Your Majesty. There are many things we may wish to change and many more we cannot hope to."

"I know that." Yuuri licked his lips, eyes focused on the cobblestone beneath his feet. "I guess... I'm finally letting myself know, is all... If that even makes sense."

His friend's hand was warm where it touched Yuuri's shoulder, and while his voice was serious it still held the same familiar comfort it had so many times before. "You're growing up."

Yuuri looked at Conrad's face and wondered how the man could mix so many expressions with sadness. Now there was pride, too. "Thank you... but... sometimes I wish I wasn't... that things weren't so complicated." When Yuuri looked out over the grounds to wait for the advice he knew
would come, another thought struck him. "And Wolfram... how much slower will he..."

"Five times."

The answer was strangely comforting. At least he wouldn't have to watch Wolfram fade away. Wolfram would always be beautiful as long as Yuuri was alive.

"At least five times," Conrad continued, "if not more. Wolfram's connection to magic has always been strong and that's what lets mazoku live as long as they do. It's also why mazoku children age faster the younger they are-- they've yet to form a solid connection to this world's magic." Conrad smiled a bit. "Wolfram was always on the younger side in his looks growing up. But he was the cutest child in the kingdom."

Yuuri had to laugh. "I wouldn't expect anything less from Wolfram." He wished there were cameras in this world and more pictures. Yuuri wanted to see what Wolfram looked like growing up. "You spent a lot of time with him when he was young, didn't you?"

Conrad nodded. "At times I practically raised him."

"But why was that? I can't picture your mother leaving him alone for a minute. And Gwendal must have wanted Wolfram to himself, as much as he likes cute things." It was something he had wondered for a long time but had been too afraid to ask Wolfram himself.

Conrad looked away. "That's a complicated story."

Now Yuuri was even more curious. "I don't mind... It would be good for me to have something to think about besides this whole business with Sara for a bit... Please, Conrad?"

"Well," Conrad started carefully, "when Wolfram was born, Mother was very happy of course, but Wolfram reminded her so much of his father--"

"What happened to Wolfram's father?"

Conrad shifted, obviously uncomfortable to answer. "He was killed soon after his wedding to Mother."

"That's terrible!" How had he not known about this for so long? And Cheri being reminded of her dead husband-- Wolfram never knowing his father-- it was so sad! "I'm glad Wolfram had you when he was younger." Yuuri wrung his hands together. While he was already asking such personal questions, another hardly hurt... "Conrad, what happened between the two of you anyway? I mean... If you practically raised him, why would he deny you as his brother? Back when I first came-- wouldn't he still remember all you did for him-- that it doesn't matter if you're human or demon or half?"

Conrad was quiet for several moments before he finally spoke. "That was my fault-- because I never told him what I was-- and he was too young to-- He was so protected from politics--"

"Wait." Yuuri stopped him. "You're not making sense. What politics?"

"Mother... The reason she married Wolfram's father was to help her forget mine. My father left when his aging grew apparent in his eyes while Mother stayed forever young and beautiful. He left to try to save her pain but in many ways he caused her more." Conrad leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His profile caught the light of the setting sun. "After Wolfram's father died, my father came back to court a few times, mostly to see me. But many-- especially those in Belefield-- saw it as in insult. It was one thing to allow a half-blood son to live in the castle, but to
be seen with a human man again after a respected, pure-blooded mazoku... It caused quite an uproar."

"But I still don't understand." Yuuri leaned forward to mimic the older man's posture. "How could anything be your fault?"

"When Wolfram was sixteen, his family in Belefield wanted him to live there, as part of the arrangements for his coming of age. They saw Mother's lifestyle--my presence--as a bad influence. They threatened to disinherit Wolfram if he refused, but because Wolfram was so sheltered, because he didn't understand the weight of the demands, because he didn't know what I was and what it meant, he chose to stay here, with his mother and brothers. The Belefields made good on their threat. They disinherited him. Wolfram is Belefield only in name--he has no crest, no lands. And once Mother was removed as maou, no place in court."

"Still!" Yuuri grabbed Conrad's shoulder to make him look at him. "That wasn't your fault! It was the Belefields who--"

"But I knew." Conrad's voice was stiff. "I didn't want Wolfram to know what I was. I knew what his family thought of me, what refusing them would mean. I could have explained--"

"But--!"

"Yuuri," Conrad interrupted softly, "sometimes things are my fault no matter what you think of me." And then he stood. "We should be getting back, Your Majesty."

Yuuri followed silently. He had wanted something else to think about, something that didn't make him feel guilty. But now he only felt worse. More distracted, more guilty. And now his mind was swimming with even more thoughts of Wolfram and that made him ache. He missed his friend. He missed Wolfram. In this moment Yuuri didn't care if he hadn't accomplished everything he'd wanted to by the time Wolfram came back. In this moment Yuuri simply wanted Wolfram home. With him. So Yuuri could make him smile and feel something good again.

******
******
Eastern Habalouge
Next Day
******

Wolfram von Belefield was not pleased. After they had dropped off his present for Greta and picked up two new horses at the next guard post, nothing seemed to be going his way. Both of their new horses had bolted within twenty miles of the guard post, taking most of their supplies with them. It had been a hard two days to reach the next station, and there they had found only the corpse of the guard who protected it.

Lucien had insisted they bury the man and Wolfram had grudgingly agreed. It had been dark work, and Wolfram was sure the overwhelming stench would stay with him the rest of his life. They had sent a report by pigeon to Gwendal. The poor bird was happy to be fed and flying, and they set the rest of them loose without messages. There was only one more guard post between them and the mountains, the natural border between Habalouge and Lesser Gael. After salvaging what supplies they could, they had decided to make for it and hope the next post held something for them besides more death.

A false hope, it turned out, and he and Lucien had been forced to make a tough decision. Attempt to
cross the mountain pass on foot with few supplies to avoid human contact, or leave the sacred path to find a village to get food and horses.

That was how Wolfram found himself stepping out of the woods and into the muck of a freshly plowed field. Without horses it would take them extra days, weeks, to complete their journey to Lesser Gael and back home. The wimp couldn't be alone that long. Yuuri needed him. They would risk a town.

Wolfram shivered. It had rained last night and his clothes were still damp, even though the sun had already passed the midday mark along the sky, shadows lengthening as they approached the quiet town. At least in the distance they could see figures moving, going about their daily lives as if the plague had yet to touch them.

"Look." Lucien's voice drew his eyes to the left. "Horses."

And it was true. A few horses were tethered outside what appeared to be a stable. Maybe their luck was changing. The money they had brought was still safe in a small pouch attached to his belt. Wolfram removed it and took out a few silver coins before handing the rest to Lucien. "You see about the horses, I'll find somewhere to buy supplies."

"Yes, Sir," Lucien answered promptly, but then continued, "Sir-- I was just thinking... it might be worthwhile to find an inn for the night."

Wolfram paused. Lucien didn't say why he thought it would be worthwhile. He didn't need to. Lucien had been eying him for days-- putting more food onto his plate at meals. It had been weeks since either of them had had a proper meal, a proper bath. Wolfram was sure he was completely ragged, but he was also convinced he must look better than he felt, let alone smelled. Staying at an inn... a real bed... a bath... Of course Wolfram wanted it. But he never would have allowed himself the risk just because he wanted it, not after the kitten had led him into a ghost town. Lucien was giving him a choice, an option he wouldn't have even mentioned if he thought it was too great a risk. "Alright," he let himself smirk, "but only because you seem to need it."

Lucien almost hid a roll of his eyes. "Why don't you find an inn, Sir, while I secure the horses? In towns like this markets open in the morning. We'll have a hard time finding supplies tonight anyway. I'll find you once we have horses."

And so they parted.

The town wasn't exactly teeming with energy, but there were a few people going about their business. Chickens pecked at the ground beside the road as Wolfram approached the town. It was small, and couldn't have supported more than a hundred people going by the number of small houses that clustered together in the center of the fields. There were a few homes in the distance too, probably housing the men and families who owned the fields. It didn't take Wolfram long to find the inn, the only building in town that was two stories tall. An old sign was suspended by two lengths of rusted chain and swung noisily above the door. The words had been obscured by time, but the symbol of a bed next to a steaming bowl was clear enough.

A group of men gave him a few curious glances as they walked past him and into the inn. The smell of cooking meat wafted out and Wolfram's mouth watered. Apparently the inn had a tavern as well. Wolfram opened the door and tried to look as unassuming as a stranger with a sword on his belt possibly could in a strange human town.

There was an empty table near the door next to a window and Wolfram slid into the seat. The top of the table stuck to his elbows and he held back a grimace.
"Well look here. We don't get many new faces in this little town, especially ones as pretty as yours," came an oddly familiar voice. "What can I get you, stranger?"

Wolfram looked up. The busty woman who spoke had a head of red hair and suspiciously imposing biceps. What was he doing here? Had Gwendal sent him to check up on them? "Well," he managed when the shock had worn off, "what do you recommend?"

"We've got stew and bacon sandwiches and the only ale for miles," Grier answered in a high voice.

"I'll have a sandwich then, and ale." Wolfram didn't trust the water in a place like this. "And," he started as "she" turned to leave, "some company would do as well, if you can spare the time."

"Ohh aren't you just darling. I'll see what I can do." And then Wolfram was left alone.

The tavern was nearly empty. Besides himself only a few men occupied the bar across the room, speaking in low tones over their drink. Wolfram kept his ears sharp as he looked out the window for a sign of Lucien while his mouth watered at the thought of hot food. His entire body ached. Traveling... eating things Lucien found in the woods... sleeping on rocks... Wolfram couldn't wait to be finished with all of it. The bruises along his right side from falling off the horse had almost finished healing, and while they were no longer tender they had left patches of green on his skin. Lucien assured him it was all part of the natural healing process, and as much as Wolfram had discovered he didn't enjoy the slow pace of natural healing, he liked even less the idea of what he might do if Lucien used his magic to heal him.

It was just another thing to test his patience. It felt like the worst possible time for him to be gone. His own progress with Yuuri aside, the wimp was miles away, engaged to a sneaky pervert of a prince, and feeling experimental and confused next to Weller of all people. Wolfram was supposed to be there! He was the one the wimp was supposed to--

He stopped.

If that wasn't a train of thought that put him in danger of losing control he didn't know what was. Wolfram missed Yuuri to be sure, worried about him constantly, but he had learned to do it in a vague sense. It was the details-- the reality-- that hurt-- that made him lose himself. For now it was better to think back on better times and warm his nights with deluded Giddy Feelings.

The sun sank below the tops of the buildings outside the window, casting the road in shadow. Wolfram glanced back over to the men at the bar. Their talking had stopped, but only because their stew had arrived. Before long Grier, still disguised, emerged through a side door that must lead to the kitchen, carrying a plate and tankard which he placed on Wolfram's table before sitting in the chair across from him.

"We're not busy," he explained in a high voice as he leaned toward him. "The owner was glad to be rid of my wages for the night." Then he batted his eyelashes. "What kind of company did you have in mind?"

"Stop that," Wolfram hissed. He was sure it would have been more threatening if he wasn't using most of his energy to keep himself from putting his entire sandwich in his mouth at once. It smelled divine. "What are you doing here anyway?"

Grier's expression hardened. "I could ask you the same thing. You're supposed to be--"

"I know!" Wolfram snapped, still eying his meal. "We ran into trouble. We needed horses and supplies to finish the trip." Wolfram's tone calmed as he realized that Yozak must be here on a
mission of his own. If Gwendal had sent him he wouldn't have asked.

Grier lowered his voice. "Well, you should get what you need and get out. This town is starting to show symptoms."

Wolfram swallowed. "We were afraid of that... but we had no choice! One night in a town that looked healthy to get horses and supplies... Crossing the mountains would take weeks on foot and I need to get back!"

"It's interesting you still feel that way."

Wolfram's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

Grier leaned further forward on the table. "You're not his fiancé anymore. I'd half expected you to desert or light the castle on fire..." The look on Wolfram's face must have been enough to stop him. "At any rate, Gwendal's pleased you did neither, though you've scared him a bit with the reason for your little trip."

He barely managed to breathe through his rage. "Of course-- I would do no such thing-- Running off to be a traitor like Adelbert just because the gods-- fate didn't please me. He is my king, if nothing else. My duty is to protect him," Wolfram seethed.

"Calm down." Grier's smile seemed inappropriate. "I didn't mean to set you off. The main thing is that you did well by staying-- though you should have left for other reasons a good deal sooner. But you don't have to worry so much about racing back. I'm sure Captain is keeping a good eye on the kiddo."

Wolfram growled into his tankard as he took a sip. Of course he would bring Weller into things. But Wolfram was in no mood to sit here and be goaded by a man who knew exactly where to twist the knife. "You never explained what you were doing here."

"Something unrelated," Grier grinned. "But don't let my lack of words keep you from your meal. You look half starved."

Wolfram glared but took a large bite of his sandwich anyway. And then another. The meat was hot and dripping with grease which soaked into the bread to soften it. When he took a moment for another drink, he noticed Grier still smiling at him. He swallowed. "What?"

"Ohh nothing," he grinned. "I just never thought I'd see you like this."

Wolfram narrowed his eyes. "We've been traveling."

"I can tell. You look like someone dragged you behind a carriage all the way from the castle."

He flushed. "I was going to bathe before I retired for the evening."

Grier snorted. "I'm sure." Then he went right back to smiling. "And I've never seen anyone eat one of those faster."

Wolfram realized his plate was empty. "We've been traveling..."

"So you said." Grier leaned back in his chair.

"Well," Wolfram shifted in his seat, "since you're working here, tell the cook I'll have two more. One is to be wrapped for my companion."
"Ohh, right away Your Highness," Grier mocked as he stood to fill his order. "I'll let them know to prepare a room for you as well, and a bath."

Wolfram humphed a response and nursed his tankard of ale while he waited. It had been a while since he'd drunk anything so strong and the alcohol warmed his flesh and numbed his aches.

Grier returned with his food a few minutes later, and Wolfram tore into his second sandwich at once. The bread was soft and dark, darker than any he had eaten before. As hungry as he was, it was still unsettling to have an audience. "Do you want some?" he offered half-heartedly.

The older man shook his head. "I can't stand the stuff myself."

"Why not?" Wolfram gave his sandwich a suspicious look.

"It's the bread-- rye-- peasant's bread. I'd be surprised if you'd ever laid eyes on it in the castle, but I grew up on the stuff. A week of living on that and water will have you praying for your bowels to move before long. But a few sandwiches will do no harm. Mostly it's the memories that are bad." Grier moved to take a sip from Wolfram's tankard. "Tomorrow morning you should try the stew."

They talked for a while longer, and drank more ale, and it wasn't until Yozak dropped him on a bed stuffed with straw with a spinning mind that Wolfram realized Lucien was still gone.

But then he was asleep.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle:
Twenty Four Years Earlier

********

The music from the ballroom thrummed through the walls of the conference room even though it was several hallways away. Wolfram's head pounded angrily with the beat as he slumped into one of the high-backed chairs surrounding the wooden table. Only ten minutes, he promised himself, any longer and someone-- likely Gwendal-- would come looking for him.

Mother and Uncle Stoffel had really gone too far. It wasn't the time for this, not with the threat of war looming in the countryside. This whole event was ridiculous. He didn't want it. But then again, it wasn't like Mother to care about what he wanted, especially if it involved the opportunity for a party or a new set of clothes.

Wolfram rested his head on the table and allowed himself a moment to breathe. He must have danced with every unwed person at court over the age of seventy. True, he was an exceptional dancer-- he had to be-- but it was all very dull now that he had mastered all the steps. Leading with ladies and following with the older gentlemen.

However, tonight he had been forced to pay attention in a whole new way. Now that he was officially presented in society he had to worry about being slapped. He had already dodged three proposals and his ball was barely half finished.

The door clicked open and Wolfram stiffened and sat up.

"Don't worry," Marques smirked as he closed the door behind him, "only me."
Wolfram allowed himself a tired smile. "What are you doing here?"

Marques sat in a chair beside him. "Just looking for the man of the hour. Though I must say I'm surprised to find you here alone after all the attention you've gotten this evening."

Wolfram snorted. "Don't be stupid."

"What are you talking about?" Marques leaned toward him. "You're presented now, Pretty Prince. All the ones brave enough can try to court you now. Though I'm sure it's not half as many as would like to." His friend laughed at the look of disgust on Wolfram's face. "In any case, you can have anyone you like now and when you do I expect you to tell me everything."

Wolfram rolled his eyes. Marques could be as bad as the gossiping maids at times. "It's hardly the time for such things what with war--"

"What war?" Marques sat back in his chair. "You've been listening to that brother of yours too much. The humans won't dare attack us up front. And even if they do, we'll crush them. It's selfish of you to deny the court their Beautiful Wolfram. Women will be crying themselves to sleep all over the realm if word gets out."

Wolfram stood abruptly and walked over to the open window to cool his head. "Don't you think you should adjust your priorities? We could be out there soon. Fighting real battles-- doing something important-- away from the castle."

Marques sighed and Wolfram could hear his chair scrape against the floor as the other boy came to stand behind him. "You always want to get out, Wolf. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy your youth. And what if there is a war? Do you think your mother-- your brother-- will let you fight?"

"I'm a corporal now! If there's a war of course I'll be on the field!" Wolfram growled.

Marques put a hand on his shoulder. "You have your rank for the same reason I have mine. Why do you think Luke is still a foot soldier? He's just as good as us."

Wolfram swallowed his retort. Marques was right, as much as he hated it. It was all the more reason for him to want a war, a chance to fight-- to prove himself. That his rank wasn't purely nepotism.

"Now why don't you tell me the real reason you're playing so hard to get?" The hand on Wolfram's shoulder didn't move.

Wolfram turned to look at him, brushing away the unwelcome touch with the back of his hand. "What are you talking about?"

Marques just smirked at him. "I'll bet you're scared. You've never done anything before and you don't want to get laughed at by whoever strikes your fancy."

He could feel his cheeks grow hot. "What do you mean? I've... I've kissed someone before!" And it was true. Almost twenty years ago, Elizabeth had him playing some stupid game and kissed him. It was right before her family sent her away to a boarding school in northern Spitzburg.

"Ohh you've kissed someone. Best not tell Sir Voltaire, he'll have their head." Marques laughed and moved closer.

Wolfram cursed his fair skin; he was sure Marques could see his blush. It wasn't that he was afraid
of being laughed at, though... He simply wasn't interested in his suitors, in anyone. Because none of them were interested in him, not really. How could they be when they didn't even know him? Wolfram knew he was attractive, had a position of prestige at court as his mother's son. That was what all those people were interested in. Not him. And Wolfram would give none of them the pleasure of that conquest. But if he told Marques his friend would probably laugh, so Wolfram simply glared and held his tongue.

"Well then," Marques continued, "why don't I help you?"

Wolfram blinked. "What do you mean?"

Suddenly Marques was very close. "I'll show you how it's done, so you won't have to be scared of making an amateur mistake. It will be worth it to hear your stories later... What do you say?" Marques tilted his head. "Or are you too afraid of getting in trouble with those overprotective brother of yours?"

Wolfram swallowed hard. "Shouldn't you be the one worried about that?" It just came out! He was trying to stall, not encourage him!

But that was how Marques seemed to take it. As encouragement. Marques stepped forward until Wolfram's back was pressed against the windowsill. "Don't worry about it... After all, what are friends for?"

And then Marques kissed him. It was strange at first. Warm and wet. Then Marques pulled back and glared at him.

"You're supposed to close your eyes." Then he put one hand on Wolfram's neck, and the other on Wolfram's hip. "And, you know, move your mouth occasionally."

Oh. Wolfram glared but didn't say anything. This was an impossibly embarrassing situation. He certainly had no desire to talk about it and make things worse. And if Marques knew he was embarrassed it would only be worse in the long run. It was just a kiss. He could do this. So Wolfram closed his eyes. And waited.

Marques' breath was hot on his cheek, and smelled like the spiced wine his mother had selected for the ball. Their lips touched again, and this time Wolfram tried to move. At first it was easier to just copy everything Marques did, but that became harder and harder as his mind started to fill with fog. This was nothing like kissing Elizabeth. This was...

Marques had clearly done this before.

Marques took Wolfram's shock as an invitation to slide his tongue into his mouth. And that was... ohhh. Interesting. Marques was the same height as him, similar build, but he was as dark as a mazoku could get without being a true double black. Wolfram had always liked darker haired people-- always liked boys better-- but he had never really considered Marques as anyone other than a friend. So why was he letting his friend kiss him like this? Why did it make him feel this way? But before he could consider his position further Marques pulled away, licking his lips and grinning a wild sort of smile that Wolfram would never be able to look at the same way again. "There," he breathed, mouth still close to Wolfram's. "You're getting the hang of it."

Wolfram licked his lips and nodded.

The door opened and the boys leapt apart at once. Marques looked completely collected, but Wolfram could feel the shame burning his cheeks. "Good evening, Brother."
Gwendal glowered at them from the doorway. "You should be in the ballroom. Mother is having a fit."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm sorry." And Wolfram followed his brother from the room.

********

Eastern Habalouge
Village Center
Four hours before Present

********

Lucien watched the sun sink below the line of trees as he approached the stable they had spotted from the woods. The horses tethered there were in good condition, and showed no signs of the madness that had affected their previous beasts. No one seemed to be nearby, however, and since Lucien had no desire to steal them, which would draw all sorts of unwanted attention, he was forced to knock on the large door that he hoped contained the owner of the stable.

The hinges creaked under the weight of his fist as the door swung open, and Lucien jumped at the loud crack it made as the wood crashed against an inside wall. "Hello?" he called into the dim stable. The orange glow of the setting sun that slipped through the cracks in the walls and ceiling was all that lit the inside. Lucien was about to turn and leave when he heard a soft scuffle-- a footstep-- inside. He touched his sword. "Hello... I'm looking for the owner of the horses outside..." I have money to pay you for them. He caught himself from saying the rest aloud. That wasn't the best thing to say if there were those who'd like to lighten his pockets about. The open door had been suspicious.

Against his better judgment, Lucien stepped inside. They needed horses, and Lucien hadn't seen any others in town. He made it seven steps inside before a shadow lunged in his direction.

"HA!" the shadow shouted loudly, before falling into a fit of familiar laughter as Lucien spun and drew his sword.

"Marques?" Lucien breathed, hardly believing his eyes in this light. "Is that you?"

That smirk was unmistakable.

"What are you doing here?" Lucien put away his sword. "I haven't seen you in over a year-- They said you'd deserted!"

"They always say a lot of things about me." Marques closed the distance between them. "But I've been on a mission."

"A mission?" Lucien breathed. Marques was very close. It was familiar, so familiar, and it made his knees weak. He licked his lips. "What kind of mission?"

"A secret one," Marques purred before kissing him. Hard. In moments his back was against a wall- Marques pressing against him everywhere-- hands-- lips. He shouldn't let him do this-- not after disappearing for so long-- without a word. But Marques always came back. To him. And that was what made it all okay. No matter how many people Lucien knew Marques kissed, he always came back to him.

So Lucien opened his mouth and whimpered. "You left..." he managed between kisses. "You left."
"I know. I'm sorry. I missed you." Exactly what he wanted to hear. Marques was so good at saying what he wanted to hear. "But when He tells you to do something you don't exactly have a choice."

"He?" Lucien mumbled as Marques' kisses moved to his neck.

Marques didn't answer. Instead, his breath moved above Lucien's ear. "This might be the last time we meet like this." And then Marques stole his breath away. Devouring his lips, making him feel whole and wanted and full. No one else had ever wanted him. Not once. But Marques always came back for him. He didn't give Lucien a chance to ask more questions, he just touched him. Made him forget his aches and pains. Forget everything but burning and wanting and more.

"Always you." Marques seemed to read his thoughts.

"But... why?" Lucien could hardly form words with his swollen lips. "Why here... why?" He shouldn't be doing this. This wasn't rational. But when had he ever managed to be rational around Marques? "How do I know you're not lying?"

Then Marques' eyes were sad. "I could have taken you in his place."

"What?" But did he even say the words aloud? There was a strange smell. Taste. Marques kissed him again. Strange taste. Thought left him. Things burned. More...

More.

Then darkness.

*******

*******
"But my pretty Sage, I've already taken care of it. Stop worrying and enjoy the tea."

The foot continued to trail along his inseam, pressing against his crotch, seeking the heat it found there. Blue eyes teased him. "Stop..." he ground out, voice an echo in his thoughts. "Stop worrying? People are dying, Shinou-- This isn't another one of your games-- You're dead."


Then the world came rushing back. Bed. Sheets. Sweat sticking to his clothing and damp in his hair. A cold night at the temple. A late evening working on a seemingly futile quest to stop disease from tearing this world apart. Murata sat up and rubbed his tired eyes before putting on his glasses. The moon was out, high and half-full in his window.

"You're dead," he whispered to no one.

If you were alive I wouldn't be alone.

It started like any other day.

Yuuri had fallen into a mind-numbing routine. Days blended together until one conversation seemed exactly like the last-- would seem exactly like the next. He would wake up, run with Conrad, and then the two of them would head over to the North Wing to escort Sara and Reyes to breakfast. Sometimes Greta would be there, giving a little bit of light to his day.

Since the "new engagement" Gwendal had released him from his duties of signing papers all day, or rather the older man was doing most of his work for him. After breakfast Yuuri would spend no more than an hour going over and signing the most pressing documents. It was the only benefit to this whole tedious situation, and Yuuri hoped that once it was all over with he could find a way to continue the system. Gwendal was so no-nonsense about everything. It took him minutes to go over a stack of paperwork that would have taken Yuuri hours. Of course part of that had to do with his lack of fluency in the demon script, but he could at least read everything now even though it took him a while.

The hour of paperwork with Gwendal was followed by another hour with Gunter, during which his teacher seemed to do more crying and clinging than anything else. Mostly they just went over the homework Yuuri completed in his room before bed and Gunter would assign him more for the next day. Doing homework in this world just made him miss Wolfram more than anything else,
however, and his mind would wander to nights spent in Wolfram's room--Things-- rewards-- and then he had to wipe his mind of anything but his studies lest he be distracted by memories of heat and--

Shame.

However, today there had been something different. After he finished his work with Gunter, Conrad walked with him over to their usual tea parlor for lunch with Sara and Reyes. But instead of being ushered inside by the guards posted at the door, one of them approached and started speaking to Conrad in low tones.

"What is it?" Yuuri frowned at not being included.

Conrad's face had hardened and he kept his eyes on the parlor door. "There was a crash-- and the door is locked from the inside."

"We were about to send for you, Captain, but we didn't want to leave the premises unguarded considering--"

"Fine." Conrad interrupted. "I'm here now so--"

"But there was a crash!" The sudden sequence of events had finally started to make sense in Yuuri's mind. "What if someone is hurt? Sara--"

"Your Majesty," Conrad's voice was hard. "Your safety is--"

Yuuri rushed forward only to be stopped by Conrad's hand on his shoulder. But a hand wasn't enough to stop his voice. "Sara!" he called out, "Are you alright? It's Yuuri. Please open the door!"

The silence was amplified by the sound of Conrad drawing his sword. Beyond that no one moved. Finally the door clicked and there was Reyes, tall and imposing and seeming to dare anyone to say a word with his very presence.

"You have my apologies, Yuuri," came Sara's voice from the parlor. "Please come in."

Odd. This whole situation was so odd. Sara and his guard were always so careful to do everything the same... nothing that would arouse any suspicion. Especially since the first Kissing Incident. Yuuri looked up at Conrad for reassurance.

Conrad didn't seem convinced that he wouldn't have to use it, but he slowly let his sword slide back into its scabbard, hand never leaving the hilt. He motioned to the two soldiers who quickly flanked Reyes on either side as Sara's guardian re-entered the room that held his king.

Yuuri looked up at Conrad's face again, a bit disappointed by his dark expression. Sometimes he felt like Conrad took his protection too seriously, but Yuuri had learned it was best to indulge him, so he didn't protest when Conrad stepped in front of him to enter the parlor first.

The room seemed normal, nothing out of place that could have made the crash the two guards described, but then Yuuri looked at Sara. The other king's hair was usually immaculate, never so much as a strand out of place, but now it was-- It looked like he had been caught in a windstorm. And while his face showed its usual calm, a drop of blood was rising on the bottom of his lip. Sara licked it away. "I'm very sorry to keep you waiting, Yuuri. Is it warm enough today to play the game you always speak of?"

Baseball. Normally Yuuri would ignore anything for the chance to play his favorite sport, but this...
"Sara, are you alright?" His eyes flashed over to Reyes before Yuuri sat in his normal place on Sara's left.

"Of course." Sara's eyes fell to his lap and the other boy ran a hand through his hair in what must have been an unconscious attempt to tame it. "I'm perfectly fine." The drop of blood had started to well up again and the last of Sara's words left a trace of shining red on Sara's upper lip as well.

Yuuri couldn't keep his eyes off it. "But Sara, your lip..."

Sara's tongue flicked out again to remove the drop. "Ohh... I must have caught it chewing." Through all this Sara still refused to look at Yuuri, seeming to shrink farther into himself as the tense seconds dragged on.

Yuuri wasn't convinced, but if Sara was hiding the truth from him he must have a reason.

Reyes.

Sara's guard stood behind him, eyes dark and focused only on his king even though Conrad's attention was on him. Reyes didn't even seem to be looking at Yuuri. Only Sara.

Yuuri frowned and reach out, placing a hand on Sara's shoulder. "Sara, you don't have to be afraid of anything now, you know that right? I'll protect you-- We'll protect you-- won't we Conrad?"

It was a moment before Conrad nodded. "True friends of Shin Makoku and His Majesty have nothing to fear."

Sara closed his eyes and took his wounded lip between his teeth. It was then Yuuri noticed Reyes' hand on the other boy's shoulder, knuckles white. Yuuri felt like the air was crackling with his own nerves.

"Thank you. You are too good to me, Yuuri. A boy could get spoiled so easily with you taking care of him." Sara turned to him and smiled. "But there's nothing for you to be concerned about." Then he leaned closer-- arms folding over his shoulders in a soft embrace. "You're much too good to me, Yuuri."

Yuuri didn't know what to do. Thankfully, the hug was over quick enough and Sara seemed eager to move on like nothing had happened.

Sara wasn't bad. Yuuri was more convinced of it now than ever. Reyes-- It was Reyes he needed to figure out.

********

********

Rain.

It was pouring, coming down in sheets that traveled loudly down his office windows. Unfortunately, the sound only made him want to sleep, and sleep was the last thing that Gwendal had time for.

Spring was coming. A terrified populous was running west and north. Into demon nations. Into Shin Makoku. But according to his latest reports their journey was pointless. Cases of the plague seemed to stop along the border between Habalouge and Spitzburg. Demons were clearly affected by the plague, the unfortunate soldiers Gisela had taken with her into Caloria had confirmed that grim fact, but for some indiscernible reason the disease seemed to have met an invisible barrier.
Even stranger was the fact that even though thousands of humans had already perished from the plague none of the royalty had been affected. Consequentially leaving humans convinced that mazoku were behind the deaths of their citizens and those in power still in the position to threaten Shin Makoku and its allies with misguided war.

Gwendal had already spent hours writing letters to reassure the leaders of the Allied Demon Nations and it was barely two o'clock. They would find a cure. They had to. What good was that Sage and Anissina's blasted creations if they couldn't even--

He forced himself to breathe. Anger only ever led to irrational decisions. Soon he would have to give His Majesty the details of the situation, but there was nothing that could be done now but wait to see if a cure could be found or if the humans would turn their accusatory whispers into a threat of action. Telling His Majesty now would only result in headaches and pointless protests about war and things outside even the control of kings. So Gwendal waited, but wouldn't for much longer.

A knock distracted him, and Gwendal shouted for the guard to open the door.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Highness." It was Gisela, arms full of an unfamiliar package. "There has been a-- delivery for you and the princess."

Gwendal frowned. He had hoped she had come with good news about the plague. "What is it? And why are you delivering it?"

Gisela was smiling, it was the first time he had seen her smile since this whole business with the plague started. "There were instructions for me to make sure it wasn't contaminated first. And there was a letter for you along with the one for the princess."

Make sure it wasn't contaminated? "Who sent it?"

Gisela stepped into the office and closed the door. "Your brother-- Sir Belefield."

Because Conrad would be sending him packages-- "Well?" he snapped. Wolfram should be busy with things more important than sending his daughter packages. "What is it?"

Gisela's smile widened, completely unaffected by his rough demeanor, and she approached his desk. "I think you should see for yourself."

Gwendal raised an eyebrow.

The box that was gently placed on his desk along with two messages-- seals unbroken-- was plain enough, but there were several small holes carved along the sides. Even though there were gaps the only thing visible through them was black. And then the box moved.

_Meh!

Gisela giggled as Gwendal reached forward to open the box, his hands decidedly steady and in no way shaking. _It couldn't be..._

There was a kitten inside the box.

"Sir Belefield wanted to make sure it was healthy before anyone other than me handled the little guy." Gisela's voice seemed far away.

There was a kitten inside the box.
"Anyway, I'm sure he'll help cheer the princess up. She's been in need of a distraction lately."

It was a black kitten with huge green eyes. "Meh, meh!" squeaked the tiny creature as it tried to climb out of its box and then licked its little nose with a pink tongue.

"Well," Gisela continued, "I have a lot of work to be doing. You won't mind delivering the kitten to the princess?"

Gwendal realized the smiling woman was still present. "Yes. Of course. We both should get back to work." Then he reached for the letter addressed to him and refused to let his eyes wander back to the... cute.

Gisela let herself out, and Gwendal had to read the letter three times before he could retain the meaning of the words. Wolfram and his man had picked up the creature in Habalouge and had been moving more slowly than anticipated. Apparently they had had trouble with horses as well as the plague, which had claimed one of the guards along the Sacred Path. He would need to order a replacement for the post at once. This was not comforting. Wolfram shouldn't be anywhere near those affected, he should have reaffirmed his rites and be on his way back to Shin Makoku by now. Gwendal had already spent too much of his time convincing himself not to worry about his wayward brother and this news certainly did not help matters.

Gwendal still remembered far too clearly the way it felt to see Wolfram, the little brother he had failed to protect from so much, burning from the inside. The way it felt to see his body cold, unmoving after he had watched a god-gone-wrong pull his heart from his chest. This path was the safest way... it had to be safe. Gwendal had refused to allow the chance that Wolfram would lose control again. Reaffirming his rites was necessary. It had been the right decision to send him.

There was a small thump. The kitten had managed to knock over his box and was now pawing at the feather quill Gwendal had left lying on his desk. Too... much... cute...

Gwendal scooped up the kitten and held it to his chest in a non-cuddly manner while he tried to think of where the princess would be at this hour. He supposed her room would be the most likely choice given the rain, though it had begun to slow.

The kitten had a decidedly squirmy personality and it mehed repeatedly as it tried to claw its way up his jacket. Gwendal knew that as long as it was in his office he would get nothing done, and so he stood with great reluctance and picked up the letter Wolfram had sent his daughter. At least his brother had refrained from sending His Majesty anything. Given his current political standing, it would have been highly inappropriate.

* * *

As it turned out the princess was indeed in her quarters, as the guard stationed outside informed him. Gwendal pulled the little cat off his shoulder where it had been trying to chew his left ear and knocked.

The princess opened the door and smiled at once before jumping forward to give him a hug. "Gwendal! It's so good to see you! I've almost finished knitting the-- Kitten? It's adorable! Can I hold it?" Her words came so fast they were almost one.

"Of course you may," Gwendal said as Greta pulled out of the hug to look at the struggling kitten with huge eyes. "He is a present for you."

"A present?" Greta's smile widened impossibly. "Who from?" She reached for the cat which got a
few more scratches in before he changed hands.

"Careful with him. His claws are sharp."

Greta held the kitten tenderly and nodded.

"Wolfram found him under a bridge in Habalouge and decided his daughter simply had to have the little creature." It was surprisingly easy to keep the disdain from his voice. It was a frivolous decision. But... the cute... "It will be your responsibility to take care of him."

"What's his name?" Greta's focus was now entirely on her new pet. Her eyes shone with emotion.

The girl really had grown attached to his little brother, and she in turn had done wonders for him. "I suspect he left that decision up to you, but you also received a letter--"

"A letter!" The girl squealed.

"Meh!" The cat squeaked in protest.

Gwendal handed her the folded parchment and Greta struggled to hold both but refused to let go of either.

"I have to go tell Yuuri!" She barely gave him a second look as she took off in a run. "Thank you, Gwendal! Come visit me more!" And then she turned a corner and was out of sight.

The walk back to his office was lonely and Gwendal tried not to glance longingly at the tiny scratches on the back of his hand. Cute. And he had been neglecting Greta as well. Why did children insist on liking him when he was so bad at giving them the time they deserved?

When he arrived back at his office there was a message waiting for him.

It was one of the emergency birds from Grier. Gwendal rushed to the window to let it in and the pigeon circled the room once before landing on his desk-- and falling still. Emergency birds didn't survive their journeys. It was the only downside to Fly-For-The-Sky-Special-Birdseed, one of Anissina's few useful creations. Gwendal shuddered at the memory of the taste and his right eye twitched once.

He carefully removed the message and sat in his chair, eyes running over the unfamiliar letters as he reached into his desk drawer for the codex. It took him a few minutes to translate, hand jumping from one page to the next as he re-wrote the message.

Big Kitty,

A young Wolf arrived in my pasture.
He has yet to eat his hot meal.
Should current works be abandoned for greener pastures?

~Red Sheep

Gwendal had to force himself to focus above the chatter of his emotions. What was Wolfram doing off his path? Gwendal was reasonably confident the action must have a very good reason, but it complicated matters none the less. It had taken Yozak time to track down Maxine, and according to his latest reports they had yet to learn anything of the numbered code Shou Shimeron seemed to be using, though his spy was certain he was closing in on useful information. But now his brother was in the same human town...
Yozak’s letter did not indicate an emergency. No pressing reason beyond Wolfram’s connection to Gwendal personally to suggest the young Lieutenant and his man be escorted to Lesser Gael. Yozak was concerned that Gwendal would feel a familial need to give his brother extra protection, and Gwendal did feel that need. His emotions told him to order Grier to accompany his little brother, to keep him safe.

But in this-- Gwendal had to be a general first. He took out a new quill and parchment and began encoding a return message. Wolfram was capable. He was trained. He was a lieutenant accompanied by his most loyal corporal. Yozak was in that small human town for a greater purpose than babysitting. The information he could gain was invaluable.

Gwendal wrote his letter, and was a general first.

But as he watched the letter fly a deep hole inside reminded him that no matter what he told himself-- he was a brother, too. He must have faith in Wolfram to bring himself home on his own-- not to be coddled by him or Grier.

After all, his brother had too much waiting for him here to stay away.

*******

Greta could hardly remember being so happy. Wolfram was okay! He had sent her a wonderful present and a letter! It was addressed to her, but she was sure Yuuri would want to see it, too-- Making the wretched Sara uncomfortable was just an added bonus!

Her father was in the West tea parlor-- like usual-- with Conrad and the two intruders. Yuuri turned and smiled as she ran over to sit right between him and Saralegui on the couch. She always sat between them when she could. When she got close she saw that Sara's lip was bleeding and the skin around it was turning an ugly purple.

She grinned. Maybe Yuuri had come to his senses and punched him. "Yuuri!" Greta held up the kitten who let out a *meh* in greeting. "Wolfram sent me a kitten! Isn't he wonderful?!"

Yuuri seemed shocked for a moment before he smiled. "Yes! Wonderful! Did he say when he was coming home?"

"He sent a letter but I haven't read it yet. Will you hold him while I open it?" She thrust the cat up at her father.

"Sure!" Yuuri took the kitten and it immediately began to chew playfully on his thumb.

Greta broke the seal and began to read:

"Dear Greta," She had to pause. Wolfram's handwriting was so formal and perfect, almost like in a real book. Memories of him helping her with her homework when she was first starting to read demon script flooded her thoughts-- the snap in his voice when she made too many mistakes-- the way he would try to hide a proud smile in a cough or touch of her hair.

Yuuri put a hand on her back, concern evident in his dark eyes as she looked up at him.

Greta shook her head, adjusted her smile, and continued to read: "I trust this letter will find you well and keeping up with your duties. My absence is no excuse for you to be lax in your studies."

Even though Greta heard her own voice in her ears it was Wolfram's she heard in her mind. She missed him so much. Her smile faltered.
"Don't worry, Greta." Yuuri's voice was comforting as always. "If anyone has been lax with you it's me. You should come to me with your homework more often. You haven't been lately."

_Because you don't have time for me._ "I will!" She grinned. Then Greta turned her attention back to the letter in her hands: _"Remember that you are the princess, and I expect you to make His Majesty and I proud."

The hand on her back moved up to run its fingers through her hair. "You always make us proud."

Yuuri was good at that. Being Yuuri. Loving and lovable and saying and doing things that made her only want to love him no matter how he acted most of the time. Greta knew Yuuri loved her though, and for now it had to be enough. She had to try not to be so needy. Too spoiled by this wonderful life Yuuri had given her in the castle. She wasn't alone. Yuuri and Wolfram wouldn't leave her if they had a choice. She had to be strong and remember. "Yuuri..." Greta maneuvered her way into her father's lap, pulling the kitten from his arms so that it could sit on her legs. There was a bit of fumbling and repositioning as the kitten tried to escape but eventually they were settled, though the letter had found its way into Yuuri's hands. Greta had her hands full of Wolfram's present, so she didn't mind letting Yuuri continuing the letter for now.

Yuuri had gotten better at reading, but still paused at awkward places between words. _"This kitten is a gift to keep you company when I cannot. It is a royal cat, perfectly suited to the demon princess."_ He paused. _"Royal cat?"

"It's black, Your Majesty." Conrad offered. "I can see why Wolfram was so taken by it. Black cats are very rare."

To her right she could see Saralegui moving away from her kitten, just the slightest bit, as it tried to crawl in his direction. Greta promptly held it up to his face. As a child she remembered being taught to avoid all black animals, cats in particular. Human superstition labeled them as bringers of death, claiming that they could be seen crying by the bedsides of those hours from death. Of course, human superstition had told her that the Maou would just as soon eat her as he would a number of other unspeakable deeds. But the reality was her first father was the nicest person in the world, and so Greta had hardly given the color of her new pet a second thought. Saralegui was human. Greta held the squirming kitten closer to the wretched king. "Isn't he the cutest thing! I'm sure the whole castle will just love him."

It was hard not to laugh in triumph as the light-haired intruder tried not to frown.

Yuuri seemed to like her interaction with his "friend". He laughed, "Well, something that cute is hard not to love. It is strange though... Wolfram told me about cats going 'meh' but it's another thing to hear it. It's actually a funny story. Wolfram and I were hiding together in this closet and--"

"Fascinating," Sara attempted to smile, but it came out as more of a grimace.

Greta pouted. She always liked hearing stories about her fathers getting along, but clearly Sara was having none of it. At least she was fairly sure she could convince Yuuri to tell her later. _"Keep reading!"_ she insisted as compromise.

_"I have left the naming up to you, so don't let your wimpy father take the honor."_ Yuuri barely managed to finish through his frown. _"He even calls me a wimpy in writing..."

"Ohh don't feel bad Yuuri!" Greta giggled. "I love my Papa Wimp!" Then she snuggled back farther into his lap, still holding tightly to her new kitten. _"What should we name you?"_ She asked the squirming bundle of cute in her arms.
"Meh!" The kitten answered.

"Meh' won't work, then how will you know when I'm talking to you instead of saying your name?" She smiled.

"Since you can't call him 'meh' why don't you call him 'nyah'. That's what cats say--" Yuuri paused. "Well, that's what I used to think cats say.'"

Greta shook her head. "Yuuri, Wolfram said you couldn't name him. Don't be difficult."

"Yes, yes." Yuuri messed up her hair. "Well then, what will you call your royal cat, my little demon princess?"

"Well," Greta's face was beginning to hurt from all the smiling, "he needs a name suited for a royal cat... but even more... he needs a name to be part of our family." Greta turned the cat so it was facing her. He was completely black from his tail to his ears and his eyes were a brilliant green---just like her Wolfram. "Wol... wol..." Green eyes and black--- "Wolri?" A mixture of both fathers to keep her company.

"Wooly?" Yuuri mispronounced.

"No, not 'Wooly' like sheep are... Wol--RE. Half Wolfram half Yuuri. He has your hair and Wolfram's eyes. It's perfect!"

"Meh!" The kitten agreed before starting to bat at one of the ribbons adorning the front of her dress.

Conrad chuckled. "It is fitting."

Yuuri gave an awkward laugh. 'Well, as long as it makes you happy."

"Very happy!" she beamed. And it was true. "Isn't that right, Wolri?"

"Meh~!"

Greta settled back into Yuuri's lap. He was much too skinny for comfortable sitting, and she could tell she was already getting too big for this sort of thing, but that was all the more reason to enjoy it while she could.

Yuuri seemed to like it too, and he put his arms around her and gave her a squeeze. "Well, I'm glad to see you happy."

Greta felt like her heart must be glowing from all the attention. "Well, I would be even happier if you kept reading."

Since Yuuri's arms were around her, Greta could let her eyes drift over the words as Yuuri read them aloud. "I am doing all I can to come home to you soon. Keep yourself safe while I am gone. All of a father's hope is in his children, and so you must be safe for both of us... Love always, your Papa Wolf."

It was too much. Wolfram... Greta couldn't help but worry even though she knew this letter was meant to stop her from doing just that. But it was more... Wolfram always told her he loved her when he sent her letters from patrolling the boarders or other trips, but he had never been quite so sentimental before. Greta clearly remembered the fear that had gripped her chest when Wolfram had come to tell her he would be leaving for Lesser Gael... the night he had refused to promise her
that he would come home safe. If Wolfram could only write her one last letter... Greta imagined it would probably say something like this.

But Yuuri wouldn't know that. He didn't need to either, so Greta kept a smile on her face and pushed down the tears that threatened to choke her.

"Wolfram is so good with words sometimes... Well, on paper at any rate," Yuuri said in a serious voice. "He's right, though." Her father gave her a squeeze. "We'll always love you and want you safe."

"It's quite a serious letter," Saralegui said softly into his teacup. "For someone visiting family."

There was a pause, almost too long, before Yuuri spoke. "Well, it's a serious time. People are dying every day as a result of the plague. It isn't the safest time to travel."

Saralegui licked his lips before putting one of his crumbly black cookies between them. Another sip of tea. Swallow. "Ohh yes. How silly of me."

Ohh how she hated him. His intrusion into her family aside, something about this boy that looked like a girl made her skin crawl. Suddenly she couldn't stand the room any longer. "Thank you for reading me the letter, Yuuri." Greta smiled as she made her way off his lap.

"You're very welcome. I enjoyed reading it," Yuuri smiled back.

"I'm going to go down to the kitchens and see what Wolri would like to eat. But I'll see you at dinner. Won't I, Yuuri?"

"Of course." Her father reached out to pat her head a final time.

Conrad smiled at her too as she made her way out the door. Greta returned it, though she was scared he would know it wasn't real. Once the door closed behind her, she only managed to turn two corners before she had to sit down and will away her tears. She put her kitten beside her, and Wolri played with the laces of her shoes until the wave of fear passed. Wolfram would be alright. He would come home safe. Thinking otherwise would only make her miserable and she was sure Wolfram wouldn't want that.

She stood and leaned over to pick up her new pet but Wolri seemed to have other plans. The black kitten took off down the hallways, and even though Greta ran as fast as she could, it was all she could do to keep him in sight.

Greta's feet pounded the stone as she followed, breath hot and burning her lungs and throat as the kitten led her through twists and turns throughout the castle. Soon she was in the main reception hall-- the entryway. A soldier carrying a bundle came through the front doors and Wolri dashed outside between his legs.

"Stop!" Greta cried out-- too late, before following the kitten out into the courtyard. The dregs of a cold rain shocked heated skin, but Greta hardly noticed as her shoes slapped the wet ground and sprayed mud onto her legs and skirts. The rain obscured her vision and her tears. "Stop! Wolri!" She called again. Wolfram's present-- Wolfram's present to keep her safe-- to keep her from being lonely. How could she have lost him?!

The soft ground was her ally-- paw prints leading her around to the stables where the mud was thick. She had come here yesterday to look for Wilfrido after her talk with Anissina, but had found his father instead. He was a tall man-- strong and menacing with a ponytail as long as Saralegui's guard. His voice was always loud and sharp and whenever he was with Wilfrido he always seemed
to be yelling about something. Greta had seen him there and retreated back to her quarters for the
day. Wilfrido could never play with her when his father was around.

Greta tried to move quietly as the tracks led her to a tree beside the stables. The branches reached
to the loft above the barn that Wilfrido shared with his father, but they were just far enough away
that climbing in seemed impossible. She had thought of trying once, but in the end had been too
afraid of falling, not to mention what Wolfram would do if he found out she was climbing into
some boy's window.

Greta squinted against the soft drizzle as she looked up into the tree-- *there!*. "Wolri! Come down!"
she called out as loud as she dared.

Green eyes caught the light as they looked down at her.

"What are you doing here?"

Greta jumped, turning to face the voice. A sigh. *Thank goodness.* "Wilfrido, you scared me!" Greta
huffed.

The boy rolled his eyes. "You're soaked. Why are you out here in the rain?"

**Wolri!**

She turned her attention back to the tree. Wolri was still there, but he seemed to be struggling with
something-- moving around-- but the branches blocked her view. "My kitten..." Greta managed as
she moved forward to touch the trunk of the tree.

"Since when do you have a kitten?"

"Since my father gave it to me," Greta snapped. Then she reached up for the lowest branch and
braced a foot on the trunk. She almost managed to pull herself up before her foot slipped on the
wet bark and she fell into the mud with a squeak of dismay. "Ohh Wolri... just come down here!"

Wilfrido stepped up behind her. "You really are just a princess." And then he started to climb.

"Am not!" Greta huffed as she got to her feet. Her dress was absolutely ruined, there would be no
hiding it from the maids. "You've seen me climb a tree before and you know it!"

A rustle of leaves was her only answer until-- "No! Stupid cat-- give that to me!"

Greta barely had time to wonder before Wolri bounded down from the tree with something in his
teeth. Greta pounced, catching the wet kitten in her arms. "Wolri! Thank goodness!" Greta hugged
her pet close. "What have you got?"

"Don't touch it!" Wilfrido shouted down during his hurried decent. "It probably has some disease!"

"What?" Greta wondered aloud as she tried to see what Wolri had captured. "Ohh no... poor bird."
She gently took the lifeless clump of feathers from Wolri's mouth.

"Don't touch it!" Wilfrido yelled again.

And then Greta noticed the bird had something tied to its leg. Maybe something for Gwendal?
Greta struggled to free the tiny slip of paper while still keeping Wolri in place. "It has a message on
it," she mumbled as she unrolled the small note.

Numbers?
Greta only got a quick glance before Wilfrido snatched it out of her hand.

"That's not yours," he mumbled and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

"Well no... but it's not yours either," she glared. "It's probably important-- something for Gwendal or Gunter."

Wilfrido's cheeks seemed to pale in the cold rain. His ears and the tip of his nose were turning red with chill. "Greta-- It's not-- You're not supposed to even be here! I thought you learned better than to come out here and bother me! You should be doing mazoku-y princess-y things, not out here with the human servants!" The boy was breathing hard and his eyes had gone wild. "It's nothing. Go back to your castle and play with your demon cat."

Greta gave Wolri a cuddle as she glared to spite him. "You're making a big deal over nothing."

Wilfrido moved toward her, voice low. "Alright, it is something, but I would get into a lot of trouble if anyone found it. That is the absolute truth little princess. If you tell anyone about it you'll never see me again."

She paused to worry her lip. "What is it?"

"It's a secret.. from Father... I-- I'm still attached to my home-- you understand, Greta." Wilfrido looked away. "My father wanted me to give up my studies... Did you know I was training to be a priest before I was a stable boy? Father took me away from all that... if he knew-- if anyone knew I was still connected to that life..." He trailed off, fists shaking at his sides. "Please, Greta. I've kept your secret... won't you keep mine?" His eyes were wide as he looked at her, shaking in the rain.

Greta nodded.

Wilfrido hugged her-- voice warm in her hair-- bare arms cold and wet. "Thank you," he whispered.

*Meh!* The kitten between them squeaked, but Greta was in no hurry to move. She had forgotten how to even breathe. *Warm... Safe...* But at the same time her heart raced. Wilfrido had trusted her with something-- their friendship was stronger than ever. "I missed you."

Wilfrido moved away.

"Thank you for trusting me. I won't tell anyone. I promise."

A hand reached out, touching her cheek. "Thank you, Greta."

Suddenly she was embarrassed... but at the same time she didn't want his hand to move. "An awful lot of trouble," she blushed, "over maths."

Wilfrido laughed, but something about it seemed almost wrong. "Yes..." And then he turned away. "You better go inside-- unless you want to get us both in trouble."

*Meh! Meh!* Wolri seemed to want out of the rain too.

"Alright... but I'll come see you later, okay?"

Wilfrido smiled, but at the same time seemed sad to see her go. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Greta's grin didn't fade until she reached the kitchens.
These were not the best of days.

Conrad Weller was more than tired of this foreign sovereign's charade. Conrad could protect Yuuri from physical harm in an open clash of swords, but this King Saralegui played in an entirely different field.

"-- and so if I could just talk to him alone again, Conrad, I'm sure I could get him to tell me what Reyes is up to," His Majesty continued enthusiastically. Similar plots were all he seemed to speak of of late.

"Yuuri," he started tentatively. It was always hard to be the bearer of reason when Yuuri was being so endearingly enthusiastic. "Does Reyes seem like someone to easily make a mistake?"

"Of course not!" Yuuri answered. "That's why I'll need your help to--"

"That's not what I meant... His Majesty Saralegui's injury at such a time when his guard was the only one present; that the door was locked in such a way that both guards stationed outside were well aware. Such suspicious activity right before they were scheduled to meet with us--" Conrad paused to let his words sink in. "When they were scheduled to meet with you. You must take into account the possibility that your thoughts are exactly the ones they want you to be having."

"But what if Sara chose the time to do something Reyes wouldn't like so that I could see it!" Yuuri insisted.

"A possibility," Conrad conceded grimly, "but it is just as possible that it is a trap to get you alone for some sinister purpose. You must remain cautious, Your Majesty, for the sake of the kingdom if no one else."

Yuuri pouted, bottom lip full and shining. "But I still feel like I'm failing everyone like this... By the way, has there been any progress with a cure?"

"None yet, Your Majesty."

"It's Yuuri!" Then he sighed. They continued to walk in silence for a few hallways. His Majesty had requested some time off before returning to his duties, and Conrad was more than willing to indulge in some time alone with him.

Conrad knew there was more on the young king's mind than Yuuri was telling him, but he also knew that now was not the time to push. Conrad missed the times when Yuuri came to him with all his problems. He could feel Yuuri drifting away from him more and more and it was a profound agony on top of all his current frustration over Reyes and his King Saralegui.

But the agony was deserved.

Yuuri's voice brought him from darker thoughts.

"Conrad... That letter... Do you think Wolfram is worried he might not come back? I didn't want to worry Greta but..." He trailed off, eyes down.

"No one can be sure of that but Wolfram. You'll have to ask him when he returns." Conrad did his best to smile.
"I guess." Yuuri stuffed his hands into his pockets and sighed. "The kitten was cute, though. I'm glad to see Greta so happy. In that regard the letter was good... it made her happy."

"You know, Yuuri, Wolfram probably meant that for you, too."

Yuuri's eyes lit up. "Really? I thought... I don't know, that he was mad or something-- that he didn't send me one. Silly right?" He laughed awkwardly.

"With your situation with King Saralegui being what it is, it would have been very inappropriate for him to send you anything. Wolfram was just being mindful of the political situation. You shouldn't take it to heart. There's not much you could do to make anyone mad, Yuuri, so there's no need to worry."

"Well that's a relief." Yuuri beamed. "Ohh and it's so strange to hear the kitten say 'meh'. Wolfram told me about that-- ages ago when we were all together looking for Morgif."

Conrad remembered the time well, how Yuuri looked to him for everything. The kitten would be a good reminder of his brother's presence-- his wants. Wolfram would come home safe. Things would return to the push and pull of every day. Anything else was unthinkable.

And the kitten was truly a rare gift. Humans distrusted cats-- black ones more than most, and many of the innocent creatures were killed on sight. His Majesty's daughter would love it dearly for years to come.

Yuuri continued. "It's easy to forget how different things are here sometimes. I guess... I guess it's feeling more and more like home."

Conrad allowed himself to put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "I'm glad."

Yuuri smiled at him and some of the invisible weight that had been resting on his shoulders for weeks seemed to lift. Then, "Conrad," he asked, worrying his lip, "I've been meaning to ask... I've been having trouble getting my work done lately. More nervous laughter. "I've been having trouble getting my work done lately." More nervous laughter. "I've been used to doing it in Wolfram's room. Do you think it would be alright if I went there later... I've been trying to get work done... but I keep getting distracted by other things lately. The more I try to push things away, the more they seem to come back when I want to be doing other things."

"Of course." An odd request, but one easily fulfilled. "And you might try facing the thoughts that have you so distracted for a bit. I've found the more you try to avoid something, the more it gets into your thoughts. I don't want you to get into any of my bad habits."

Yuuri laughed and reddened. "Ohh Conrad, I'm sure none of your thoughts could be bad."

Conrad couldn't answer.

********

********

The room hadn't changed at all.

Maids must have been in. The bed was crisply made, and there was no dust on the desk or chest of drawers, but the basin and pitcher of water were empty and there was no book sitting half-read by the bedside table.

Empty.
Maybe coming here hadn't been the best idea after all. Yuuri leaned back against the closed door softly so as not to alert Conrad, who was standing guard on the other side. Wolfram wasn't here. Yuuri had known he wouldn't be, but in this room-- he could almost hear Wolfram scolding him for not getting to work sooner.

It was surreal to be in here and not feel Wolfram's eyes on him. Yuuri took a deep breath and crossed the room. When he had been here before he had always sat at the desk, but now that seemed wrong.

And then for a moment this whole idea seemed wrong. Surely coming here would just make everything worse. Just enhance-- deepen the corruption he knew had seeped inside him until he burned up in the wrongness of it all.

He had to sit. The room spun, and since the single chair by the desk had already been ruled out, Yuuri found himself teetering as he sat on the foot of Wolfram's bed. This was panic. It wasn't helping. But everything he had ever thought was wrong suddenly applied to him. Surely he hadn't always been like this?

"...the more you try to avoid something the more it gets into your thoughts..."

Yuuri forced himself to breathe. Conrad was right. His words grounded his spinning mind as Yuuri tried to steady himself on gulps of air.

Conrad had to be right.

Yuuri had avoided thinking about Wolfram-- what Things meant for so long that his subconscious was eating him alive. He had to do this. He had to face it or he would never be able to do what he needed to do. After all, how could he be of use to anyone else if he couldn't even help himself?

Yuuri sighed and flopped back onto the bed, feet still planted firmly on the floor. The history books he had brought weighed heavily on his chest, but he crossed his arms over them and pulled them closer until he could hardly breathe. Empty comfort. False security.

Another breath.

Yuuri closed his eyes.

Wolfram.

His friend and accidental fiancé. But more than that, Wolfram had become part of his family here, a father to Greta when he had been on Earth. He was a soldier, a prince, with all the strength and honor those words implied. And despite his years, Wolfram was still helplessly cute. It was so easy for Yuuri to lose himself in memories of soft hair-- skin. Smells of soap and sweat and crumpled sheets.

Wolfram was fire.

Selfish and alive and ever present in his thoughts, even when he was miles away. The memories of Wolfram wanting him were always there. Always. Intimidating and comforting all at once.

And Wolfram had changed so much. He had gone from Conrad's baby brother to a soldier disinherited from Belefield to his nagging fiancé and best friend. And so much of his life was still a mystery.

Yuuri's eyes snapped open. An idea crept into his mind, terrible and appealing. Yuuri left his books
on the bed and made his way to the floor beside the dresser.

A stuck drawer in their bedroom such a long time ago. Pictures and hats and letters he hadn't been able to read. Yuuri's hand shook slightly as he pulled open one drawer at a time, heart racing with the danger and excitement of it all.

And then he found it. Stuck with disuse like last time. A pink nightgown-- bearbee hats-- pictures of him from his photo album back at home on Earth. A cheap little charm from a coin machine that had once been attached to the hilt of a sword.

Yuuri stopped.

He was avoiding it again. As much as he wanted to learn more about Wolfram-- this invasion of privacy wasn't the way. Going through this drawer of Wolfram's special things would only make him feel worse later, and hadn't he already resolved to follow Conrad's advice and use this time to face his demons?

His beautiful blond demons...

Yuuri sighed again and closed the drawer, making sure that everything was back in its place. He stayed on the floor though, only scooting over a bit to rest his back on the edge of the bed.

Yuuri licked his lips and ran over what he was okay about so far. Wolfram was his friend. Wolfram was certainly attractive. Wolfram had touched him and made him feel-- made him feel-- things he had never felt before. Yuuri could feel his cheeks heat even as his mind barely ghosted the memories.

He must have gotten used to the idea that Wolfram was... gay, at some point-- or at least interested in Yuuri as more than a friend. If Yuuri wasn't okay with the possibility of Wolfram having an unnatural sexual preference he wouldn't have been able to come to care about his friend as much as he did. And-- and-- Yuuri supposed he was okay with other people being gay. The idea of love being love was more than fine with him-- he wanted everyone in every world to be happy after all. But for him to be--

Yuuri shivered and tried swallowed a wave of nausea. It couldn't be true. He was normal-- a male friend having an interest in him couldn't change the way Yuuri had been his entire life. He had always been a normal boy interested in girls. In breasts and short skirts ahead of him, riding bicycles on windy days.

But something dark inside of him crawled from the forgotten corners of his mind and forced him to remember that he hadn't always been as... normal as his peers.

He had never ridden the trains out to the special vending machines in the city. The ones where all sorts of images and videos could be bought in secret for any young boy who was clever enough to get away with it. He had never enjoyed slipping into the back of bookstores and comic shops the way the other boys had. Upstairs rooms with walls of women and breasts and panties too small. Drawn images somehow more graphic than real life.

Yuuri had always blamed his disgust of such things on Shouri. Things he had seen on his brother's computer when he had been too young to know better and old enough to be curious.

Those girls-- drawn and real-- what they were doing-- what was being done to them. It always looked like they were in pain. Teary eyed and covered in impossible torrents of come. Yuuri remembered his fear-- his revulsion-- his arousal as he had seen sex for the first time. Grunts and
high pitched pleading overwhelmed by the sounds of wet and the slapping of flesh. Sounds that seemed all too near in his borrowed headphones.

That day he had quickly closed everything-- terrified of being caught-- before running to his room in shame, harder than he had ever been and shaking as he came-- memories of an almost impossibly large cock disappearing again and again into the soft pink lips and throat of a red cheeked girl in a high school uniform.

He didn't want that-- hurting someone he cared about. Yuuri didn't like fantasizing about strangers, or even the pretty girls in class. Touching himself always felt wrong-- and he always did his best to avoid it. Unwilling to reward the perversions of his mind and body.

Yuuri had never even touched a real girl-- not like that-- so he really should be able to blame his inexperience for the way Wolfram had been able to make him feel.

But that seemed so unfair. To Wolfram. Yuuri hated the idea that he had used his friend for nothing more than physical gratification, but did he hate the alternative worse?

And did it even matter what he hated worse? Would that even affect which one was really true?

Which one was really true?

Had he started to have feelings beyond friendship for Wolfram? And were those hypothetical feelings even real, or were they simply a result of his desire to make everyone around him happy?

Yuuri rubbed his eyes and shifted, noticing with slight revulsion that all these intimate thoughts had made his pants uncomfortable. He pushed the heel of his hand into his half arousal as punishment until his eyes burned with the sting. It had been so long-- not since Wolfram--

Despite the too hard pressure he could feel himself swell at the thought. He hadn't touched himself since Wolfram had-- Even though he had woken twice with dirty sheets since his friend had left. Wolfram's absence from his bed made such consequences easier to hide, but even when he and Wolfram had slept together it had been easy to crumple up affected areas of sheets and blame the bed's disarray on their unusual sleeping patterns until the maids could wash the evidence away.

But that time-- Yuuri whimpered softly and bit his lip. Wolfram had really wanted him. Wolfram had been in control, hands on Yuuri's hips-- green eyes demanding as Yuuri had watched the top of his cock disappear into that hot-- hot mouth in the dimming light. Wolfram had looked for all the world like there was nothing he wanted more.

And now he was fully hard, constrained in tiny underwear and his cotton pants. His hand betrayed him, rubbing lightly against heat-- making everything worse.

Better.

Giving in, Yuuri pulled himself free, hissing as the bare skin of his right hand came in contact with hot damp flesh. Ohh... His hand sped up-- rushing out of habit until--

"You're going about this all the wrong way. You'll hurt yourself at that pace."

Yuuri's hand slowed and he could almost feel Wolfram's breath on his ear.

His mouth fell open as he gasped in air. The small sound of want was embarrassing, but all it did was make him picture Wolfram's smirk.
Yuuri's head drooped-- lip stinging from his teeth. His eyes drifted open to watch himself-- seeing Wolfram's eyes-- his lips stretch-- longing for a heat he could never hope to recreate.

He looked away for a moment. Ashamed to be using Wolfram's memory for such a selfish purpose, but no matter how hard he tried to think of other things, his mind kept drifting back to pale skin and soft hair and heat and then-- Something sparkled in the corner of the room. Yuuri paused for a moment before a whole new wave of images came rushing over him.


Yuuri's hand sped up. Ohh... he wanted more-- he wanted to return the favor-- see Wolfram squirm and gasp and lose control in this feeling. His head fell back on the bed and Yuuri's hips began to move of their own accord.

And Wolfram's *throat.* That accidental moment of *inside.*

Yuuri keened softly, mouth open and breath too fast. "Ah, n--" he breathed, startling himself in the quiet of the room. A voice over the wet sliding of his hand. Yuuri realized he was going to come. Soon. Desperately he kicked off a shoe and removed one of his socks. Not his favorite trick, but he wasn't about to use another of Wolfram's cravats.

His cock twitched.

Yuuri struggled to stay quiet as he sped up to finish himself in a few desperate strokes.

Green eyes. Hot... soft...

*Wolfram.*

A gasp tore from his throat as his cock pulsed, sending hot come into still-warm fabric.

Yuuri shuddered and fought to breathe. To not pass out under the weight of his realization.

He wanted Wolfram.

*******

*******

Eastern Habalouge
Same day

*******

They were outside. Greta smiled down at him from a tree of green feathers. The sun spun around him and Yuuri put a hand on his shoulder. And then the two of them sat on grass to watch her.

Yuuri looked away, his profile catching the light from the clouds. "Stop kicking me out of bed!"

"Wimp!" Wolfram huffed, rolling over in sheets. There was something wrong. The sheets scratched his cheek and Wolfram struggled to pull his eyes open. This wasn't his bed.

"Wolf?" Yuuri's voice. Another smile, but the sun burned his eyes and forced them open.

This wasn't his bed. His head pounded.

"Papa!" Greta laughed, eyes soft and far away.
This wasn't his bed. The roof was made of wood, and the mattress was straw. He could smell himself and it was terrible.

A bath, he had wanted a bath. He was at an inn. Yozak had made him drink another ale...

 Filthy half breed.

Wolfram growled and forced himself to sit up, mind still clinging stubbornly to sleep and dreams. The room swam unnaturally around him and color seeped in from the window, crawling along the floor toward a tub of water.

By now it was probably cold. Good though. He couldn't wake up. Wolfram struggled out of his clothes and stumbled over to the tub. The cold water helped to jolt his mind, but somehow it wasn't enough. He put his head under, rubbing furiously and feeling the clean water go fuzzy around him with grime. It felt like he was rubbing his skin off in places. His chest hurt.

Oh. He was still under water.

Wolfram stood up and gasped in air, gray water splashing over the rim of the wooden tub in shining streams. The water pooled on the floor and light from the windows danced in the shimmering reflection. When Wolfram looked up, the whole room shimmered, too.

Had he really had that much to drink? Wolfram continued trying to wake himself up as he scrubbed the remaining dirt from his skin with a bar of soap with undoubtedly questionable origins. Still, it was better than nothing, and by the time he had removed anything that had even the slightest chance of actually growing on him, his mind had somewhat cleared. He sighed and climbed out of the tub. His first instinct was to try washing his clothes in the tub as well, but there wouldn't really be a way to dry them. Even if he could still use his--

Lucien.

Where was Lucien?

Wolfram grimaced but hurried back into his traveling clothes and rushed from the room, making sure to grab his sword. Maybe Grier had set him up in another room. He paused outside of a neighboring door. It would hardly do to start waking up random patrons at all hours of the morning-- at least he hoped it was morning. Wolfram gave the door a fleeting glance before climbing down the creaking stairway that led to the tavern.

Familiar smells of food wafted up at him and he could feel the heat from the stoves as soon as he entered the main room. There were two men eating soup in the booth he and Grier had occupied the night before, but besides that, there seemed to be only a single barkeep on duty.

"Excuse me," Wolfram snapped, though he did his best to keep the concern from his voice. "Was there another traveler at the inn last night? One of your girls drank me under the table--"

"That'd be Yozana," laughed the man with a crooked smile. Wolfram only counted three teeth. "She said you'd be in quite the mood when you woke."

"Yes. Yozana." Wolfram ground out. How the man could get away with such absurdities was absolutely beyond him. "Did she see to my companion as well?"

The man spit into the glass he was cleaning. "No companion. Though you might try over at Ol' Sandra's place. She's got a few girls there that have been known to distract a traveler or two in their prime." He leaned closer. "A boy, too." And winked.
Wolfram grimaced. "A brothel? I didn't think this town was large enough-- not that it isn't... quaint."

"Ohh a brothel." The man laughed again, coughing halfway through. "Quite the charmer you are. Every town needs a place for whores. Why else would the young men work for their coin?"

There was a pause while Wolfram considered what sort of reaction would be most appropriate. He forced a smile.

This seemed to please the man and his smile widened. Four. The man had four teeth, this time Wolfram was sure. "Sit down, lad. You look half-starved. You'll need a full meal before trying to pull that friend of yours from one of Ol' Sandra's girls." More laughter and the man resumed stirring a large cauldron full of... something.

Wolfram's stomach rumbled, and he decided he didn't care to know. In moments a steaming bowl of stew was placed in front of him, along with a large slice of the same type of bread he had eaten the night before. Wolfram started quickly, wanting to finish as soon as possible so he could go and look for Lucien. While Wolfram couldn't imagine what had kept the other man, he wasn't too concerned. Lucien had always managed to take care of himself. He was a good soldier and completely in control of his emotions. Lucien was probably having some trouble finding suitable horses for their trip through the mountains. By this time he probably had most of the supplies they would need as well.

He had almost finished the last of his bread when the barkeep put a full tankard in front of him. "Ohh," Wolfram started after swallowing. "I don't need any more ale--"

"It's roggen. You'd have to drink a lot more than that if you want the effects of ale." The man looked at him expectantly.

Wolfram smiled through his discomfort. While he certainly didn't want to be drinking the water, the odd feeling was coming back and he didn't like the idea of what more alcohol would do when he was clearly still feeling the effects of what he had had the night before. But he didn't want the man to make a scene, and the bread had made him thirsty and so Wolfram drank as much as he could stand before pushing his stool away from the bar. "Thank you. How much do I owe you?"

Wolfram reached into the pouch attached to his belt.

The man didn't look up from his cleaning. "It's been taken care of."

At least Grier had taken care of something after the mess he'd put him in. Wolfram tried to keep his mind sharp as he made his way out the door.

Outside the sun was almost blinding, but it still hung relatively low in the sky and Wolfram could smell the lingering dew in the air. The sounds of a crowd drew him to the main road where there seemed to be a small marketplace set up. Perhaps Lucien was lurking amongst the vendors?

Wolfram walked slowly, trying to avoid drawing attention to himself. Even though there was no way for them to tell what he was from his face alone, Wolfram couldn't help but feel different amongst so many humans. One of the stalls had a blue cloth overhang and Wolfram had to stop as it seemed to melt into its own shadow.

He blinked and it was normal again. Wolfram shook his head to clear it. The voices around him seemed far away, and sounds came after they should. Wolfram shook his head again and kept walking. Maybe this was all a trick. The humans had figured him out. It was all a trap to get him to panic.
His fingers twitched, yearning for the sword at his hip. A hand fell on his shoulder and Wolfram whipped around to face it.

"Special scents. The flowers of the far east. Such a lovely young man won't need such tricks but as a present perhaps?" The man seemed too rugged to be selling perfume.

Wolfram's palm found the hilt of his sword.

"It's quite popular these days." The man sprayed a mist of something on him and Wolfram jumped back-- half drawing his sword before the screams of the villagers brought him to his senses. His face was sticky from where the sweetness clung to him and his lips were sour.

A familiar sour

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" The vendor backed away. "I meant no harm!"

Wolfram's heart was racing. He took a step back. He had to get out!

He turned and ran. Losing himself between houses in the tiny town. He had to find Lucien! He had to get out!

It was a trap! The humans had found him out! Wolfram ducked between a pile of lumber and the side of a house to wait and see if he was being followed. The ground seemed to move beneath his feet and he couldn't think. There was something blocking his mind-- making everything wrong.

Had he been poisoned? The humans... they had found him out... slipped something into his food... it was all a trap! Wolfram gripped his sword as he peeked out from behind his hiding spot. No one seemed to be following him, but that could be because they knew where he was. They knew where he would hide. This place was probably a trap!

He had to find Lucien and get out!

Wolfram slowly made his way back onto the nearest road. There was no one in sight. Carefully, carefully. One foot then the next. He had to move slowly. The humans had found a way to make the ground move-- a clever trap to trip him, make him cry out. But he was too smart for them. One step at a time he made his way down the empty road and then--

Someone on the road with him! Ahead of him! They hadn't seen him yet though... maybe he was still safe. They were walking the same direction and Wolfram was behind him...

He was his height--young-- black hair--

It couldn't be! Weller would have kept him in the castle! The wimp wouldn't have come after him! But then again how many times had Yuuri run off before? Wolfram had to save him! Warn him of the human's trap!

Without time for another thought Wolfram was running towards him, desperate to get there before the humans came for them both. But before he could reach him Yuuri disappeared into one of the houses. "Yuuri!" Wolfram's throat tore in desperation. It had to be a trap!

In moments Wolfram had reached the door, pulling it open with enough force to throw himself off balance for half a second. "Yuuri!" Wolfram yelled again. There was a man standing behind a counter. "Where is he? What have you done to him?"

The man tried to hide, but Wolfram was faster, drawing his sword and leveling it at his throat.
"Where. Is. He." _Filthy human._

"The customer-- he-- he--" Tears began to run down his round face. "Please sir-- he's rented the last room on the right-- his companions--"

"If he's harmed they'll never find your pieces," Wolfram seethed, keeping his sword drawn as he made his way to the room the man had indicated. The door was half ajar and Wolfram pushed it open slowly, ever conscious of the possibility of a trap.

"Wolf?" Yuuri turned to him. A dark silhouette against the bright sun that streamed in from the open window. "What are you doing here? I was looking for you."

Wolfram stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, the bolt was missing from the lock and so Wolfram slid his sword inside to keep the humans from breaking in. "What am I doing here? Why did you leave the castle? What were you thinking?" Wolfram's mind raced. How could Weller have let Yuuri follow him?

"What?" Yuuri stepped toward him. "What do you mean--"

"Yuuri!" Wolfram snapped, "Now isn't the time for another one of your adventures! I thought you understood how important it was to stay! What about Greta? What about that--"

"Ohh..." Yuuri touched his face.

When had he gotten so close?

"My Wolf... so soon..." A thumb pressed against his bottom lip. "And to think I was supposed to find you. You've come to me..." Yuuri smiled and kissed him.

It didn't make any sense! But Yuuri was kissing him... holding him... wanting him. What he had spent so long wanting... "Yuuri..." Wolfram managed, breaking away, "You're not making sense--the humans could come at any minute! We have to get back to the path--"

"Don't worry." Yuuri smiled and kissed him again, he looked so happy to see him. "I've already seen Lucien. He's safe." And then something was wrong... for a moment Yuuri seemed... different. "I've missed you so much. You're just as beautiful as I remember. I'll make sure you enjoy it this time."

Something was wrong but it was so hard to tell with the way the room spun. Wolfram clung to Yuuri's shoulders. "Yuuri..." He murmured.

He had been so scared... Yuuri was in danger... but now he was safe. Holding him. Wanting him. Kissing him. Touching him in ways his wimp had never dared.

And then it all made sense.

A dream.

This had to be a dream.

Dreams were the only place his Yuuri wanted him. And dreams were the only place Wolfram was allowed to have him. Wolfram moaned, deepening the kiss as the room spun around him and his body went numb with feelings. The sun was warm on one side of his face and Yuuri's hands were in his hair. When Wolfram opened his eyes colors spun into themselves and Yuuri's face was close and his words slid over him like rain.
He was falling-- Yuuri held him up. The ground had turned to water and he was sinking into wood. Wolfram grabbed onto Yuuri's hand to keep himself afloat-- "Yuuri..." His tongue was stuck-- words seemed thick and bitter sweet, filling up his throat. Then he noticed something... He tried to back away, there should have been a chair nearby to pull himself up but his hand went through air. He fell.

His gift.

"Yuuri... my... ring..." The room spun until color was the only thing left. Bright. Stinging his eyes.

"What ring?"

He was drowning. He was poisoned. This had to be a trap! The humans-- Yuuri. He had to save Yuuri!

"Ohh, my pretty Wolf. I'm so sorry."

Strange. Being kissed when Wolfram was sure he couldn't feel his own lips in this swirling darkness.

"I'll make you feel good..."

A gasp.

"So good... while I can."


Wanting.

Needing.

Yuuri.

Then nothing.

*******

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
Ten Years Earlier

*******

It had been a long day.

Even though the war was years finished, the countryside and smaller towns were still scared by consequences. Wolfram had only returned from his monthly border patrol a few hours earlier. A trip that should have taken one week had ended after nearly two. This time they had gone east, to the parts hit hardest, and nearly every village had begged aid in some way or another. From the expected running off of human bandits to the mundane assistance of carrying lumber or work with reconstruction. They had lost so many men of working age-- It would take decades for their population to rebuild while in ten years the humans would have enough troops and spite to be a threat.

The reconstruction was work beneath soldiers-- but it was their country-- their people. And brother
would insist they not refuse them. The work was hard, but worth the result. Finally people saw that he was capable of something other than raising moral within the palace-- after years of being nothing more than a dancing doll for his mother to play with while Stoffel ruled their nation into disrepair.

Wolfram frowned and sunk farther into the hot water of the bath. Sometimes he felt like access to the royal baths were the only benefit of being his mother's son. At least the steaming heat would help him to forget his aches.

The war was finished and he was a Lieutenant who had only overseen a few minor skirmishes. He could count the humans dead by his sword on only one hand and his flames on two. Another rank from his brother's graces. Greater shame in having it than not, when Wolfram hardly felt it was earned. He would only have to work harder to prove himself.

It only twisted the knife that upon Weller's return it was as if he had never left. Hero of Ruttenburg. Half Blood Legend. He had probably just gone off to help the human's rebuild. That or crawled off to lick his wounds over the death of Susannah Julia like Adelbert the Traitor.

Wolfram had cared for Julia as well. She was hard not to like for all the trouble she gave him over his studies. But Weller's covetous eye was hard to ignore, and it was in some ways a blessing that she killed herself in healing before Weller could do the only thing that would probably affect his perfect reputation. And then he and Adelbert would have had no choice but kill each other over honor while Julia cried at the sounds of their swords.

But Weller had returned changed. Happy. Looking at him like the last sixty years had never happened and Wolfram was still a child at his mother's knees who was too ignorant to know better than to tolerate his presence.

"You'll inherit your brother's wrinkles sooner than you'd like if you keep that up." Marques' voice beside him.

Wolfram merely grunted in response. Marques was too light-hearted for his own good-- but it certainly helped him to get his way at times. Of course Marques wasn't allowed into these baths, but even Wolfram had a hard time turning him down after such a long journey.

He could feel his skin beginning to flush from the heat. He was just tired. There was absolutely no other reason Marques had an easy time having his way where Wolfram was concerned.

After all, they had known each other for most of their lives and Marques was the only friend to stay close to him for long.

His only friend.

Marques scooted closer on the platform beneath the water, until their shoulders almost touched. "We should have stayed longer-- you could have taken better advantage of the pretty ones making eyes at you."

Wolfram snorted.

Marques had somehow managed to acquire nearly twice the reputation that Wolfram had himself for taking advantage of his status and good looks. Of course, all the stories about himself were merely lies and wishful thinking, so the same could probably be said of Marques. The other boy talked too much about such things far too much for him to actually be doing them.

Marques simply loved to joke. Especially with him.
Water spilled over his head. "You're so hard to talk to sometimes, Wolf. Stop brooding and at least wash your hair. It's almost brown." Without waiting for Wolfram's reply Marques poured soap and started washing Wolfram's hair for him.

Wolfram fought to breathe. His heart raced. He willed himself to stop feeling like this, but he was sure his face was as red as it could be. "Marques--"

"Don't complain, you're always working too hard as it is." Marques was leaning over him, both hands in his hair.

Wolfram could feel his own breath bounce back at his face from against the other boy's chest. Surely there was a less awkward way for Marques to go about doing this... His corporal was practically on top of him! This couldn't be comfortable for him.

"Here..." Wolfram turned on his seat so that his back was to Marques. "That should be easier-- since you insist on doing such a thing."

Marques sighed behind him and slapped his back playfully. "Wolf, you're so--" Another sigh.

"What?" Wolfram crossed his arms defensively over his chest. Had he messed up something social again? Marques was always teasing him about his social interactions outside of court. In court Wolfram knew every rule by heart, every step, but outside of it... He seemed to think more about what he should do than other people. As if some innate skill had skipped him over.

Again.

"Nothing." He could hear Marques' smirk as the other boy pulled Wolfram back slowly to submerge his head and rinse his hair. Wolfram kept his eyes open through the sting so he could watch Marques' blurry face shift in the water above him.

Then he sat up, back still to Marques, who began to scrub his back, pressing fingers against slick skin and too-tight muscle, making a small sound escape Wolfram's throat.

Wolfram was mortified, but Marques seemed not to mind and his hands only moved lower along his back. He seemed to be doing more touching than washing, but Wolfram didn't want to do anything that would make the situation more awkward than it already felt. Wolfram was sure Marques could feel the way his heart was about to beat out of his chest.

"Relax." Marques' breath in his ear-- so close. "I can't do anything when you're so tense."

"Okay..." Wolfram managed. The water was so hot-- probably in part his own fault. "You don't have to--"

"Stop being so selfish!" Marques gave his shoulders a hard squeeze, rubbing his thumb into a particularly tight knot and making Wolfram let out a tiny gasp. "You keep this all to yourself..." Marques' hands trailed along his back, over his arms, and then Marques' arms were around him-- keeping him still. "Wolf-- don't be mad-- you just make it so-- so hard to be your friend sometimes."

"What?" How did Marques expect him not to be mad! After all this time-- And it hurt-- That Marques was tired of him. Marques was the only one who really knew him-- that Marques was about to throw him away, too--

Then Marques kissed his neck.
"Wolf..." Marques murmured against his neck. "I'm sorry... you're just so..." He held Wolfram tighter. "I can't keep my hands off you any longer..." Another kiss on wet skin. "Are you mad?"

A pause.

"I don't know." Wolfram answered truthfully. He had always liked Marques as a friend-- even though he made him frustrated and angry more often than anything else. And then there had been that kiss... but then there had been the war and Wolfram had needed a friend, a loyal corporal, more than anything else. Now...

Marques started kissing his neck. Slow, covetous. Flashes of tongue-- teeth.

It felt good. And if anyone was interested in him for anything other than personal gain it was Marques. If he was going to do this with anyone it was Marques.

And it wasn't as if he wasn't interested in sex in general-- it was just he hadn't had much interest in anyone specifically. His pride had kept him from anyone's bed more than anything else, his wish not to make the rumors true.

But this wasn't general, this wasn't rumors. This was Marques who knew him best of all.

Wolfram twisted-- and let Marques have his lips for a kiss. And this time he remembered to close his eyes.

Marques moaned in appreciation and deepened the kiss at once, tongue sliding into his willing mouth. He brought a hand up to cup Wolfram's cheek and the touch helped Wolfram relax as his heart fluttered wildly in his chest. Marques slowly turned him so that kissing was easier-- more desperate-- but even so, after a moment Wolfram had to pull away to breathe.

"It's okay to open your eyes sometimes, you know."

If it was possible to blush more Wolfram would have done it. "I know that!-- I was just..."

Wolfram paused and to open his eyes and glare. "I wanted to do what you wanted... is all..."

Wolfram was quickly becoming appalled by his own behavior. What was he... some blushing village girl? He was a lieutenant, a prince, warrior of flame, and more importantly a demon male in his seventies!

Enough was enough.

He was certainly ready for more-- and Marques had taken the first step-- admitted to-- something anyway.

Wolfram pounced, pressing his lips boldly over Marques' smirk. He had no idea what was the proper thing to do with one's hands at a time like this, so he settled with putting one in Marques' hair.

Marques pulled him closer-- moving Wolfram forward until he found himself straddling the other boy's lap. And then--

Marques' hand was somewhere no one's hand besides his own had ever been. And it was wonderful

Wolfram had to break their kiss to gasp and Marques' mouth moved to his ear. "Oh Wolf-- You're so-- better than I ever thought!"
Wolfram moved forward, pulling Marques close. Marques' hands-- his voice-- wanting him so much-- Wolfram couldn't trust himself to think so he had to act, reaching between them to press himself against Marques' equally eager cock. The other boy moaned into his ear before biting his shoulder-- joining his hand with Wolfram's to better surround the hot flesh rubbing together in his grasp.

They kissed again but all too quickly Marques moved away. "We should have done this years ago... come on..." Marques moved back-- heat leaving-- contact leaving. "Let's get you out of the water."

Wolfram would have been happy to continue as they were, but he didn't want to disappoint Marques and soon found himself sitting on the edge of the bath.

"I'll do something for you Wolf-- but you'll have to give me something too." Marques smirked from between his legs, still standing in the bath.

"What?" Wolfram breathed, distracted by the breath sliding over his cock.

"Let me hear your voice."

And then Marques-- It was-- He'd never thought it could be-- so good. Nothing had ever-- nothing should ever-- More.

"I can't hear you--"

"Don't stop--" Wolfram growled. "Marques."

"That's better." Marques practically purred and then he moved his head and--

Swallowed.

Wolfram forgot to breathe.


Marques' hand was moving between his legs-- wet-- inside-- strange-- as Marques spread Wolfram's legs further and swallowed his cock Wolfram hardly cared what his hand was doing until--

Something inside--

He came.

And Marques swallowed.

Wolfram fell back against the stone floor. Spent.

Marques moved above him, fingers still... "You're so perfect, Wolf." Marques kissed his stomach. Then bit. "No one can compare to this body."

The fingers... more than one... moved inside him. Wolfram grimaced.

"You're so tight" Marques moaned. "Please, Wolf... please..."
It couldn't be that bad... and the thought of making Marques happy-- he wanted so much.

A nod.

Another kiss.

Then pain.

Wolfram had to bite his lip to keep from crying out-- he'd never imagined--

"Gods Wolf-- Relax-- You're tighter than a virgin--"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Wolfram snapped through the pain-- It stung-- hurt so much and Marques wasn't even all the way inside him. "Had a lot of virgins lately?"

"As always." Marques smirked.

Wolfram paused. "Now really isn't the time to boast over your false conquests--"

"False?" Marques laughed. "You're really taking this too far... Don't be so serious Wolf. Besides I'm sure you've done this little blushing virgin act a dozen--"

CRACK! Followed by a splash.

Wolfram had never punched someone with a closed fist before. He only wished he had been in a better position to put his weight behind it.

Marques came up sputtering. "Damn it, Wolf!" Watery blood streamed from his nose. "What--"

Flame. Everywhere. Rage. "Answer carefully. Are the rumors-- have you slept with everyone in the castle? Couldn't find someone for tonight so you thought--"

"Wolfram stop it! Calm down! I don't understand, you're upset about gossip? According to the staff you've slept with--"

"LIES!" Wolfram shouted, flames rising. "Why would I bother with any of them-- All they care about is--" He was going to kill Marques. He had never been so humiliated. So angry. "Get. Out."

"Oh gods..." Marques' eyes were wide. "Wolf I'm so sorry-- I never thought-- I only thought we were--"

"OUT!"

There was more yelling, more flames, but eventually Marques left. And Wolfram had been left alone, sitting on the bathroom floor for hours, too numb to even--

Marques avoided him for days-- weeks-- after that.

He was just like everyone else after all.

********

********
Sender,

He came to us.
Soon I shall make him sing for you.

~Recipient

Recipient,

I am glad.
I will think of him often in this tedious endeavor.
Make him scream.

~Sender

********
*******

Eastern Habalouge:

Of all the times for the selfish loafer to get himself caught.

Yozak sighed as he surveyed the "situation". Wolfram's corporal really had managed to get himself in a unique mess. Not only had the boy gotten himself captured, but he had been suspended from the roof of a barn.

Naked.

"The letter was addressed to you, Miss-- tellin' me he was yours. Though I can imagine a pretty lady such as yourself would have no shortage of young lads at your disposal..." The man laughed. "Well, it seems to be quite the delivery service."

"Quite," Yozak answered darkly.

There was a muffled complaint from above.

"How'd they get him up there ya' suppose?" The man pondered. "It was quite the shock this morning I'm tellin' ya'-- not that the boy's not pleasant to look at but-- I'm just glad I woke up before my wife or she'd have run off with him." Another hardy laugh.

"Well," Yozak made sure to raise the pitch of his voice, "I suppose we should get him down."

By all rights, this situation should be hilarious. The boy had managed to get himself strung up naked in a barn. But if he knew what was good for the both of them, he would have some
information about who had done this... and where they had taken his commanding officer.

It only took a few minutes to lower him down. Whoever had tied him had been kind enough to do it in such a way that nothing had been dislocated, but there would be burns to remember the event for days to come. The soldier gasped as the gag was removed from his mouth, then coughed.

The man who owned the barn was kind enough to toss a blanket where it was needed most. "Well now, cover yourself, boy. There's a lady present."

Yozak managed not to roll his eyes as the young corporal reflexively pulled the blanket over his hips. "Well, I'll see to him now. Thank you so much for your kindness."

The man made a move to protest, but Yozak put some coin in his hand and batted his eyelashes before he could be too much trouble.

Once they were alone he glared down at the shivering Corporal. "Well?"

The man brought up one of his hands, still clenched in a fist and slowly used his other to peel back the strained fingers. "I didn't drop it..." He shivered, lips tinged with blue.

It must have been a long night.

Yozak moved closer. The corporal had managed to hold on to a single scrap of folded paper, and scrawled in the middle of it was one word.

_South._

"What does it say?" The boy stood shakily, wrapping the blanket around his waist.

"You didn't write this?"

"No..." He looked away. "When I came to... it was the only thing I could do... holding onto it."

Yozak rubbed his forehead. He must have been hanging there all night and most of the day... The farmer hadn't managed to find him at the tavern until well after midday, hours after he had checked on Wolfram's room and found him missing. "Who put you up there?"

"I don't know..." He took a breath before pulling a lip between his teeth. "I spent... I've been trying so hard to remember... It's like my thoughts-- Everything's confused." The boy lowered his head, putting his neck at just the right angle...

Yozak reached forward and grabbed his chin, turning it into the light. "Whoever it was seems to have gotten to know you quite a bit-- unless you and your commanding officer--"

"Of course not!" The corporal sputtered, seeming to shrink into himself. The movement only drew more light to the red marks settling into purple along his neck and collar, and the lingering paths of nails against his chest. "You know the lieutenant! If anyone is loyal to His Majesty it's--"

"Strange, then, that you don't remember who did this. Considering how close you've been to someone recently."

"Are you calling me a traitor? I've given-- You have _no idea_ what I've given to protect him!"

Lucien seethed.
"Then why are you lying to me?" Yozak's voice was cold.

The boy lowered his head and drew the blanket up to cover himself from neck to knees. "You asked me if I knew who put me up there." His eyes flashed up. "I don't know who put me up there. I can't remember most of last night--"

"Stop." Yozak stepped forward, towering over him in height and heels. "There is no time for this. We have to find him. Now. Without stalling or avoiding the facts. Tell me what you remember. Everything. Every second a man is in enemy hands can mean the difference between life and death. His Majesty the Maou aside, what do you think Lord Voltaire will do-- The Captain-- when they hear of--"

"Marques." The boy shivered. "He used to be Wolfram's corporal, his friend, my--" A breath. "He vanished almost two years ago, right after the battle with Shinou when His Majesty disappeared. I thought he was dead, but he was here. I-- We--" A blush. "I saw him for a few moments before everything went dark. But I know him. He wouldn't have done this. He would never hurt Wolfram! We were children together... Maybe Marques has been taken too--"

"That hardly matters now..." Yozak glanced down at the paper. "South... They could be telling us where to go, but it's more likely to lead to an unfortunate detour... There's nothing else useful you can tell me?"

Lucien shook his head.

Yozak sighed. He had been so close to gaining Maxine's trust, and now his favorite Yozana was going to have to disappear without a word.

Gwendal would not be pleased... Yozak's mind was racing to find the best plan. He would ask around the village first, see if anyone had seen strangers leaving in the past few hours-- Then he would have to send Gwendal an emergency bird...

Of all the times for the selfish loafer to get himself caught!

*******
*******
Elsewhere
Eastern Habalogue
*******

Darkness.

Alone in darkness.

Wolfram had to touch his eyes to be sure they were open.

Was he blind?

There was a sound.

Maybe he wasn't alone-- breath on his neck-- or only in his mind?

A dream? But everything hurt too much.

He was lying on-- solid-- cold. Wooden planks fitted too tight for the tips of his fingers to pry...
between them. He stood slowly-- mind scrambling to figure out-- where-- why-- what.

He raised his arms until he could feel the same wooden surface above him.

Wolfram tried to move forward-- touching the ceiling for balance as the room seemed to spin even though he couldn't see it. Swaying beneath his feet. Almost like... almost like a ship.

**Nausea.**

He had been dozens of miles from the ocean before-- before what? How had he even gotten here? Wolfram couldn't-- Yozak and drinking-- Humans and-- Yuuri?

Or was it all a dream?

If it wasn't a dream... If they had him they must have--

**Yuuri**

It was like falling out of sleep-- his mind and body seemed to jerk into reality at once, and he could feel a cold sweat begin to break out against the chill of the air. Wolfram moved forward as fast as he dared, breath echoing in his ears. He couldn't panic. He had to remember his training.

Wolfram's fingers trailed along the wood above his head, counting steps.

One... Two... Three.

If you panic, you're already dead. If you're captured-- stall long enough for any tactical information to be obsolete. No one can withstand torture forever, but it is a soldier's duty to resist as long as possible. Wolfram had prepared himself decades ago to give everything for his country-- his king.

**Yuuri.**

As long as he could keep Yuuri safe. Panicking wouldn't help Yuuri.

Wolfram swallowed. Forcing down the growing nausea-- fear. One hand ran along the ceiling while another grasped at the empty air before his small, hurried steps.

Four... Five... Six.

A wall. More wooden planks-- cracks with no light between them-- only cold. The same as every other surface he had touched since waking into this nightmare. It was all the same. From ceiling to floor. Wolfram put both hands on the wall-- searching-- for something. Anything. But there was nothing but more of the same. He walked to the right, following the wall with sore fingertips.

A corner. Ten steps. Another right turn. Corner.

Then he hit something with his foot-- wood clattering on wood. Wolfram knelt, searching the floor for the source-- A bucket. Wooden-- no handle. Wolfram smirked morbidly in the darkness.

Small comforts.

Whoever had him intended him to be here long enough to need this. They must want him alive-- for the moment.

Thinking. Thinking was good. It wasn't panic.
Wolfram kept going. Three more right turns of ten and a half small steps before he found the bucket again. Or maybe it was a different bucket... put there to trick him. Wolfram turned the bucket over and tried again.

Same bucket.

Square room-- cell. But no door, no way in or out. Wolfram started his journey again, slower this time, scraping his fingers along every surface from ceiling to floor until his hands started to shake and his fingers were covered in splinters and tiny cuts.

There had to be a door! There had to be some way out! But maybe there was no door--

He was supposed to die in here. Alone. In darkness.

_Filthy humans!_ If he had his magic-- he would burn the entire thing to ash! He would take all of them with him in death! Wolfram could feel the tiny ember of something in his chest, something that wasn't his but was close enough.

He may have to use it... But not now-- For now he could wait. Humans were the impatient ones after all-- short, useless lives.

And they were humans, whoever had done this to him. Somewhere-- somewhere close-- there was a throbbing pain-- everywhere. Damn stones. They were close, probably for his benefit.

Wolfram growled and kicked a wall-- the resounding crack was so loud-- abrupt-- so much more than his quick breath and thudding heartbeat. He swallowed, throat uncomfortably dry. He had to stay calm, keep looking. They wouldn't expect him to be calm-- ready. The moment they came for him Wolfram would be ready.

And so he continued his search, running his hands over every surface he could find in his wooden cell. Up and down, side to side. And then-- his fingernail caught-- A crack where there shouldn't have been-- larger than the rest-- vertical.

Wolfram let out a small laugh of triumph and ignored the throbbing from his torn nail. The crack went all the way to the floor... back up... not quite to the ceiling and then over-- horizontally to the left-- down again.

A door.

No hinges on his side-- thin space-- but a door!

They would come through here, and when they did, Wolfram would be ready.

* * *

Wolfram had been thirteen when he had wandered into one of the treasuries and had been locked in for the night. At first it was an adventure-- tall shelves and golden things-- It had soon dissolved into dust and fear and _alone_.

He was in the storeroom again. Light shone in from a top window and there were spots of rainbow on the floor. Bending in the wind.

And he wasn't alone.

Something was there-- chasing him. Hot breath on his neck. The shelves seemed impossibly high--
surrounding him-- stretching into the sky until the stars came crashing down.

The ground bent, cracking, and then there was water. Everywhere. Water surrounding him-- he had forgotten how to swim. He couldn't make his legs move. Dark water-- sticking to his skin-- crawling inside.

He had to get out! Drowning--

CRACK

Eyes open, heart racing, darkness. Wolfram blinked. Or was he blind? He had been in the treasury... he had been... Yozak... and drinking... breakfast and a market...

Trapped.

He must have fallen asleep. The floor swayed beneath him.


Wolfram hurried across the room to make use of his bucket but all that came up through his heaving was sour bile. He spat and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. There was a nagging pressure in his bladder too... but since he didn't know if he would be given water... He could hold out a while longer. It would help him keep himself awake at any rate.

Wolfram leaned against the wall and glared at where he knew the door to be. There was a slight breeze coming from that direction. Cold. Wolfram drew his legs up and held his knees against his chest.

Bastards.

Hopefully Lucien-- Yuuri?-- had gotten away.

He would kill every one of the filthy humans that had put him here! Wolfram stood. He had to try at least once. With a roar of adrenaline Wolfram ran towards the door-- hitting it sooner than expected and doing nothing more than bruising his shoulder as he bounced back on impact. He tried again, this time with his foot. Again and again.

"--Fight me! You wanted me! Here I am! --COWARDS!"

Wolfram kept at it until his voice was raw. Because he was angry.

Because it was the only thing he could do.

He must have lost the door in his rage, because all of a sudden he stepped on something that clattered... something that hadn't been there before. He knelt to--

Wet.

His knees were wet-- Then his hands-- Water. They must have given him... He had knocked it over. A few seconds of searching was all it took for Wolfram to find the wooden cup. A quick shake told him that there was barely any left inside. They had also left a loaf of bread.

Wolfram put the cup aside for now and touched the floor once more. The cracks were too big for his fingers, but the water had already slipped away. Wolfram took his bread and his cup and moved back into his corner, ready to pounce if anyone came through the door.
The bread was different than what he had eaten last at the inn, but similar all the same. It was hard- stale-- and must have started to mold. His stomach growled as he chewed, and his mouth and throat were dry.

* * *

The cat had escaped.

Wolfram had been trying to take it to Greta-- The last thing he could give her.

The black kitten darted between trees, over a wooden bridge that swayed like the sea. The water miles beneath him roared and the little kitten ran farther and farther away. He had to keep it safe. He had to catch it!

Every time he got close enough to touch it there were more. All of them were different but some of them were similar enough that Wolfram was suddenly searching through castle hallways and village squares to find the cat he needed. The one that made it okay for him to go home. Home to his daughter and Yuuri.

Everything hurt.

His back... The ground was hard. A cold wind blew against his skin and his mouth was dry. Bitter taste. Colors swirled. Danced in darkness. The sound of breathing merged with his thoughts until the room was filled with cats. Maybe he had been eaten.

Maybe he was blind.


Nausea rose up, and Wolfram searched as quickly as he dared for something-- a bucket. Bile. The whole room smelled of sick.

Where had Lucien gone? Where was Yuuri? He had to be safe... back at the castle. Weller would... Weller would keep him safe.

How had he even gotten here? How long had he been here? Everything merged... waking and sleeping.

* * *

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
Five Days Later

********

********

********
Yuuri sighed and flopped face first into the bed in Wolfram's room. He had started making a habit of it, and Conrad didn't seem to mind what Yuuri did these days as long as it wasn't talking about Sara. It was emotionally exhausting, but coming here gave Yuuri time to think about things he couldn't let himself most of the time.

It was best to keep things separate. Things he had to do as Maou, and the things that were tearing him apart inside.

He wanted Wolfram. Sexually.

Yuuri groaned into the pillow and wondered vaguely how long it would take to suffocate himself. This wasn't supposed to happen. Pretending for the sake of his family was one thing... but actually being gay. Or at least bisexual. It was all so very wrong.

Maybe he was just Wolfram-sexual. That seemed somehow better than any other label Yuuri came up with. It had made him angry for a while too... that Wolfram had made him... like this. Yuuri imagined that maybe it was all Wolfram's fault, for wanting him so much and being such a good person. Saving his life so many times. Maybe karma was on Wolfram's side and Yuuri was just a casualty of the universal order of things. But then he had started thinking about the way Wolfram had felt about him for so long, and if those feelings were really those kinds of feelings, and if Wolfram would still feel that way about him when he came back from Lesser Gael.

It had made him feel-- even worse-- to think that Wolfram might have given up on him. And that fear was terrifying. Yuuri didn't want to want Wolfram, but everything inside was making this feeling so hard to deny.

And Greta would be happy. Wolfram, too-- assuming he still wanted him. Assuming Yuuri wanted Wolfram to want him...

Yuuri groaned and rolled fitfully on the bed. Messing up the sheets and hugging the pillow to his chest as he curled into himself for comfort. It had been nice in winter, sleeping with Wolfram. At least, it was nice when he wasn't being attacked by Wolfram's violent sleeping patterns. Yuuri had gotten used to Wolfram's smell, his little snores, the sound of another person's breath in the room. It had made him feel safe. Not so small and alone in the huge royal bed chamber.

It was still so strange. Waking up alone. Being king without Wolfram there to tell him when he was doing something terribly wrong. The castle seemed empty. Greta was always so sad and there was nothing he seemed to be able to do about it.

He should talk to Conrad about it. Yuuri should go outside and ask Conrad to come in and tell him what he should do, about Wolfram, about everything. But every time he tried, stood and walked to the door, Yuuri couldn't do it. Yuuri still hated himself for feeling this way. What if he told Conrad and Conrad looked at him with the same disapproval Yuuri felt for himself right now. If Conrad looked at him and knew... Yuuri couldn't bear it.

Why did Wolfram have to want him anyway? What appeal could he possibly have to someone as aesthetically perfect as Wolfram? Yuuri sat up so he could see himself in the small mirror above the dresser. Average. He was so absolutely average. Sure, he had never had problems with his skin and there was nothing hugely wrong with his face, but Yuuri couldn't imagine what Wolfram could possibly see in him. Wolfram, who could have anyone he wanted. His hair was a mess. It always seemed to be a mess and he had never bothered trying to style it even when he had been in Japan. He supposed he was lucky to have a crease above his eyes-- girls paid millions of yen for that these days, but it wasn't really that uncommon to be born with it.
It had to be the double black thing. Everyone here was so obsessed with it, the same way girls being unhealthily thin was the "beautiful" thing these days on Earth... People in Shin Makoku must have been raised thinking the same thing about black hair and eyes. And Wolfram had met him before Murata so... Yuuri frowned. There were much better-looking people with black hair and eyes in Japan--

Yuuri didn't like the idea of Wolfram going to Earth again. He supposed he would have to bring his family here from now on.

It had been months. Yuuri hoped his mother wouldn't be too upset with him when he returned, but things were just too complicated now to even consider it. His family on Earth would just have to understand.

There was so much to be done now. According to Gwendal, the plague wasn't progressing onto demon lands but the people were still in a panic. And of course the fact that the plague was only in human territories even though it affected mazoku as well was another mystery, and a mystery that caused humans to suspect that it was all a mazoku plot. Yuuri had been signing so many letters... and he had even had to make a speech in town the other day as an attempt to reassure everyone. It had been nerve-wracking, but at least Yuuri had been doing something.

And there was the business with Sara. Ever since the incident, Yuuri would have expected Sara to act more meek and upset than ever, but lately he had been strangely happy, smiling to himself at the oddest of times. Maybe he and Reyes had simply been fighting, and now they had made up... After all, he and Conrad were close, so it only made sense that Sara and Reyes would be close too. Whatever it was, Sara seemed happy and Yuuri was glad that he was finally feeling more comfortable here. Yuuri had even gotten him to talk about the games Sara had played growing up in Shou Shimeron. Little by little, Yuuri was sure Sara would trust him. And then Sara would tell Yuuri what he could do to help. And Yuuri was so sure he could help if Sara would only let him.

There had to be something he could do... to make things better for everyone.

During his pondering, Yuuri's eyes were drawn to the drawer again. It wasn't right... but Yuuri really wanted to know... Wolfram's special things. If Wolfram was here Yuuri would be able to ask him... but Wolfram wasn't here and the feeling of missing him only made Yuuri want to open the drawer more. Yuuri sat on the floor by the dresser. It was wrong.

But when had Wolfram denied him anything? If Wolfram was here Yuuri was sure he could simply ask him, and Wolfram would let him see whatever he wanted, Yuuri was sure of it! And really, how mad could Wolfram be when he came back? Hearing about Yuuri's Other Discoveries would probably be much more distracting. For both of them.

And so with shaking hands Yuuri pulled open the drawer before he could think better of it. The things on top were mostly what he had seen before-- pictures of him as a kid from his photo album on Earth and Wolfram's pink nightgown, bearbee hats and the charm from the vending machine in Ginza. Beneath that was mostly paper. Some of them were sketches-- oddly better than the paintings Wolfram kept trying to make of him. Drawings of people Yuuri didn't recognize and others that must have been younger versions of Gwendal and Cheri.

Another stack of paper caught his eye. Japanese? The letters his mother had sent to Wolfram. They were mostly pictures, but Wolfram's name in katakana and a small drawing of an overly stylized Wolfram were on the top of each. This must have been where the pictures of him came from. His mother could be so ridiculous at times. Or really... all the time. Yet another person who would probably be happy about his current lifestyle crisis.
It was probably all those dresses when he was a kid. If his mother hadn't been completely crazy, maybe he would have been able to have a happy normal life.

Yuuri frowned. It was all just-- He hadn't grown up thinking he was-- Of course, it was okay for other people. A sigh. It would just take some getting used to. And maybe it still wasn't true, maybe he would see Wolfram when he came home and this feeling-- this feeling wouldn't devour him.

But it would. Just-- just thinking about Wolfram... Now that Yuuri had admitted it, just the smallest bit, it all rushed up to choke him. Maybe he would try talking to Murata about it again this evening. He was supposed to come to the castle to give another progress report after dinner anyway, and maybe Yuuri could pull him aside for a while... But Murata had so many of his own things to do. He was actually helping with important things. It didn't seem right to bother him about this now.

Yuuri spun Wolfram's ring absently on his finger as it ached. It had been doing that for a while. Last night it had even woken him up-- but that was probably just because he was thinking about Wolfram all the time. It was all in his head.

Yuuri brought his attention back to the final stack of paper in the drawer. Letters from-- names he didn't know. Thin demon script with formal signatures and seals thick along the bottoms. Seals from Belefield. Yuuri squinted to read the one on top, it wasn't from all that long ago, almost four years...

Wolfram,

Your refusal pains me. I would have thought you to have grown wiser over the years. This new Maou's appointment is madness. Our Lord Shinou's will must have been misinterpreted. There is no way that one with contaminated blood can command the Allied Demon Nations. The very idea is preposterous. I am surprised Sir Voltaire has allowed it, though now anything would be an improvement over your dear mother's brother.

I am shocked to discover that the rumors of his vanishing during the ceremony were true, and even more that you dare to defend him!

I have always been an advocate of your honorable return to Belefield in more than name. You are still my precious nephew, but I am afraid this was the last hope for our cause! I can no longer fight for you after this refusal.

I can only hope to convince you of the gravity of this mistake before it is too late. Refuse him. This proposal is madness! How can the prize of ten nations be promised to one of such contaminated blood? The duel aside-- Leave your mother-- That castle-- The mistake that has trapped your honor for the last seventy years!

You will always find a place in my home in Belefield. You can marry someone deserving-- If you denounce him I can convince the council to return your title! I have kept your trust for you all these years, untouched. Please reconsider. Wolfram, this is my last chance to help you.

Your Loving Uncle.

Yuuri stared at the paper in his hands.

How much had Wolfram suffered because of him? This letter was written years ago... Wolfram had never mentioned... No one had ever mentioned... It suddenly hit him how very little he knew about Wolfram's family. Hard. He hadn't known about his father until Conrad told him; he hadn't known about his uncle until he went through Wolfram's things.
Yuuri had never asked.

He had never asked Wolfram about himself. He had never been particularly nice to him, or shown interest in anything he was interested in. He hadn't even bothered about his family. The Bad Feeling rose in his chest.

What had Wolfram ever seen in him?

He had to be better. He had to make up for everything...

Yuuri swallowed. He had to be better.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Capital

********

The city was still untouched. There was no smell of death in the streets, no bodies burning in the wind.

But there was fear.

The people knew it was coming. An eerie silence surrounded the busy marketplace as the townsfolk moved about their business.

Tai felt a tug on his hand. Frith had paused, eyes fixed on a stand where the smell of food pulled at empty stomachs. Tai bought a dozen dumplings from the man, and his little Frith smiled down at the face painted in browned sugar against the curved top.

"Maou," she whispered, before sinking her teeth in dough.

Tai smiled down at her fondly as they walked along the road to the castle gates. It had been a long journey, but the steps to come would be the most difficult.

Was this Yuuri the True King of Gael? And how would they prevent the prophecy that his Frith had walked all those nights ago?

The words were still fresh in his mind, as fresh as his rabbit's screams as she had fallen into the fire.

_Our king, He gives it away_
The king will take it
The king will order it done
The king must die-- To save our king

They had to save him. Anything else and the world would fall.

Lost in ash.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********
Gwendal willed his hand not to shake as he finished signing the orders. Half of his personal troops
would now be making their way to Habalouge by the swiftest means possible. It was the most he
could do without raising suspicion.

Grier still hadn't found him.

Wolfram had been missing for nearly six days. Another week and His Majesty would be expecting
his return... Greta....

Never before had Gwendal cursed his mind for politics. His Majesty-- The Maou had saved
Wolfram before. If His Majesty knew-- ran off to find him-- to save him-- no one would be in a
better position to save Wolfram from dire consequences than the Maou.

But if His Majesty left the castle-- There were things that not even Weller could protect him from.
If His Majesty contracted the plague--

Gwendal closed his eyes and took a shaking breath. No one could know. Not His Majesty, not even
Weller. Conrad was already hard to control when it came to protecting Yuuri from King Saralegui
and his guardian, and Gwendal remembered all to well the look in his eyes the night Wolfram
nearly lost himself to fire... the days his heart was stopped. And of course Mother would tear
herself apart with worry.

He had to be discreet.

And it was torture.

Grier sent him birds every day, and each time Gwendal's heart would race with hope only to be
disappointed. Any sound would wake him and send his eyes flashing to the nearest window.

How could he have let this happen?

He should have sent more men... but that only increased the risk of their discovery in the first
place... But Gwendal must have done something wrong... His precious little brother--

"Sir?"

Gwendal's eyes snapped open. He hadn't even heard the guard knock.

"You look pale. Is everything alright?"

"Fine," he snapped. "State your purpose."

The guard stiffened in attention. "Sir Voltaire, ambassadors from the Demon Nation of Lesser Gael
have arrived to see His Majesty."

Gwendal stood. No one from Lesser Gael had come to Shin Makoku in centuries. Even during
national conferences the seat for Lesser Gael was nearly always empty. "Are you certain?"

"They have the crest--"

"I will see them before His Majesty is summoned. I'm sure our honored guests will understand that
now is the time for the utmost of caution."

The guard saluted. "Yes, Sir! I will bring them at once."

Once the guard left, Gwendal sat heavily in his seat. There was a meeting scheduled in an hour to
go over any new developments with the plague... What could Lesser Gael want at this particular moment? It was possible, given their geographical position, that they were having trouble with the plague as well and had come for aid-- or that they had found a way to cure it. But Lesser Gael had always been fiercely solitary, and so the chance of a carried infestation taking root was slim in such an isolated region--

A knock announced the arrival of his guests, and Gwendal stood to greet them.

A man of nearly Weller's height and no more than a decade older entered the room first, hand in hand with a little girl only a few inches taller than Greta. The man bowed low, causing a thin braid beside his left ear to slide from behind his shoulder and sway below his knees. Excluding that, the rest of his hair was fairly short and brown, though ragged from traveling. He was wearing a simple dark cloak under a scarf of the blue and green interlocking checks of Gael.

Gwendal returned his bow. "Please sit. I apologize that I must be the one to greet you before His Majesty. These are dark times."

"Perfectly understood." The man bowed, lower this time. "The mind behind His Majesty of the United Demon Nations' throne is well known and respected even in the far-off lands of the True Gael, Sir Gwendal von Voltaire."

Gwendal willed his eyes not to narrow as the man approached to sit in the chair before his desk. The citizens of Lesser Gael had long since ceased calling their land "True Gael". It was one of the provisions of the treaty that bound them under the rule of the Maou in Shin Makoku.

"I am the master Taibhsear and this is my prophet, Frith. My rabbit in moonlight." He gestured for the girl who sat on the floor beside him and rested her head on his knee. "I have long ago given my name to the True Faith, but there are those who call me Tai." He ran his hand absently through the long red curls of the girl at his knee.

Perhaps he should have called for the Sage. This Tai was speaking in terms of Old Politics. Gwendal had studied them, knew them of course, but it was possible he would miss some nuance of their purpose. The Taibhsears were religious men, not the careful politicians Gwendal had become accustomed to. This man believed in the magic of the ground and stars, and viewed the rule of the Maou as temporary. He was dangerous in the very strength of his beliefs. "And to what do we owe the honor of this visit? If I know my history, a Taibhsear has not set foot outside the lands of your Gael since Shinou united the Demon Kingdoms."

Tai nodded. "This is true. Those close to the Great Circle have been content to wait until the arrival of our True King. Shinou claimed a legacy that was not his, and destroyed one of our most sacred Weavings of the Word." His blue eyes had gone wild as he spoke, though his voice was calm. "His egotism did no real harm to those who were of the True Faith, and the unification of the Demon World was wished for by all. Despite his faults, Shinou was great. But he is no god, and he never was the True King of Gael--"

"He loves him," the girl murmured, eyes gone so black that neither green nor white remained. "His heart cries for him... His cause is the same as ours."

Tai looked down at the girl in wonder. "She is closer to the cycle than any I have ever found. She knows our love for the True King is the same..." Tears welled in his eyes. "Sir Voltaire, you know him... He is here... It is true... We can save him!"

Gwendal blinked. "If you would explain--"
"There was a prophecy tying your Maou to our True King-- Many, in fact, but one most recently foretelling of great danger. We must save him before it is too late! If your Yuuri is our King then we must do all we can to save him! I promise him no harm by my hand. I only need to feel his magic-- To feel the truth. Then the True Gael can finally join our demon brethren under the rule of the True King of the Prophecy!"

Gwendal studied him hard. "And if he is not?"

Tai bowed his head. "Then things can return to the way they were. My only wish is to protect the True King."

"Protect him from what, exactly?"

"Death." Tai's fingers stilled in the girl's hair. "His and the world's."

********

********

Murata studied the man from Lesser Gael carefully as he explained for the third time his reasons for coming to Shibuya. The Taibhsear seemed certain of his beliefs, that much was clear. But how much was he hiding?

The Taibhsear was here to protect the prophetic King of Gael. The True King who would unite all the Demon Nations beneath one flag.

A man long dead.

It was impossible for Shibuya to be the king the Taibhsear was here to save. During his first life, Murata had seen the two forks of prophecy describing Gael's True King. The first spoke of peace and mist and a whole pile of vague things that could speak of Shibuya, but the second-- Impossible.

Shibuya could not destroy this world. Even as the Maou he would find a way to destroy himself first.

According to the prophecy, the King of Gael would not be so compassionate-- He would be more selfish in his sorrow. That much, from the prophecy he had been allowed to read all those centuries ago, was clear.

Murata still remembered every word.

*Our King's rise to power is followed by*

his fall.

Power that is his and not consumes,

contorting rage.

Revenge blinds; the child of

hope is lost.

His Kingdom,

The whole world burns

is left in ash.

Shibuya would be a great king one day. His compassion would lead this world toward peace between both demons and humans. The prophecy that foretold the world's demise-- It was impossible it spoke of Shibuya. It had been Shibuya who saved this world from the rage of Shinou's
corruption. There was so much about this Maou that was simply incomparable to the Original King.

There had been a darkness in Shinou, even before his corruption by Soushi. A rage so different than even Shibuya's most violent call for Justice. Shinou had been so... Selfish. There was a purity to Shibuya that would never allow him to do true innocents harm that Shinou had never possessed.

For all of Shinou's immaturaties, there had been a cold focus in every determination. Once he wanted something, there was no room for compromise, no matter how great or trivial. Complete submission was the only option.

It was all too easy for Murata to remember Shinou, to forget himself in memories. A time when he was just himself, not too many people stacked in one.

It had only been three months after Shinou defeated Soushi. Lesser Gael was the only Demon Nation who refused to bend a knee to Shinou's Shin Makoku. They offered a prophecy as the cause for their hesitation, and he and Shinou had traveled to Lesser Gael to see for themselves and convince them to join the Demon Alliance.

"Stubborn old fools."

The air was hot and the air was thick with moisture as the carriage moved south. Shinou's insistence in sitting beside him and keeping the curtains closed made the heat nearly unbearable.

Daijinka could feel his robes lying heavily on his thighs, sticking to his flesh with damp heat as a beads of sweat trailed between his shoulder blades and down his neck. Each swallow brought his Adam's apple against the high black collar of his robes. "You of all people should be able to understand stubbornness," he snapped.

Shinou pouted dramatically and managed to move closer in the small space. "And what about you, my pretty Sage... Even in this blasted heat I can't get you out of these robes." Greedy fingers slid into the front of his robe, parting it down to the navel in a practiced sweep.

Daijinka slapped his hand away and growled. "We're going to arrive any moment! Don't be inappropriate! You need to be on your best behavior."

"If I'm bad will you put me over your knee?" Shinou smirked and leaned in to lick the spot of skin below Daijinka's ear. "But I won." The whisper managed to burn at the same time the rush of air chilled the sweat on his neck. "Why do they continue to defy me?" The hand slid back into Daijinka's robes, insistent. "I've tried being patient." Lower, ghosting over half-hard flesh to tease the inside of his thigh and nudge his legs apart. "Why can't they simply appreciate all I have to offer?"

Daijinka cursed the thin walls of the carriage. The last thing they needed was to alert the guards and make a scene, let alone be late for their meeting with the dignitaries of Lesser Gael. "You only ever see what you want. Fool of a king." He made one last attempt to move the hand away, but Shinou was strong, stubborn, gripping his leg until Daijinka was sure the bruises would be dark for days. "Can't you think with your mind--"

"But that's why I need you." Shinou left a quick bite on his ear.

Daijinka scoffed. "Well, since the war is finished and there's only thinking to be done I don't see any need for such a selfish, foolish king."

Shinou pulled away to pout. "I'm good for other things." A smirk.
Daijinka raised an eyebrow and ignored him, turning to the blue curtains covering the window. The hue distorted the bright light of the noon sun and gave the inside of the carriage a tinge of color. He felt Shinou move away and was instantly suspicious. The man never gave up so easily.

But then Shinou was on the floor of the carriage-- between his legs. "I don't like it when you ignore me," he growled, both hands setting to work to untie the front of Daijinka's robes.

"You are impossible!" Daijinka hissed, eyes narrow.

"Impossibly good at sucking your cock perhaps." Shinou grinned as the last of the fabric was pushed away. Like a child unwrapping a present.

Daijinka glared. "The Taibhsears of Lesser Gael are the last remaining order of the oldest religion of our culture! Even those who no longer follow the old ways will question you if they continue this defiance!"

Shinou licked his thigh.

Daijinka simply continued. "You must convince them you are not a threat."

"Well if they would only do what I want I wouldn't have to be so threatening..." His breath teased the now full arousal that barely brushed his lips, making them shine.

Physical affects were impossible to hide, but Daijinka refused to let Shinou have his way. "You must humor them then!" Shinou licked him slowly, tongue lingering at the tip as a hand moved down to stroke him. "Don't provoke them if you can help it. They're convinced of this prophecy of theirs. They're afraid you'll destroy the world." Shinou swallowed him, increasing his pace-- blue eyes locked on Daijinka's face as they filled with fire at his Sage's defiance. "I'll examine the prophecy-- prophecies are such ambiguous things after all-- and convince them of its absurdity."

Shinou was working hard, and he was more than skilled, more than practiced at lingering on his favorite places, but Daijinka's will to remain aloof was stronger. He leaned back, relaxed, and watched his king on his knees before him. Daijinka kept his breath even, kept his hips still no matter how much he wanted to lift them, to fuck the smirk from the corners of Shinou's lips.

He came without warning. Expressionless as the carriage came to a stop.

Shinou swallowed, eyes smoldering with lust and fury.

Daijinka closed his robes with steady hands. "At least you're capable of cleaning up your own messes occasionally." Then he stood.

Shinou's voice was rough, evidence of its abuse, "Where are you--"

"It's time to greet the stubborn old priests, Your Majesty. Besides, now you have to be good..." He trailed his fingers along Shinou's swollen bottom lip. "Or else you won't get your reward." Daijinka smirked and stepped out of the carriage. The sun had made him squint even under the shelter of the high canopy of trees. His blue tented world was immediately plunged in green and he had to blink a few times before the colors bled in to right themselves.

"Tease," Shinou growled, pausing slightly to discreetly pinch Daijinka's buttock as he walked past.

Daijinka smirked. "At least now you'll be awake for the meeting." He pulled a stack of parchments from the carriage and held them against his chest as he followed his king through the row of guards assembled to greet them and serve as guides to the Master Taibhsear's chambers. "As long as you
don’t snore, feel free to allow me to settle this matter."

Shinou turned to glare, and Daijinka took the moment to make sure he was presentable, adjusting the other man’s robe so it fell straight. "You treat me like such a bratty child," Shinou murmured, low enough for only him.

"Hnn... only if you're good," Daijinka returned in low tones. "Now try not to be threatening--"

Someone kicked him under the table.

Murata blinked as the present world slid back into unsettling focus. Shibuya glanced at him once from the seat to his right and then looked back to the conversation the Taibhsear was now having with Sir Voltaire. Had Shibuya just--?

He really must have been in a world of his own if Shibuya had noticed. And His Majesty had even accomplished subtlety! Murata's pride in his king's new-found maturity balanced out his own embarrassment comfortably.

"--but that still doesn't explain why you cannot simply tell us this prophecy," Sir Voltaire continued, eyebrows drawn together in frustration.

"As I have said, the Weavings of the Word are not for those who do not follow the True Faith."

Because Shinou destroyed the words he didn't favor.

At the time, Daijinka had thought Shinou was unusually rash as a result of his earlier teasing, but later he had come to realize that it was an action that came from fear. Shinou had suspected then--the darkness that clung to his soul.

"But--" Shibuya paused to lick his lips. "I'm sorry if I'm not supposed to know-- but I've read some prophecies from Lesser Gael. If those prophecies are in history books, why can't you tell us this one?"

The Taibhsear bristled. It had been one of the provisions of the treaty signed with Lesser Gael, that prophecies were to stay within their borders.

"Those were spoken before the ban was placed," Sir Christ answered. "You can hardly expect us to change texts that had already been written."

"But why?" Shibuya asked. "It would make everything so much easier if we could hear the prophecy-- If it even has anything to do with me."

"The Weavings of the Word are kept secret for their protection--"

"But our job is to protect His Majesty," Sir Weller interrupted. "You came here because you believed His Majesty to be the king of your prophecy, because you saw danger. Why won't you tell us what we should protect him from?" His voice had raised.

"That is in part my fault," Murata answered. "Our guest is being courteous by withholding accusations. Shinou destroyed a prophecy-- before I could stop him. If not for that, the prophecies would not be under such strict regulation."

"The-- The rumors were true?" Sir Christ sputtered to his left.

The Taibhsear nodded. "It is true your Shinou destroyed a prophecy-- but it remains unclear why
"I was there." Murata let his head tilt forward until his glasses caught the light. "Not in this body of course. But my soul was there, and I remember." He paused. "However, I'm sure no amount of apologies will change your mind."

The Taibhsear shook his head. "I have sworn to uphold the laws of my position."

Murata nodded. "I understand."

"But why come?" Shibuya asked, face stuck in confusion. "Just to warn me... to be careful of everything?"

"My hope is to save Our King through any sacrifice necessary. For years there have been whisperings in Gael that the title belongs to you, young king Shibuya Yuuri, Maou of Shin Makoku."

"But--" Shibuya stopped for a moment to blush. "I don't think-- I mean-- I'm not..." He trailed off.

Murata decided to save him. "Shibuya is a great king, but he is not the one you're seeking. The prophecy that foretells that king's destruction of this world has already come and passed. Shinou--"

"Lies," The Taibhsear snapped. "We would have seen if it had passed."

Murata frowned. "I saw the prophecy. It doesn't apply to Shibuya. He is incapable of killing innocents!"

"People can always change," the Taibhsear answered. "And it still remains to be seen if King Yuuri is meant to be the True King of Gael."

"How will you know if it is me?" Shibuya asked.

The Taibhsear turned to him. "I need to feel your magic."

"Well?" Sir Voltaire growled, "Haven't you had enough time?"

"For something of this magnitude some manner of touch is required." The Taibhsear stood and with a nod of permission from Sir Voltaire made his way around the table to stand by Shibuya. The little girl followed.

Shibuya was distracted at once. "Frith, right?" he smiled. "I have a daughter about your age. After this I'm sure she'd love a playmate."

"She isn't yours," the girl answered, face blank. "But..." She touched his cheek. "Love." Her eyes fell shut.

"But-- She is human," said Sir Christ.

"There are things besides magic that can be felt." And he took the hand that Shibuya offered him.

His eyes went wide, and then black as his pupils expanded to the edge of the iris and grew, black spreading out until no white remained. Impossibly dark. And then he stepped back, looking at Shibuya with-- so many feelings.

"Well?" Murata heard himself ask.
"Things are-- more complicated than I had imagined."

"What does that mean?" Sir Weller asked, frustration evident. He was so eager to protect him...

"Let me dance for you." A soft voice. The girl.

"Dance?" Shibuya asked, then "Oh! Gael! The fire dances! Wolfram told me! I'd love to see-- Greta too! You'll have to stay-- at least a week. Wolfram should be back by then and you can show him too!"

Murata smiled to himself. Shibuya's whole demeanor changed as he spoke of Sir Belefield.

The girl returned Shibuya's grin-- more of a mimicry than an emotion-- then moved to stand behind her master. She yawned and rested her head against his back.

"It has been a long journey," the Taibhsear apologized.

"Oh!" Yuuri stood. "You should let her sleep!"

"But you still haven't--" Sir Voltaire started.

"I'm sure we can discuss it tomorrow. Unless you think Shibuya will be in danger before then?" Murata interrupted.

"The Maou will come to no harm," the Taibhsear answered.

Murata nodded. Perhaps before tomorrow he could talk to the master alone. For now Murata was looking forward to the royal baths. The heat always helped him think, and there were so many things that needed thinking on.

There was still no progress in finding a cure for the plague, though he hoped Lady Karbelnikoff and Lady Christ were having some luck in a meeting of their own. There was no telling how long the affliction would stay behind its invisible borders. And now there was this Taibhsear and more talk of prophecies.

Memories long past...

The meeting came to a close around him as Murata wracked his mind with far too many thoughts. Shibuya tried to approach him twice, each time seeming to think better of it.

Tomorrow, Murata decided. He would have time to pursue Shibuya's worries then. For now he would be no help until he figured out what to do.

At least for something.

********

********

Elsewhere

********

Yuuri's lover was just like the girls in those picture books that melted instead of burned. He stood beside them at their wedding, and Greta called her "Mother". She was kind and beautiful and made Yuuri happy.
Something he could never do.

Every day Wolfram watched them. Kept the Royal Family safe. He watched His Majesty smile and laugh and kiss her softly while she blushed. And then one day she gave him children.

And when they were born the last of his hope died.

But he stayed for Greta even though he was no longer her Papa Wolf. He stood and watched as His Majesty walked her down the aisle-- Married to someone who would take her far away.

It was so lonely.

Cold.

The wedding must have been in winter. It was snowing in the castle, huge flakes that stuck to his eyelashes until he was blind. Just like on the mountain--

He wanted to be in Yuuri's arms again... held.

A cold wind blew against his cheek, and his tongue slid against cracked lips. The darkness danced against his eyes, swirling into visions of terror and sorrow. He shivered and curled tighter into himself, lying on his side on the hard wooden floor. The skin on Wolfram's fingers cracked as he uncurled them-- wounds that didn't heal-- only hurt. The movement reminded him of their existence, and it was all he could do to count his heartbeats as blood throbbed through infected veins.

Wolfram slid his hands together-- his fingers-- The last time he had dreamed they had fallen off and he'd spent hours-- days-- minutes in cold sweat, trying desperately to find them on the floor. In darkness.

Always darkness.

Like being inside a giant mouth that held him, refusing to swallow. Caging him with teeth.

And then the floor was soft-- warm. A giant tongue. Wolfram held his breath. He couldn't move or it would feel him.

Swallow.

The darkness swirled white as he refused to breathe. His head pounded-- fingers-- lungs protesting...

Dreams.

He must have slept again, because he woke to the sound of banging.

The banging happened occasionally. Usually when he was asleep. At first he had tried to find it-- provoke it-- do something. But now... Wolfram just closed his eyes and willed his heart to slow after the initial shock. The cold wind fluttered against his cheek.

At first Wolfram had tried to face the door from the opposite wall. Tried to be alert. Ready. Focus...

But his mind... Feelings... Colors he had never heard...

They fed him. Came in when he was asleep.
Ghosts in the walls.

Whispers in the dark-- inside his head.

Bread. Water. Small things that had sugar but tasted mostly of dirt. The same thick, crumbling bitterness that laced the bread.

It was probably poison.

But he had to eat something. And there was nothing else. Besides, it hadn't killed him. Yet.

Wolfram was almost positive... That he wasn't dead. Or maybe he was and this was his eternal torture?

This pain. This darkness. This fucking wooden box.

He was trapped. Alone with only the company of his own stench.

Which is why he had moved to right beside the cracks he had decided were the door. There was more air. And so he put his face in the crack in the wall and breathed.

Another flutter.

White.

Burning.

Wolfram moved back-- until his back hit the far wall-- hands covering his eyes from the--

The light.

The light the light the LIGHT!

Wolfram discovered he was grinning. Well, at least his face felt like it was grinning. He wasn't blind!

And then the door opened. A huge wave of light, white and burning, and still visible through eyelids and crossed palms. Too bright for him to move until Wolfram felt two pairs of hands curl around his arms.

"Pathetic."

A voice! A voice that wasn't his!

Someone else. An open door. He could get out!

Without warning Wolfram twisted hard to the right, the hands that were there went lose-- just for a moment-- and he tumbled to the ground. The light still made it impossible to see-- but after all this time he didn't have to.

He bolted.

And collided with something solid-- hard and soft-- that threw him back onto the floor.

Sharp sounds echoed around him-- cackling-- still blind in light.

Laughter.
Wolfram growled, rolled into a better position to strike-- But something from behind forced him down. Their voices, their laughter spun around him-- weaving in and out of light. And all that he could feel was rage.

He tried with all his might to move, to stand, to keep his eyes open, but his face was stuck in squinting-- refusing to obey him. The room spun-- The floor was moving even though he was still-- tilting in circles as the laughter crackled around him-- weaving in and out of sound.

"Get him up."

There were three forms around him-- casting shade-- always spinning never stilling. Made of tiny things. Insects, bugs and beetles and flies that crawled over one another into forms. They grabbed him-- covering him with tiny legs-- tiny teeth pulling him to his feet. Their fingers itched along his skin-- grip too tight.

"Who..?" Wolfram coughed. So much time in silence. Not talking to himself. If he talked to himself he would be going mad. Was that even the sound of his own voice?

A hand came up-- holding below his chin-- forcing him to look. A shadow between him and brightness. Slowly twisting into features. A man--

"When is the attack?"

The shadow's mouth was darker, red. Things poured from the gaping hole as it moved-- forming into words-- breathing hot air onto his face. Arms held him. He had to get away! But he couldn't make his body move.

"Shit-- Look at him-- How much has he had?"

The face began to melt. Eyes boiling into white fire... dripping from his cheeks.

"How am I supposed to know?"

His left was talking. The shadow to that side. Person. Man. How long had it been since he bathed? There was an awful smell...

"He won't have fingers in a week--"

His fingers. They would run away. Far away. Hiding in the ground like rabbits.

And somehow that was-- that was-- funny. He was laughing. Laughing. How long had it been since he had been so happy?

"-- him milk. Tend to his hands too. I want him whole before he's broken."

The hand moved along his face-- so many tiny, squirming things. And then to his left-- cradling his hand.

"I'll take care of him."

This shadow had a face. "Yu... ri?"

Yuuri's lips moved. "Be good--"

_Why was Yuuri here?_
"-- pretty Wolf"

The world dissolved in colors.

********
********
Yozak gripped the wooden fence so hard his knuckles cracked. The sun was rising behind him, casting long shadows onto the dock. Seagulls chirped as he watched the boat drift away from the harbor.

At least Sir Belefield wasn't on it.

Of that Yozak was painfully aware. He had followed the wrong lead-- made the wrong choice-- and Sir Belefield would suffer his mistake.

If he was still alive.

After asking everyone in the village, Yozak had come upon rumors of two carriages leaving on the day Sir Belefield vanished. One headed west to the Great Sea, and another heading south.

The Great Sea lead to almost every nation, was a faster and more efficient way to travel, especially with a prisoner. The south was plagued with death. And then there had been the note...

Yozak growled and turned away, heading back toward the stable where he had lodged their horses. He could hear Lucien's hurried footsteps as the boy followed behind him. Yozak would have to write to Gwendal-- waste days going back the way they had come to follow a cold trail.

Damn.

At least now Gwendal could send his men in the right direction. What had the selfish loafer been thinking, getting himself caught when he was already about to burn out the moment he lost his temper? And just when he was becoming somewhat respectable-- growing up.

He hadn't expected Wolfram to take His Majesty's engagement to King Saralegui so reasonably. Yozak could appreciate the frustration involved in loving an idiot all too well... Walking away was bitter medicine that he hadn't expected the young lieutenant to see the value in so quickly. Sometimes walking away is the only way to survive. Some men are fools until they die.

Yozak kicked a stone out of his way as he walked up the main road. Only a few people were out this early. Mostly the small shop owners setting up their stands of fruits and trinkets. Lucien should have known better than to trust a man who had disappeared without a word, and Yozak was sure Wolfram must have done something equally stupid to get himself caught.

Or killed.

They would ride all day-- all night. He had already lost them too much time.
"But it's impossible-- disgusting-- two men?" Yuuri's voice echoed throughout the council room.

Wolfram's family in Belefiled was pushing the wedding forward for politics. Every seat in the hall was filled with dignitaries, leaders of the United Demon Nations-- His family.

Wolfram sat in silence as Yuuri humiliated him. He should be used to it by now. How could such an old pain still hurt?

"Your Majesty..." Weller hushed, putting a hand on his fiancé's shoulder.

Yuuri lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, I just mean it's impossible... I refuse." Then Yuuri looked at him. "I'm sure Wolfram feels the same way-- and Greta will need a mother someday, someone who can take care of her..." Yuuri's words continued even as Wolfram tried to force his ears not to hear.

But even then he could still feel them. He couldn't get angry. He didn't know why, but he couldn't get angry.

He wasn't allowed.

The meeting ended while he was still in a daze. He was the last one to leave the conference hall, too stunned to move. Yuuri had said... but hadn't he kissed him once? Or maybe that had all just been his imagination. A hopeless dream.

Wolfram was in his bedroom-- the royal bedroom. He would probably be wearing this pink nightgown-- this shame-- for the last time. He went out onto the balcony-- moon rising over castle walls. The door to the bedroom and the hallway opened and closed in a muffled click behind him and Wolfram could hear voices from inside the royal chambers. With shaking hands he pulled the curtain to the side-- just enough to see.

Weller and the wimp. Talking-- standing far too close. Yuuri reached up to cling to the front of Weller's jacket and Weller cupped his cheek like Yuuri was precious.

Kissing.

Wolfram couldn't make his legs move. Couldn't close his eyes as he watched his brother kiss his fiancé. Lean him back onto their bed. Yuuri holding him-- wanting Weller in a way that he could only see Wolfram with disgust. Yuuri's cheeks were flushed and his lips were red and shining with spit.

And then he watched them fuck-- But it was so much worse--

Love.

Something neither one of them had ever felt for him. Finally Wolfram was able to make himself step back-- tipping over the balcony as the moon and stars spun in the sky.

He was lying on the grass with Greta as she played happily with a little black kitten.

"And then once I have a mother Yuuri will take us to Earth to meet his mother and father. It will be so exciting! And Yuuri says that if I'm good I can go to school on Earth. I've already started learning how to speak--"

Wolfram closed his eyes and sounds ebbed away, until he was lost in darkness.
Alone.

At least now he had a clean bucket. The shadows—Yuuri had bandaged his fingers, given him a blanket and milk and some kind of stew to soak up with more bread. And somehow his mind had slowly begun to clear. He was still in his dark cell, but sometimes light crept in below the door. As if they had stopped bothering to keep him in absolute darkness now that they had decided to show themselves.

It was still impossible to really think. Thoughts—no matter how important—seemed to slip from one to the next, too quick to grab. Sometimes Wolfram was sure he’d already had them— the same thoughts over and over on a never ending loop of color.

He knew he had been captured, though he still wasn’t sure by whom. He was in a cell—In what sometimes felt like a boat—but sometimes not—But Wolfram had no idea where he was. The last time he had been sure of anything, he had been drinking with Yozak in a human town in Habalogue.

He had to go east. He had to reaffirm his rites. His insides ached from the nearby presence of the human stones but even more so from the ever-present shadow of his borrowed flame slowly flickering into nothing. Still, if he needed to, Wolfram was fairly sure he could still burn his wooden prison to the ground—take his captors with him.

What did they want him for?

*Filthy humans.*

Sometimes Wolfram occupied his time with vivid fantasies of murder. Of course, Yuuri wouldn’t like him to be so violent—Yuuri loved everyone, even his enemies.

A scene from a keyhole. His Yuuri kissing him... Wolfram wouldn’t be surprised if Shou Shimeron was behind all this. But besides his interference in Prince Pervert’s engagement, there was no reason for them to want him. And no one was even supposed to know where he had gone—Was it possible that his captors didn’t even know who he was?

A number of rumors he had heard about humans during his childhood flashed through his mind. His uncle telling stories of humans who drew straws to decide who was eaten during some strange ritual—Not to mention the more likely scenario of why strangers would want someone who looked...the way he did. Not that they were giving him a chance to take very good care of himself.

What would Greta do without him? She had been coming along well with her lessons—If Wolfram wasn’t there to teach her, who would?

Wolfram snorted. Probably Weller.

He curled tighter under his blanket. It was still cold, but he was sure the wet sweat covering his flesh was mostly to blame. The wool blanket was thin, rough, and scratched against his cheek. No better than what they would give an animal. Once he--

There was a shadow, interrupting the crack of light beneath the door. Someone was there.

Wolfram rolled into a crouch and faced it—ready to pounce.

The door opened into a crouch and faced it—ready to pounce.
Yuuri?

And two others-- Caught!

Wolfram struggled against the arms that held him-- kicking and biting at every bit of flesh he could reach. But then a foot collided with his chest. Hard. He curled up-- coughing despite himself-- and giving his captors time to force him into a chair they had brought. They forced his wrists onto the arms and trapped them in metal rings with a sickening click. This shouldn't be happening-- his reflexes-- every movement-- took longer than it should.

"You bastards!" Wolfram growled, testing his restraints with a tug and wincing as the metal cut into his wrists. "What do you want?"

They just looked at him. Two with long braids and one wearing Yuuri's face. The older man with a braid nodded to the other who left the room.

The older one must be the leader. He had a soldier's build and stance but his eyes were cold-- intelligent. The braid that hung over one shoulder was brown with streaks of gray.

"What do you want?" he seethed, this time directing his glare at the one in charge.

The man simply smiled.

Wolfram kept glaring, wishing he could kill with a thought, before he was distracted by the other braided one reentering the room. He was carrying another chair and a small table, both of which he placed in front of Wolfram, table between the two chairs.

Wolfram kicked the table over.

**CRACK!**

For a moment, Wolfram thought it was the sound of the table crashing to the ground, but he was suddenly facing left. His mouth-- tasted of metal-- blood. Seconds later the pain came-- stinging his cheek and making his jaw ache from the impact.

The lesser braid smirked and tapped a thick riding crop lightly against his palm

Wolfram spit a mouthful of blood at the man's shoes.

**CRACK!**

This time his vision blurred before there was another flash of pain-- trailing off into waves.

"He's just as stupid as the rumors say." Lesser Braid addressed the leader.

The leader simply smiled again and sat in the chair facing Wolfram as the one who was Yuuri picked up the table and placed it between them.

Wolfram swallowed hard. He had been hoping that Yuuri wasn't really here-- that he was just seeing things. But tables didn't move themselves.

"Be good, Wolf." Yuuri ran some fingers lightly through Wolfram's hair. "If you're good they won't have to hurt you as much."

"Yuu..." Wolfram stopped himself. Maybe the others didn't know it was him... maybe Yuuri was here to save him... **reckless wimp.** "What?" his spinning mind asked aloud.
The hand moved to hold his cheek. "Be good... Next time he'll break the skin." Yuuri knelt to look at him. "I want you to stay beautiful for me, Wolf."

Someone laughed-- The leader. It was an emotionless sound that made the hair on the back of Wolfram's neck stand at attention. "If you're good I'll let you play with him again before I kill him."

Yuuri smiled sadly and slid a hand along his injured cheek before he stood and stepped away.

"What. Do. You. Want?" Wolfram could barely contain his rage as the words hissed through his teeth, misting the table red.

The leader took his time to answer, pulling his chair closer to the table so he could lean toward him and flicking his long braid behind a shoulder. "My name is Velasco. I am a first class citizen and lead inquisitor of the army of Shou Shimeron." The man paused, holding Wolfram's gaze. "I am telling you this, Wolfram of Belefield, third son-- pretty prince and king's whore-- because once you tell me everything I need to know, I will also be the man that kills you."

Wolfram glared and ignored the sweat prickling its way down between the hairs on the back of his neck.

"I want you to know who I am. I want you to know that no one is coming for you. I want you to know because the sooner that you realize that there is no hope, the sooner you will break." Velasco leaned back in his chair, relaxed. "And in reality I am a kind man. I get no joy from suffering. I suffer for the good of this world." His lips turned up in a mockery of emotion. "Think of it as serving a higher purpose." Then he stood, walking around the table to stand at Wolfram's side. He reached down, and Wolfram watched him take a small key from his belt and unlock the clamp connecting his left wrist to the arm of the chair.

Wolfram tried to move. Spin away to the right and use the chair his other wrist was still attached to as a weapon-- but Yuuri-- and the other man held him in place as his left arm was stretched out-- pressed flat against the table. Then Velasco pulled a knife from a leather harness on his thigh and Wolfram instinctively clenched his fist-- holding back a wince as the fresh bandages cut into the wounds on his fingers.

"You underestimate me, Sir Belefield," said Velasco as he dragged the back of the blade lightly down Wolfram's arm. "Removing fingers is so crude-- so" A pause. "unnecessary." He turned the blade over and let it slide along the raised ridges of his clenched knuckles, making the bandages fray and split and thin lines of red bloom in tiny spheres before soaking into white. "I merely wish to convince you of something." He took the blade away-- only to bring it down upon his wrist, hardly applying any pressure before the skin parted cleanly in a cut no longer than an inch on the back of his wrist. But deep.

"What do you want?" Wolfram growled, wishing his voice was stronger as the blood welled and fell in lines onto the top of the wooden table.

"Patience." Velasco smiled, as if speaking to a wayward child. "I'm almost finished." He took a pouch from his belt, and poured a powder into his palm. "I wonder if you know, Sir Belefield-- Wolfram-- the most effective way to kill a king?"

Wolfram swallowed out of reflex, using all his will to hold the force of his glare.

"No?" Another quirk of lips. "Well, you simply have to give his lover something special-- a slow death passed without warning." He brought his palm onto the open wound and wolfram made a
sound of pain despite himself.

It *stung*. The rough bits of something underneath his skin.

"There are so many ways to cling to hope. But I want you to know, as you dream of salvation, as you betray everything you were born to protect, that even if you were to escape-- If you ever make your way into the bed of your king-- before it kills you, too-- he will die. And you will have killed him." He moved back to his seat.

Wolfram was too numb to even fight the other braided one as the harness clenched shut over his bleeding wrist.

"It really is too easy. You've destroyed yourself already, haven't you, Wolfram?" He leaned back. "Love is crueler than I could ever become-- You've made yourself so *easy*. So weak. Even if you could use your magic-- I'm sure you've felt the presence of the stones-- Even if you could go back to the life you used to lead-- In reality, you've destroyed yourself."

Wolfram studied the man before him and ran his tongue along the wound inside his mouth that the earlier blow had caused. He certainly talked a lot. Enough for the both of them, really. Wolfram smiled. This was clearly another nightmare. There was no way this Velasco could taunt him with the whisperings of his own mind if it wasn't in fact his own mind that had birthed this abomination.

There was no way a figment of his imagination could answer questions Wolfram himself didn't already know, or at least suspect, the answers to. He loved Yuuri-- as his king and as his wimp. It was a weakness. Something that had destroyed his life and reputation time and time again. But Yuuri was... Yuuri. And somehow that made everything worth it.

Wolfram let his eyes slide shut. It was about time he took control of this whole nightmare situation. When he opened his eyes, Wolfram was sure he would return to the comforting alone of darkness.

"Still here." Velasco's face was uncomfortably close when Wolfram opened his eyes.

Why was his heart beating so fast?

Of all the times-- his mind had cleared since they bandaged his hands-- since Yuuri forced him to swallow warm milk. Wolfram suddenly longed for the fleeting insanity of visions. At least then his only enemy was himself.

He had to get out.

Wolfram refused to submit to their grim fate. If he would die-- He would give them *nothing*. He would spite them till his last breath-- take as much time as he could before they found someone else.

He twisted fast-- threw out a leg to kick the lesser braid before the motion sent himself crashing to the floor-- landing on his shoulder and cheek as he tried to scramble on his knees to escape. Panic rose in his chest like bile as he felt the hands on him-- he kicked-- screamed-- bit-- tore anything he could reach. They hit him-- held him-- but he didn't want to stop even as pain spiked through his limbs.

He had to get *out*.

Eventually they trapped him-- kept him still-- but Wolfram could barely hear their words-- their laughter over the ringing in his ears. The heartbeat in his pains. He didn't want to hear. He refused to acknowledge them-- even Yuuri-- as their mouths formed sounds in his direction. Wolfram
wondered if Velasco would find his methods unnecessary when he tied him down and removed his fingers.

After a time they left. Wolfram had been staring-- mind wandering in their direction for so long that once they were gone he couldn't remember how long it had been. Yuuri stayed behind for a while. To dress his wounds and take him out of the chair. Lesser Braid came in to watch once the table had gone-- and Wolfram thought of trying for the door again-- but everything hurt-- and surely this was just a dream. It had to be. Yuuri's hands were in his hair, and once the bandages were new and clean he put a blanket over him-- and lay beside him for a while-- hands moved over his hair-- his cheeks-- making patterns along his back as Wolfram curled into himself. Yuuri's voice echoed in his ears-- telling him he was sorry-- breath in his ear as the other man watched-- Wolfram could feel his eyes.

And when he slept he woke alone. In darkness.

********
********
Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********

It was hard for Yuuri not to grin as he made his way to Greta's chambers with Conrad at his side. Greta would be so excited about the fire dance! Yuuri had eventually decided, after only a few hours of consideration, that some festivities were exactly what the castle needed to distract them from the plague, from the dark cloud that seemed to hang with Wolfram gone.

Sara had been speechless when Yuuri had told him about the performance this evening. Yuuri imagined that even in human countries the fire dances must be well renowned for being spectacular.

Of course, tonight would only be a preview-- Yuuri wouldn't feel right about seeing a full performance without Wolfram by his side-- But still! This was the best thing to happen in weeks!

Yuuri shook his left hand a few times as he walked, joints snapping together and distracting him from the stinging pain that seemed to come in waves these days. He was also sure that he would be able to get Murata alone for a few minutes tonight. There were so many things he needed to get out of his mind, to say aloud in the vague hope that somehow everything would become more clear. Generally, Murata was good at making things "clear"--

The guards outside of Greta's door saluted at their approach and Yuuri remembered to nod and allow them back into relaxed attention.

Greta looked up from her desk as he and Conrad entered the room, and greeted them with a smile. "Close the door behind you, Yuuri. I don't want Wolri to get out."

Yuuri grinned and followed her request, eyes scanning the room for the kitten. "Where is he?"

Greta sighed. "Probably under the bed. I think he's upset I won't let him play outside."

"Well, that's understandable. He's still getting used to life around here, after all," Yuuri said as he made his way to sit on her bed.

Greta put a piece of paper into her book to keep her place before closing it and turning in her seat to face him. She was smiling more than he'd seen in far too long.
"I'm glad he's making you so happy. Although I have something else that should make you happy--"

"Is he back?" Greta leapt from her seat. "I know it's not a full month-- I tried not to get my hopes up, but--" Her face fell as she noticed Yuuri's expression. She sat. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Yuuri assured. "Everyone is looking forward to when Wolfram comes back. Though when he does I'm sure he'll come see you himself." He leaned forward to put a hand on her shoulder. "He should be home any day now."

Greta's lips quirked a bit as she nodded. "I can't wait!"

"Me neither." Yuuri grinned. "It's not the same without him here."

"I'm sure he's anxious to be back," Conrad added with a smile of his own from his place beside the door. "I wouldn't be too surprised if he does come home early."

Yuuri could feel hope begin to bubble in his chest at the same time Greta cheered.

"But don't get too excited," Conrad reminded. "There's no telling exactly when he'll come back. It could even be a few days later than we expect."

Greta nodded solemnly. "I know-- But it won't hurt to start getting ready."

"Getting ready?" Yuuri asked.

Greta blushed. "Well... I've been a little distracted lately... And I might have fallen behind in my work just a teensy bit..."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Yuuri stood. "I can help you."

"That's okay, Yuuri." She looked away. "Wolfram..."

"Ohh..." Yuuri mumbled. "You're probably still better at reading than I am anyway." He sat. Wolfram was better at explaining things. Especially since he had grown up with the culture and history, while Yuuri still felt like an outsider. And Wolfram was the one-- who took care of her, really-- during all the times that he was gone. And now for the first time he had stayed while Wolfram was gone... And he had spent most of his time dealing with politics and Sara. He wondered if he'd ever really know all the ways he'd failed her. "Well," Yuuri tried again, "next time we go to Earth to visit my family you'll be coming, too. And it would be nice if you could speak some Japanese. That's something I could help you with."

"Earth scribbles?" Greta frowned. "But Papa, even though I'm excited to visit your world... Wolfram... Wolfram says Earth Scribbles are silly..."

It was Yuuri's turn to frown. "It isn't silly at all! Some people say Japanese is Earth's most beautiful language."

Greta chewed her lip a bit. "Why is that?"

"Well..." Yuuri hadn't really been expecting to give a lesson on linguistics... not that he really knew that much about linguistics. "Well... The writing system is beautiful. A mix of three distinct alphabets."

"What do you mean?" Greta tilted her head to the side. "Why do you need three?"
"Well," a pause. "One is like the Demon script-- where each sound has a symbol. And the other works the same way, but it's for words that weren't originally part of the Japanese language--"

"So they're the same... but depending on the word, you use a different alphabet?"

Yuuri smiled. It felt so good to have his daughter interested in something only he could provide... "Exactly! And then sometimes, instead of 'spelling' the sound there is a specific symbol, or combination of symbols, to replace it."

Conrad coughed. It sounded more like a snicker.

Greta was staring at him. "Wolfram's right... That is silly."

Yuuri crossed his arms-- and even that reminded him of Wolfram, what was he going to do with himself-- He supposed that it would be a difficult thing for foreigners to learn. There were a lot of people who thought that even the language was something that made Japanese people unique. Shouri was always going on about the inherent Japanese-ness of things ever since he started college. "Well, still, it would be nice if you could say a few things to my parents."

"Of course, Yuuri." Greta leaned forward to put a hand on his shoulder. "I didn't mean to seem uninterested. It just seems really hard and I have enough studying to do already. I really do want to see Earth and meet your parents!" Her smile was irresistible.

Yuuri grinned. "Alright, what do you want to--"

He yelled and jumped two feet, but the sharp pain in his right ankle was still there.

"Wolri!" Greta shouted. "Yuuri is not a toy!"

Yuuri looked down at the black ball of fur and teeth-- sharp teeth-- and claws as it proceeded to climb its way up the leg of his pants, using his skin as leverage. "Ow..." he whimpered helplessly, afraid to swing his leg the way he desperately wanted to and inadvertently hurt his daughter's new pet.

Greta giggled as she knelt to remove the kitten. "I'm sorry, Yuuri. I think he's used to climbing trees."

"That's alright." Yuuri winced as the claws were pulled away, taking tiny pieces of his leg along for the ride.

"Meh meh!" Wolri squirmed in his daughter's arms.

Yuuri sat back down on the edge of the bed and rubbed his calf. "Conrad," he whined playfully, "aren't you there to protect me?" But he then felt bad when his friend actually seemed distraught.

"My apologies, Your Majesty--"

"Conrad," Yuuri interrupted. "I was kidding. It's fine." Then he smiled. "Kittens are like that. I'm sure he'll settle down once he's older."

"Of course he will!" Greta said to Wolri in an unusually high voice. "You'll be a proper royal cat, won't you?"

Wolri purred and settled into Greta's lap.

"Anyway," Yuuri continued, "I came to tell you that there will be a performance tonight after
dinner. So don't be surprised if Lady Cheri comes in to help pick out something for you to wear."

Greta almost managed to hide a grimace. "Thanks for the warning." Then she tilted her head a bit. "What kind of performance?"

Yuuri grinned. "A fire dance."

********

The room was full of candles.

It had taken the servants several hours to assemble enough of them to his liking. Thin and tall enough to last the hours of preparation it would take. The ritual was old, probably one of the oldest things left unchanged even in the ancient ways of Gael.

The Taibhsear had not planned on killing him this way.

But then, Tai was not one to ignore such a neatly packaged opportunity. His Majesty the Maou had been so enthusiastic about holding the performance, so innocent. A child.

For a moment Tai had been unsure. How was it possible for him at once to be their king and not? If he wasn't their king, then wasn't he also the one they had come to dispose of? But when he touched his hand, and looked down at the fingers that wrapped around his own-- The king will take it.

The prophecy did not speak of two kings. It spoke of three.

Then there was a sound of skin, bare feet padding softly along the floor. Frith had finished her bath. Tai smiled as she came toward him, and picked up the towel to dry her. Her skin was still pink from the heat of the water, and her wet hair hung in waves down her back.

"Thank you," she whispered, pupils wide with prophecy and sprinkled with the fluttering lights of candles.

Tai nodded as her body was dried and the towel wrapped into a knot to hold her hair. Then he reached for the jar. Most of the ingredients were common, but he was lucky to have brought some of the others just in case. With steady hands he began the markings. A thousand stories written in a thousand curves of blue, now seemingly black against pale skin in the wavering darkness.

"It is already done." Tears hovered on her lashes. "The order is sent, and we are too late to save him."

"Hush," he murmured, laying a kiss on her palm. "We can't be sure it won't change anything."

She nodded, and silently returned his touch.

********

Something was very, very wrong.

Not only was Gwendal not in his office, but both locked drawers that were usually stocked with reserves of yarn were empty. Anissina had come to complain about the Sage's recent evasiveness, and perhaps drill Gwendal a bit for any new information that could possibly aid her research, and she had been shocked not to find the man chained to his desk. It didn't take her long to narrow the
search to his room, and the presence of one of his men stationed outside only confirmed her theory.

The man's right arm twitched for his sword, and she could see sweat break along his brow at her approach. Pathetic.

"M--my Lady Anissina-- I must insist--"

"Oh don't bother, Gerald," she smirked as she barred past him to throw open the door and slip inside, shutting the heavy wood behind her and lowering the bolt to prevent any interruptions.

"Not now, Anissina..." Gwendal grumbled behind her.

She turned. Something was very, very wrong.

Gwendal wasn't at the desk in his room either, and the floor was covered in tangles of yarn and half-finished creations. Gwendal was lying on his back in full uniform over the green comforter on his bed.

She had only ever seen him like this once before.

Anissina let her features soften as she stepped over and around the graveyard of yarn and made her way to the bed. Gwendal's eyes were closed, but the skin beneath was dark and swollen with fatigue. She simply watched him for a moment, before doing the same thing she had done nearly sixty years ago, and joined him on the bed.

He moved for her, raising an arm so she could rest her head on his chest, both of them looking up at the sky of clouds painted on the ceiling like it was another time all over again. She could feel his heartbeat, his breath, the way his arm would twitch as it struggled not to curl around and hold her. She didn't say a word. He would tell her when he was ready. It was so strange, being like this again after so long. Anissina had lost her maidenhood on this bed, with this man, nearly seventy years ago.

At the time she hadn't given it a second thought. She had been so sure that it was just a matter of time before they were married. And they had both been young and stupid and pretending to be in love.

Really, this whole room was full of memories of her youth. There had even been a time she'd had to hide in the closet late one evening to avoid discovery. During that time-- she was probably her stupidest-- her happiest.

It was a winter night. Anissina had crept into his room with stockings beneath her night clothes and dressing gown and Gwendal had grumbled when his fingers found the barrier beneath her skirts as she sat upon his lap.

Her first years in the castle had been lonely, and she had missed the grand and icy halls of her father's castle in Karbelnikoff. But then, Gwendal became her friend, her home, and she was happy here with him.

They had only just begun. Her hands were in his hair and his palms were moving up her thighs when a knock at the door froze them both. Gwendal's eyes were wide, just inches from hers, and his hands tightened as the knock came again. And then there was a scramble of limbs-- quickly, quickly, with thrumming hearts to find a place for her to hide.

Seconds later she was peeking through the crack of light from her place inside the closet, trying not to laugh from nerves and shaking hands. Gwendal had to put a robe over his pajamas-- to hide the
"Big brother..." came the tearful voice before Wolfram scurried in to jump onto Gwendal's bed. There was a stuffed cat on the duvet and Wolfram hugged it to his chest as he looked at his brother with red eyes and wet cheeks. A sniffle. "Big brother-- can I stay with you tonight...?" The child bit his lip to stop the tears that threatened to run down his cheeks.

"Now, Wolfram," Gwendal sighed. "You're getting too old for this, don't you agree?"

Anissina frowned. He was barely over a decade!

Wolfram held the cat closer and lowered his eyes. "But... Big brother... I know... I know you're very busy... but Little big brother is visiting his father... and... I tried sleeping but... I had a bad dream again and--"

"Wolfram." Gwendal knelt beside the bed. "Everyone has bad dreams. Do you think soldier's cry when they have bad dreams? Do soldiers need to crawl into their brother's bed?"

Wolfram hid his face behind the cat's lopsided head, and for a moment his shoulder's simply shook. Then finally, "No, Big brother."

"Very good." Gwendal took his little hand to pull him from the bed and lead him toward the door. The cat dragged on the floor behind Wolfram as he kept its paw in his other hand. It was nearly as big as he was. When they reached the door Gwendal knelt again, and put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder. "You're very brave. You shouldn't be sleeping with Conrad either, alright? You need to be strong, okay?"

"Yes, Sir." Wolfram mumbled, rubbing his running nose against the cat. "Can I-- Can I sleep with your bear?"

"Yes," Gwendal tensed before nodding, "But only for tonight." And then he reached for the door--

"Big brother?"

Another sigh. "Yes?"

"I think-- you should check on Mother-- I'm worried Sir Briston is hurting her... There were noises..."

"It's nothing for you to worry about, Wolfram. Go back to bed." Gwendal stood, and then the door was almost shut--

"Big brother--?"

"What?" Gwendal snapped, obviously holding back a harsher response.

"Why is it always Little big brother's turn to have a father? It isn't fair--"

"It's late, Wolfram. We'll talk about it tomorrow. Now be a good little soldier and stay in bed, alright?" Gwendal leaned to pat his head.

And then he closed the door.

A minute passed before he walked over to pull her from the closet-- kissing her almost at once. But she pushed him back.
"I cannot believe you!" she hissed.

"Anissina," Gwendal groaned, almost pained, as he pulled her forward until their hips touched and she could feel him. "Don't do this now. What was I supposed to do? Leave you in there all night?" He tried to move his kisses to her neck.

She frowned. "You didn't have to shuffle him off so quickly! And that business about being a little soldier! He's not even fifteen--"

"He has to learn to grow up!" Gwendal growled. "He's in Conrad's bed nearly every night complaining of nightmares. He's too coddled--"

"It's not normal for a child to have nightmares that often-- do you even know what it's about? You're his big brother--"

"Not his father. And neither is Conrad. It isn't normal for a boy his age-- I won't baby him-- He can't rely on being cute his entire life, he needs to grow up. It's not like it's easy for me to turn him out!"

Anissina glared. "It sure seemed like it was." And then she pulled away.

"Anissina--"

"I'm sorry, Gwendal. Not tonight." She turned back, just to give him a chaste kiss on the cheek. "It isn't easy for me either-- but big boys have to learn to sleep alone, right?" And then she left.

It was one of the few times they had fought. But Anissina was familiar with the feeling of alone inside this castle-- and she was so used to taking care of her younger siblings back in Karbelnikoff-- It had been impossible for her not to find her way to Wolfram's room that night.

She felt a little out of place, in this part of the castle. Normally she only ventured far enough into the royal wing to invade Gwendal's quarters. Anissina hadn't learned the guard's schedules this deep inside, and so it took her almost an hour to reach the young prince's chambers.

For a moment she thought he must already be asleep, but then there was a thump and a flicker of light under the door. She knocked softly, not waiting for a reply before she slipped inside. The carpet squished beneath her feet. She glanced down at the blackened carpet and she could feel warm water soaking up into her slippers. Wolfram was standing on his dresser with a pitcher of water, and the wooden frame of the mirror was still smoking-- not to mention the curtains. He looked at her with wide eyes, before they narrowed and he hugged the porcelain pitcher to his chest. "What are you doing here?" All the candles in the room fluttered.

Anissina blinked. In her mind... she always thought of... once she and Gwendal married... taking care of Wolfram. And when she and Gwendal had children, she'd hoped he would still be young enough to play with them. It was a certainty. Once she was officially part of the royal family she would be more often in the young prince's company. But, for now, Anissina was the only one who knew it. She hadn't even spoken to Wolfram alone before-- she imagined this all seemed very strange to him.

She smiled as kindly as she could and kept her distance. Wolfram's tantrums were well renowned throughout the castle, and the last thing she wanted was to be discovered here with a distressed little prince. "I had a bad dream... and I was looking for someone to take care of me--"

Wolfram humphed. "That's stupid. You're too old to have bad dreams." He set down the pitcher and climbed down the handles of the chest of drawers. "Mother says they stop once you grow up."
Anissina tried to decide whether it was best to tell him the truth-- dare to contradict the Maou-- as Wolfram padded over to his bed in soaking blue pajamas to grab Gwendal's cat.

Wolfram pulled it off the bed, and turned to face her. His eyes had gone impossibly wide. "Do grown-ups still get bad dreams?" The he looked away, fingers tight in knitted wool. "Mother said they'd stop..." His lip began to quiver as his whole body began to shake.

Anissina blinked, and then rushed forward without a second thought, kneeling before him and taking off her dressing gown. "Shh... Of course they'll go away." She wrapped the cloth around his shoulders and rubbed-- knowing she should really get him out of these wet things. It was the middle of winter! From this close she could tell his lips were blue even in the dim light.

Wolfram sniffed and simply watched her, fearful eyes now critical as she tried to get him dry. "You know you don't have to be here don't you?" He pouted as she took away the cat to have better access to his front. "You're not my family. You don't have to stay with me." Then he shoved away from her to pad back over to the dresser. The bottom drawer was pulled open viciously as the candles started to flicker again.

Anissina wondered why he was allowed alone with candles.

"I'm fine alone," he muttered as he began to change into dry pajamas. "I'm going to be a great soldier." Once he was finished he turned to her again, chin held high. "I'm fine alone."

"Of course you are," she smiled and reached for him, willing her hand not to shake with anger. How could Gwendal-- Her Majesty do this to a child? "You're very brave. That's why I came to see you."

Wolfram came to her slowly. One step at a time with crossed arms and narrow eyes. And when he was close enough she pulled him into a hug. He struggled for a moment, then held her back and shivered. "Don't be scared..." he whispered, as Anissina lifted him into the bed.

She stayed with him that night, until he fell asleep and she'd had to creep away as dawn crept between the curtains. The maids would be in soon, to dress the prince for breakfast with his mother. It had been easy not to sleep. She remembered her bed in Karbelnikoff-- two sisters and a brother younger than she was, curled together as snow buried the lower floors and wind whistled through the corridors. Fires roared all night in Karbelnikoff, and she had missed their crackling, and their smell.

Wolfram had started cold as they lay together in the huge bed, so much softer than the one in her little room two stories down for wards, but soon he was a little heater who twitched and kicked as dreams danced beneath closed eyes. "No," he murmured once. And "More cake" another time, as Anissina planned the time they would spend together once she and Gwendal married. Maybe she could find a way to light his room without fire? It wasn't safe for him to be alone like this-- his magic was truly special-- Gwendal didn't move the earth when he was angry, and she had never even heard the whisper of an element.

Maybe once he was older she would let him run some tests... Her mind still raced as she snuck along corridors back to her little empty room.

Of course, her life had never become what she had wanted. She talked to Gwendal about spending time with Wolfram, who quickly came to resent that "Big brother liked her better". And then Gwendal got so very busy that it was all she could do to keep him interested in her at all, not to mention her plans for the future. She tried to keep him-- Turned away at the door when studying became more important than messing up the sheets.
But sometimes he would find her. And that would be enough.

He was her family in this southern country with summers filled with heat.

And then one day he wasn't in his study. She had found him in his room-- floor covered in yarn-- looking up at the ceiling. He had never been like this before. Anissina had come to lay beside him, pondering a painted sky of clouds.

He had wrapped an arm around her. "They made me Captain."

Anissina gasped, sitting up to look down at him and grin. "I knew they would! You're brilliant! The youngest in a thousand years!"

But then he hadn't smiled. He hadn't looked at her. "It's only the beginning. If I want to be a General someday... It will only be harder."

"But it's what you want!" She snapped, "I'm sure you'll make it happen." Then she moved back to her place beside him. "I knew you would make it."

"Anissina." The pause had stretched forever. "I'll never marry you."

The pause had stretched forever. And then she sat. "As if I'd have time to be married. My inventions will need just as much--"

"Anissina--"

She was across the room. The floor was spinning. "Really, Gwendal. Don't be a child."

"Anissina--"

The door had closed before she started running.

And things changed. Politics changed after Lord Weller died. They didn't need to trade their children to keep the kingdom from falling to pieces. But Anissina had stayed. If she went home her father would want her wed, she would have to admit how utterly stupid she had--

Karbelnikoff was no place for a strong woman to make her mark on the world. She had already started her lab, already made so much progress with her work, Anissina wouldn't let a stupid man keep her from what she wanted.

And really, all men wanted was war and sex. Once she and Gwendal had stopped having sex the space between them had only grown. She'd heard all sorts of things-- Even about him and Sir Christ, their teacher for goodness sakes!-- and eventually-- well, she had been stupid to put any sort of trust in a man.

Even brilliant people make mistakes; they simply learn from them.

The awkward decade was followed by a simple business relationship, a simple friendship. And really, he could be pretty entertaining from a respectable distance.

Anissina blinked. How long had she been here? Gwendal was still quiet... Why hadn't he said anything by now?

Men.

A sigh. "He..." Gwendal started.
Anissina tried to be still. He wouldn't tell her anything if she pressed.

"Wolfram..."

It was like all the air was gone. "What--"

"I don't know!" He growled. "Taken on the road... Grier is on his trail but damn it..."

At least now she could breathe. He wasn't dead. They didn't know for sure. He wasn't dead...

She wanted to scream at him for not telling her. For not telling everyone. For not sending everyone he could to save him.

But sometimes Gwendal wasn't stupid. "His Majesty..."

"No one knows," he said. No one else will know.

"Gods..." she breathed, and looked for answers in the clouds.

*******

*******

It was impossible for Yuuri to keep still in his royal chair upon the raised platform, and not only because it was uncomfortable. Conrad stood behind him, but slightly to the right to be between him and Reyes and Sara. Reyes had assumed a similar position for the protection of his king, and he and Conrad seemed to be absorbed with trading glares.

Greta was directly to his left, in a slightly smaller version of his chair. Her legs were still not quite long enough to reach the floor as she sat up straight in her fancy dress, but her feet skimmed the marble in polished shoes. She was perfectly adorable. Cheri had done a marvelous job as usual, even though he knew Greta disliked her fussing. Yuuri could only imagine what it had been like for Wolfram when he was young.

A tiny speck of guilt rose in his chest again. He should wait for Wolfram to see this... But his excitement quickly doused it.

A fire dance!

Yuuri shifted in his seat and glanced at Sara. There was definitely something wrong, even though his friend refused to admit it. His jaw was twitching the way Wolfram's sometimes did, and the other king refused to look at him. Yuuri had asked him several times along their walk to the ballroom what was wrong, but every question had been deflected by a stony silence.

Maybe there was something going around? A cold? Gwendal had been acting strange for days. The older man was standing behind Greta now, but even from here-- Gwendal wouldn't look at him.

Of course Yuuri was happy to sit beside his daughter, but he wished he was closer to Murata. Yuuri had so many questions! At least maybe Murata would hint at what was going on.

Was-- Was everyone hiding things from him again? Yuuri stopped fidgeting and twisted the ring on his finger as a particularly strong wave of pain flared up.

Yuuri would insist upon another meeting after this.

He had told Gwendal not to keep in in the dark! Did even Sara know? Yuuri frowned. He couldn't be sure. He would have to wait until Sara and Reyes were safely in their room. No one else seemed
to have any faith in Sara and so it would probably be for the best...

Why did this keep happening?!

"Ara!" came Cheri's telltale squeal. "I'm sorry I'm late. I haven't missed anything yet, have I?" She was wearing an even lower dress than usual and smiling in his direction as she took her seat on the other side of Murata.

Well, at least she was acting weird in the usual way.

"It hasn't started yet," Greta chirped beside him, all smiles.

"It took some time to find someone to lower the torches." Murata supplied, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Sir Christ and Lady Anissina should be here shortly."

"Hey, Murata?" Yuuri heard himself ask. *What is going on?* A pause. "Have you ever seen a fire dance before?"

"Not with these eyes," his friend smirked.

Sara clenched his fists beside him.

Yuuri opened his mouth to ask, but before a sound escaped, the door to the ballroom clicked open and Anissina and Gunter stepped inside.

Gunter cleared his throat. "For the first time in over a thousand years, the honorable nation of Lesser Gael will grace the heart of the Demon Nations, this great country of Shin Makoku, with a presentation of a dance of fire. It is an ancient and protected ritual, as ancient as the blood of mazoku itself. We have today the Master Taibhsear and his prophet to perform. They have traveled long and far, over mountains and rivers to present our great king, the twenty seventh Maou, his benevolent and wonderful Majesty, our Lord Shibuya Yuuri, with a showing of this most ancient of rituals." Gunter paused to breathe, air squeaking dramatically before he continued. "It could only be our king, the great Maou, the wondrous--"

"Thank you, Gunter." Yuuri blushed. "This is only a preview. We have to save something for when Wolfram gets back."

Gunter's eyes were wide. "B-- But your Majesty, I only wish to--"

"Certainly." Anissina bowed. "I hope I will be allowed to stay as well, Your Majesty. I have a professional interest in the performance."

"Of course, Anissina." He smiled. Then, "Is it time to start?"

"If Your Majesty is ready." Gunter bowed low, hair touching the ground.

"Well, then let's begin!" Yuuri grinned, excitement and anticipation rushing back into his chest at once.

Gunter bowed again and said something to someone behind the door, before he and Anissina came up to sit in two of the dozen empty chairs set up below the platform. The torches along the wall went dim, casting the ballroom in shadow. Yuuri imagined they must have gotten someone from Wolfram's guard to handle it.

The door opened almost silently. The man from Lesser Gael and the little girl entered slowly,
walking carefully along the floor, him behind and her in front. Each of them held a slightly different earthen pot. The way they walked until they were only a few yards away, the way each movement had a purpose as the girl set down her pot and knelt, reminded Yuuri of a tea ceremony.

The girl-- Frith-- Her hair was pinned neatly atop her head and she was wearing a simple white dress that hung just above her knees until she had sat behind the pot, her legs tucked neatly underneath in the traditional Japanese style. The Taibhsear did the same, but several paces behind. He was still wearing the plaid robes he had arrived in, but there was blue paint in patterns on his face and hands.

The hall was silent besides their scattered breathing. Then Frith began to hum a simple tune, eyes closed and body still. When she reached the end of the melody she began again, but slowly moved her left arm to dip into the pot. Her pale limb went in to the elbow and then was raised above her head. There was some sort of clear liquid in the jar and her arm shone in the dim light, patterns of blue now visible everywhere the liquid touched. As droplets slid down her arm, more of the same patterns were revealed.

The ritual was repeated. Again and again, until every part of the girl's body was covered in a sheen of wet, intricate patterns of blue on every inch of skin. It was even visible beneath her dress-- white gone clear-- every part of her was canvas for the winding blue.

Seeing a girl so close to his daughter's age so close to naked... It was more uncomfortable than anything else.

Finally, when the tune had been repeated at least a dozen times, Frith picked up the jar and spilled the remaining liquid over her head. Now the few curls that escaped the spark of silver holding up her hair hung long and crimson.

Then she opened her eyes. No white. Only black, and shining.

During all this time the Taibhsear hadn't moved, but now he took up the hummed tune as well-- but in a different place-- their voices high and low and weaving together in the air like a web of sound. The Taibhsear put a hand into his own pot and suddenly Yuuri had to squint from the light.

So much fire. Fire in the place the girl had been. He gasped and almost stood-- to save her. She was covered in flame, the blue center of an orange fire. But she smiled, and stood, and didn't seem to be in pain.

A fire dance... Yuuri reminded himself. This was only part of the performance. The girl was fine.

The humming continued, mixing with the crackling of flame and blooming into a song without words as it popped and sizzled, birthed from the lines upon her skin. The smell came next. Strong and heady and burning in his nose like incense and suddenly the flame seemed that much brighter. His body felt light-- and while he was still it felt like he was spinning with nothing to hold on to except for the arms of his chair and nowhere to put his eyes but on the glowing light that fluttered around the girl before him.

And then she started dancing.

It was like looking into a fire as a child-- burning sweet potatoes in the yard-- he always thought the shapes were dancing, fluttering with a heart of blue. But this was real, and Frith was the heart of blue, moving with the crackle of the flame with a childlike grace and innocence of motion.

Her dancing brought her closer, until Yuuri could feel the heat on his face-- everywhere-- until she
was so close it was almost too hot to bear. Frith spun and twirled-- everything was so bright-- for a second she was right in front of him, and then to his right-- another twirl--

Yuuri must have blinked.

Greta screamed.

There was something on his face, his chest-- everywhere-- hot and thick. The fire had gone out.

From the corner of his eye-- she was already so far away-- Frith fell back, blood raining from her chest as the silver of a knife sparkled in her grasp. Now her hair was free. It floated with her until her body hit the ground with a sickening thud and didn't move.

What...

Yuuri looked to his right. Sara held his neck and glared and Reyes had his weapon drawn-- a string visible where it was dripping red-- but then cut by Conrad's sword.

The Taibhsear was screaming-- coming towards them so quickly-- another knife-- for Sara--

No.

Justice.

********

********

Her dress... There was blood on her dress-- That girl's chest was open and there had been so much blood-- spraying her face-- metallic in her mouth-- and now it spread out-- black-- following the tiling of the floor in lines.

Yuuri stood-- but not Yuuri-- not her father--

Maou.

The Taibhsear was hanging in the air-- but there was smoke too-- no... *steam*. The Maou's left hand was steaming-- Hissing against the power flowing through the rest of him.

"You came into my home as a guest." The Maou's voice echoed, sending shivers to her toes. "How dare you harm one under my protection."

"Vile," Sara seethed, still holding his neck where Frith had cut him.

"Silence!" boomed the Maou. "You--" A water dragon went for Reyes as well. "How dare you kill a child."

"She's better off!" Sara screamed-- face red with fury. "Stolen child-- how many times has he raped her--!"

"Silence!" The Maou turned to Sara-- there was something wrong-- a crinkle to his brow. The room was so full of steam that Greta could hardly see. "I will have JUSTICE!" The maou raised his hands. One toward the suspended man from Gael and the other toward Reyes.

Then paused.
The Maou seemed for the first time to notice the steam hissing from the ring on his left hand--

Greta screamed again as the power ripped through the room-- prickling against her skin and knocking her chair backward with the force of it. Somehow there were hands on her-- holding her close-- Gwendal. The Maou was screaming too-- and light was everywhere-- burning her eyes.

Conrad was yelling-- Murata-- There was so much sound. Yelling for the yelling to stop.

The windows shattered across the room and the Maou's power seemed to be reaching out-- toward the sky-- farther-- searching for something.

"Stop, Shibuya, it's too far!"

"Yuuri!"

Stop, her mind whispered as she buried her face in Gwendal's chest.

But it didn't stop-- so loud-- her face was sticky-- wetness half dried-- still warm. She was ruining Gwendal's uniform-- but surely he wouldn't be mad if the world was about to end.

And then it stopped.

She could hear her breath, her thoughts-- Conrad's voice and the sound of his boots hitting the marble floor. Greta looked up-- tried to struggle out of Gwendal's arms. "Yuuri..." But Gwendal wouldn't let her go.

"It's alright, Greta." Gwendal's voice was rough. "It's exhausting to use so much power-- He's only sleeping."

It didn't make her feel better. Guards were rushing into the room-- and somehow, even though he held her, Gwendal had his sword in his other hand-- pointed at Reyes-- even though the other man wasn't moving in his puddle of water on the floor.

Sara was huddled behind his chair-- glaring and looking like a drowned white rat.

Greta smirked.

Gwendal finally set her down, but almost the moment he did she was caught by Cheri. "Are you alright?" The older woman fussed, kneeling to rub her face with a handkerchief. "Poor dear, let's have a bath, shall we? The boys will deal with all this business, and we'll have the royal chambers all to ourselves." Cheri stood and pulled her along.

"But Yuuri..." she whimpered, looking over her shoulder. Conrad had picked him up-- her father seemed so small now, after the overwhelming presence of the maou.

"He's fine, love," Cheri assured. "Once we're cleaned up I'll take you in to see him, alright?"

Greta nodded... watched her feet take steps.

That girl's chest was open...

Greta's mouth still tasted blood.

*******

*******

Elsewhere
Wolfram wished they would leave him alone. He had been fine alone...

The servants fussed around him, pulling his hair and making him wear all sorts of lacy things that itched. He was so tired-- he didn't want to have breakfast with Mother and that man.

They didn't really want to eat with him anyway--

But that was so long ago.

Not that the 'selfish loafer' had gotten more popular with anyone--

But that hardly mattered now. Here. In darkness.

Yuuri liked him-- Yuuri liked everyone. Sometimes Yuuri would come into the darkness and sit with him while the other watched.

But that wasn't real.

Once upon a time his Yuuri kissed him-- made him think he had a chance. But that was probably a dream too.

The colors had returned-- not as strong-- not as distracting or confusing as before-- but there even when he closed his eyes. Wolfram swallowed thickly. They had stopped giving him water... long enough ago for him to wish for it now.

Wolfram had given up trying to keep track of how long he had been here. Whatever it was that made his mind spin also made it impossible not to get lost in memories. Forget how many times they fed him-- how many trees he could see in the garden outside of Greta's window.

He rolled over and pulled his blanket over his head, feeling his fingers rub together in their new bandages. They were almost healed-- no longer pounding with infection-- or maybe it had just been lessened by the pain of his bruised insides from when he had last refused to acknowledge his tormentors.

Why heal him if they were only going to kill him later? Why keep him alive so long just to let him rot in this wooden cell? Why allow the one with Yuuri's face in to comfort him-- whisper apologies into his hair-- if they wanted him to give up hope?

Or perhaps Pretend Yuuri was another layer of their deception-- maybe that Yuuri was trying to get information-- gain his trust-- trick him--?

Wolfram had run out of time to ponder. The door opened again-- but instead of running or turning to glare, Wolfram stayed in his corner. Every time he tried to run they hurt him more-- he should wait-- gather strength and wait for a real chance to escape once they let their guard down.

This time-- along with their footsteps-- there was the sound of wood scraping along the floor-- and the dull sting that constantly reminded him of the presence of the cursed human stones rose until it was difficult to even breathe. And then their hands were on him-- taking away his blanket and forcing his wrists into the metal clamps on the all-too familiar chair.

"Wolfram." Velasco smiled. His head and shoulders were wet and he smelled of rain. Of Outside.

Yuuri.
Wolfram couldn't help but wonder if he would ever get to feel rain--

"It's time for you to tell me."

Wolfram simply glared.

Velasco clicked his tongue in discontent. "You really shouldn't be so rude to your host. Don't forget your manners, Sir--" A mocking smile. "Well, son of Sir Belefield at any rate."

Wolfram could feel the heat rise in his cheeks. How dare this filthy human--

His vision blurred.

Lesser braid came in through the door, holding a tray which he placed on the table between him and Velasco. Wolfram's skin burned-- Everything inside him both pushed and pulled away from the tiny stone. The pain brought the colors with it-- making his head light and his mind heavy--slow. "What--" he hissed, trying to force his mind to clarity. "-- Do. You. Want?"

"Just a bit of conversation." Velasco picked up the pitcher that was also on the tray that Lesser Braid had brought, along with one of the two glasses, and poured a full glass of water. Then he reached for the stone, rolling it in his palm before dropping it into the water with a sickening plunk. Velasco smiled as he raised the glass to his lips and drank.

Wolfram swallowed.

A trail of water ran down the man's chin, catching the light that poured into his dark cell from the open door. Velasco nodded to Pretend Yuuri who stepped forward to pour another glass of water and hold the rim to Wolfram's lips.

"Drink," Velasco ordered, twirling his now empty glass so that the stone rattled along the bottom.

The sound made Wolfram's teeth hurt. Then Yuuri tilted the glass forward and Wolfram couldn't help but drink. If they were going to poison him-- If they wanted him dead he would be dead--They wanted something from him, and Wolfram would be alive until they got it.

The water was cool, a blessing to his dry throat, and didn't seem to be tainted with the wretched human stones. Wolfram didn't seem to be able to drink quite fast enough to keep some of the water from spilling down onto his shirt and lap. Once the cup was empty, Yuuri took it away and went back to his place against the wall, face half hidden in darkness.

"What do you say, Wolfram?" Velasco asked, tilting his head to the side.

Lesser Braid had the riding crop again, and he tapped it against his palm.

Wolfram glared. "Thank you."

Velasco's lip curled up-- the biggest parody of joy that Wolfram had been unfortunate enough to see thus far. "That was wise of you, Wolfram. Maybe you're not quite as stupid as your reputation would have me believe." He nodded to Lesser Braid.

CRACK

Wolfram's ears rang-- face whipped to the side with the blow.

"It doesn't matter what you are," Velasco explained. "It doesn't matter what you say." Dark eyes. Empty. "I own you now."
"If it doesn't matter what I say-- Then what reason do I have to tell you anything!" Wolfram raged--wishing for nothing more than to leap from his chair and kill the filthy human with his bare hands.

Velasco answered calmly, unmoved by Wolfram's display. "Because I own you." Then he leaned forward, weaving his fingers together as a place to rest his chin. "Because I want you to tell me." Then he flicked a hand toward the door and Lesser Braid went out again.

"What?" Wolfram hissed, falling easily into the comforting arms of anger. "What do you even want me to tell you? You know about things-- details of my life to torment me-- Obviously you already have an informant-- What could you possibly want me to tell you?"

By the time his rant was finished Lesser Braid returned, placing a stack of paper on the table. Velasco took the one on top and held it up to Wolfram's face. "You will read this."

Wolfram blinked.

No.

This was-- This was--

Too ridiculous.

It started small, low in his stomach, but no matter how much he tried-- within seconds he was laughing too hard to breathe-- It made everything hurt more-- the stone-- his stomach-- fingers-- but that only reminded him he was here and hurting because of this.

Because of silly Earth Scribbles.

The crack of the crop against his cheek really shouldn't have surprised him-- but it was shocking enough to help him get his laughter under control. Laughing only seemed to make everything hurt-- better-- but for the moment Wolfram managed to control his breathing, and watch the light bubble around Velasco's head.

Velasco leaned forward on the table-- raw breath in Wolfram's face-- judging his reaction.

Wolfram glared. It was safe to say he would have glared if he did know the Earth Scribbles-- Well... really know them, anyway-- He couldn't do any more than write his name. Wolfram had to convince this man that he knew something-- something he wasn't telling him. Because for every day they wasted time on him, it was a day they didn't get to spend with someone who possibly did know. Waste their time for as long as he possibly could.

But-- why did they even have Earth Scribbles?

Wolfram swallowed. Hard.

Velasco nodded to Pretend Yuuri again, who came forward and filled another glass with water-- pressing it to Wolfram's lips. He drank-- there wasn't much else to do really-- Yuuri's hand in his hair--

What if they were after Yuuri's Earth? How could they have known about the other world--

Or more importantly--

These letters-- This paper--

Wolfram gasped as he finished the last of the water in his glass, panting.
The code. The new code to combat the mystery of the numbers creeping in from the borders of Shou Shimeron. Even the letters in his own name-- Enough to give it all away.

The realization must have read on his face, because Velasco seemed eerily pleased.

"Don't worry," the man leered. "It isn't poisoned." He shook his own empty glass for emphasis, cursed stone rattling in the bottom and making Wolfram's head throb-- spinning until he couldn't think and his vision blurred to sparkling brown around a shrinking spot of sight. Wolfram felt his head drop forward-- fingers tingling-- mind screaming at him for refusing to simply pass out and let the pain lessen in the alluring black of unconsciousness.

"Such a pity," Velasco's voice echoed in his ears as Wolfram's vision slowly tingled back into reality. "Such a simple weakness-- easy to keep you compliant-- keep you from using that pretty fire of yours."

Wolfram lifted his head enough to glare. "Bastard."

A chuckle. "No. Although-- There were some questions about you weren't there?" Velasco reached forward and picked up the stack of papers, tapping them once on the desk to straighten them. "I know that your kingdom is making plans to attack us. You can hardly blame me, Sir, that I go to such lengths to protect my country." He placed the letters once more upon the table. "In that, we are the same."

"No..." Wolfram hissed, pain shortening his words. "You're insane... There's... no attack."

CRACK

Wolfram spat blood into his lap as his head fell forward. He must have blacked out for a moment, because he was shoved back into consciousness with the pressure of glass against his lips-- more water.

By now his stomach was uncomfortably full-- almost nauseous-- head numb from cold.

For a moment he was submerged. Lost in the pressure. The pulling spin of darkness between worlds. But here-- There was none of Yuuri's magic to cling to. Nothing to pull him up-- make him feel safe in drowning.

He swallowed. Again and again until the glass was empty-- until the one with Yuuri's face took it away. Not Yuuri-- Not real-- None of this was real.

He was back in the treasury. Lost and forgotten. A cold child alone in darkness.


In and out.

In and out.

A face opened-- spoke colors-- Where was Greta? It must be time to put her to bed.

Read her a story.
Nothing but pretend.

CRACK

Wolfram opened his eyes again and the world was clear. Once more trapped in the reality of pain. He glared.

"Welcome back, Wolfram." Velasco's face was close. He still smelled like rain. "You went somewhere else for a while-- but I didn't give you permission." His hand came forward-- tilting up Wolfram's chin.

_Gods_. Wolfram tried to move away-- Everything in his body resisting-- Velasco had the stone in his other hand-- pressing against his cheek-- He kicked-- tried to knock his chair over-- but Lesser Braid held him in place and Pretend Yuuri looked away. It was like nothing-- Fire and cramps and ice and sharp-- so sharp-- he could feel it through his cheek-- onto his tongue-- into his neck-- Whole self-- toes-- lungs--

"You do **nothing** without my permission." Velasco pressed the stone against his skin-- had it even been really touching before-- was there room in his body to feel anything but **this** forever? "I own you." A final hiss, before he sat back in his chair, taking the stone with him.

For what felt like an eternity all Wolfram could do was breathe-- and dip in and out of swirling darkness.

Every time Wolfram raised his head-- Velasco was there-- smiling. Waiting for something--

"You won't read these today." He nodded to the stack of coded papers. "First, you have to understand your perfect lack of control in this situation." Velasco tilted his head. "Think of it as freedom-- Something glorious-- a perfect lack of consequence. No pain. No control. Freedom."

Something touched his leg. Wolfram looked-- Velasco's boot-- then his stomach-- slightly lower-- pressure--

_Oh._

Wolfram's eyes widened in realization and Velasco's grin widened.

"You're going to wet yourself like a dog, _Sir._" The man moved back into his seat. "Because even your body-- everything-- **is mine.**"

It must have taken hours more. Weaving out of pain-- colors-- control. But eventually--

Wolfram barely held back a whimper as hot shame slid down his leg.

********

********
He was going to die.

Wolfram curled as far into himself as his aching body would allow as the single thought ran circles in his mind. His breath bounced back at him from the wooden wall. Short hot puffs-- the only heat in the room.

Last time they took his blanket.

He would never escape. He was going to die-- going to stop existing-- the world would go on without him as his body fell apart-- into dust-- into ash. Nothing left. Alone. Only more black-- more nothing.


He would never see anyone he cared about again. There was nothing he could do to change it. Nothing. Nothing except become nothing. Too nothing to feel this pain-- this cold-- this panic.

This was panic.


\textit{Yuuri}.

At least he would die before Yuuri could see him like this. Weak. So weak. Filthy.

Shouldn't panic. Have to stop-- become nothing--

\emph{Breathe}.

Panic only makes it worse-- no hope in panic-- no hope--

Once you panic you're dead. Panic is death-- giving into death-- No hope-- Nothing-- Alone.

Even if he saw Yuuri again-- couldn't touch-- couldn't touch anyone or they would die-- Sickness inside him-- crawling through his blood-- No way to escape what was inside him. Eating him from the inside-- Little things-- Little teeth.


Stop. He had to make himself stop. Even if it was all true-- thinking about it-- panic-- not helping. Nothing to be done-- Stop.

His face was wet-- chest aching from holding back tears-- so weak-- just like everyone thought-- he was weak-- crybaby-- selfish loafer.
Their eyes-- always on him-- watching-- finding every fault no matter how carefully hidden.

Don't look under the bed.

There's nothing there.

Wolfram's shoulders shook as tears and snot ran sideways down his face-- crying like a child alone in his room-- heavy sobs-- voice escaping-- running away--

Stop it-- Stop.

But-- just like always that word made the tears come harder. They couldn't see him like this. Wolfram refused to let them watch him break--

Like last time.

Yuuri had gone back to Earth. Forever. Wolfram-- Greta-- The family he had tried so hard to build wasn't enough. He wasn't good enough-- Never good enough.

Running-- Finding a place-- an alley-- fire in the air-- ends of battle-- a place to scream and hit stone until his knuckles were as raw as his voice.

That was the last time he'd let himself-- no matter what everyone thought of him-- no matter how many eyes filled with pity stared at his back. No matter what the Old Maid said-- He hadn't broken since that day-- and now--

A loud sob made its way past Wolfram's lips and before he pulled the lower one between his teeth in defiance-- more blood in his mouth-- salt.

Stop it. Stop.


Breathe.

Stop.

No panic.

Breathe.

He was lying on his side, curled up, face to the wall. Almost like being in bed-- curled up-- early-- watching Yuuri sleep. Sun on his skin-- like tea in milk-- long eyelashes-- skin-- smooth-- sun warm on his face-- Greta safe-- between them-- everyone safe.

Curl up in bed.

And for a moment it was Yuuri's breath that bounced back against his face.

********

********

Shin Makoku:

Blood Pledge Castle

Three days later
His cheek was warm-- bright-- pink light through closed eyes. Why was he awake?

Yuuri's entire body was thick with sleep. The bed was so comfortable-- thick blankets-- warm and soft. Sleep was dark, black, comfortable.

So tired.

Warm face-- blankets-- weight on his side-- his stomach. He must have to pee. If he never had to pee again it would be so wonderful. He could sleep forever. Stupid body interrupting his sleep. So tired.

Yuuri focused on the way the mattress pressed perfectly into his back-- sun on his cheek-- small arm over his chest--

Greta?

Yuuri cracked an eye open-- stuck with sleep. Greta didn't sneak into their room anymore. Wolfram must still be asleep, he normally helped her sneak back before the maids came to wake her for lessons.

His throat closed with anxiety and Yuuri could feel his heart race-- almost-- something. A dream-- nightmare-- flashes of feelings-- images he couldn't catch.

Bad dream.

Maybe if he got up and used the bathroom he could go back to sleep and have a different dream this time. So tired. The door to the bathroom seemed so far away-- and Greta was asleep too-- So tired.

Yuuri managed to reach up and rub some of the sleep from his lashes-- ugh-- One eye was practically stuck shut. Yuuri slowly slid out from under Greta's arm and stood-- And then his vision swam and his head tingled-- black-- but Yuuri knew his way to the bathroom in the dark, and so he took a few slow steps until his vision returned.

Yuuri fell back into bed moments later with a pleasantly empty bladder and few memories of the last moments.

"Yuuri?" Greta's voice-- worried. She wasn't in the bed anymore-- now standing. "Yuuri, you woke up! Are you alright? I was so worried! Should I call Gisela?" She reached down to shake his shoulders.

Yuuri closed his eyes against the barrage of motion outside his control. "It's early... ta... more sleep." Yuuri's tongue was thick-- not working properly.

"Wimp." Wolfram's voice in his mind.

"-- you okay?" Greta's face seemed so worried...

"... ss... fine--"

And then he was asleep.

*******

*******
Elsewhere

Wolfram could feel the door open. Cold air, but fresh, brushing against him-- light sliding along wood. He refused to acknowledge them.

"Strip him."

Wolfram closed his eyes. His heart raced--

No.

He fought back. How could he do anything else? But he was so-- He had hardly moved-- hardly eaten but bread and water in he couldn't remember how long-- He was so weak.

He tried so hard to keep his clothes-- fight off the hands-- bite-- scream-- but his fingers were nearly useless.

No.

In minutes Wolfram was in the chair again. Naked. Heart hammering in his chest and a cold sweat breaking over his skin.

Velasco looked down at him, face twisting in shadows. They hadn't bothered to bring the other chair or table this time.

Wolfram loosened his fists and tried to slip them through the metal clasps trapping him to the arms of the chair for the thousandth time, hard edges cutting into worn sores on his wrists. He barely managed a glare.

Velasco wrinkled his nose as he hooked a thumb over the edge of his belt. "Filthy."

Lesser Braid chuckled behind him.

Velasco looked over at Pretend Yuuri, now leaning in his familiar place in the corner. "Call me when he's clean." Then he turned on his heel and left.

--Cold--

Wolfram gasped aloud-- sputtering as the water poured over him-- bangs sticking to his face-- covering his eyes. The water pooled in his lap, slipping under his thighs and running down his legs. He shivered.

Behind him, Lesser Braid laughed. "I'll get you another bucket-- You'll need it."

The chair lurched forward-- onto the floor-- knees and shoulder-- cheek-- scraping against the now damp wood. A noise of pain escaped his throat as Wolfram tried to roll to the side to free his little finger from between the arm of the chair and the floor.

"Filthy Mazoku scum." And then the sound of boots clicking against wood faded away.

Wolfram's breath bounced back against his face-- against closed eyes. They were going to clean him-- and after-- after--

He was a soldier. He was a soldier. He would survive.
"I'm going to get you up now, okay, Wolf?" A soft voice in his ear-- fingers unstickling the wet hair from his eyes and forehead. Pretend Yuuri picked the chair back up just in time for Lesser Braid to reenter the room with another bucket and a horse brush, the latter of which he tossed roughly to Pretend Yuuri. "You're not finished 'til he's red." He left the bucket by the door.

"Bastard," Pretend Yuuri muttered as he stood to retrieve the bucket, which turned out to also contain a bar of soap. He came back and knelt beside Wolfram, setting the hard bristled brush aside.

Wolfram wondered-- even if he managed to get out of the chair-- how far he could get before the other two caught him. How many more were outside? Where was outside? They wouldn't expect him to try and escape while he was naked. But Yuuri--

This-- *person*-- was he just another way to spin his mind in circles or was he really trying to help him? Maybe Pretend Yuuri could help him escape... He wasn't really Yuuri-- Yuuri couldn't be here--

Wolfram had to be sure that Yuuri was safe, back in his bed at the castle-- he had to know it-- or else Wolfram was sure he really would break.

Pretend Yuuri rubbed the soap into his hands and reached up to rub the lather into Wolfram's still wet hair. Soft-- touching that didn't hurt. And even though what would happen next didn't bear thinking about, it felt good to be getting clean-- and Wolfram let his eyes fall shut for just a moment and sighed.

"Don't do that," Pretend Yuuri purred as he massaged Wolfram's scalp. "You'll only tempt me more."

Wolfram opened his eyes as Pretend Yuuri's hands moved down the back of his neck-- face so close-- Wolfram tried to focus. He knew who this was-- this face-- Yuuri?

No-- *Someone*--

The name was gone as quickly as it came. Wolfram couldn't hold it-- couldn't dissolve the imaginary mask he had placed over this man's face.

He really was going insane--

Pretend Yuuri's face was full of light and shadow. Black and white shapes that bled into the rest of the room until it was all the same. Even his own body. Darkness and lightness-- hands on him-- crisp smell of soap in his nose-- hands... touching...

The next moment Wolfram was naked. Strapped to a chair in a wooden cell while one of the people who trapped him there was touching him. Gentle hands-- warm-- so warm after so much cold. Wolfram didn't want it to feel good. It had been so long since anything but pain-- Hands moved down his chest, rubbing his stomach-- lower--

"Don't," he breathed, eyes squeezed shut in shame. "Please don't." He was hard-- He was hard from this man's touch. How could his own body betray him like this? He couldn't even control himself.

Pretend Yuuri shushed him, sliding wet hands to rest on Wolfram's thighs. "It's okay--"

"No." Wolfram could feel himself shaking. Too *weak* to even open his eyes.

A pause.
"What do you want, Wolf?" Pretend Yuuri's voice was so soft, almost like a dream. "I won't-- If I can help it I won't make things worse-- What do you want?"

"Out--" Wolfram could hear the rush to his words. The panic. "Let me out-- Let me--"

A hand over his lips. "I can't."

The hope that had bloomed sank in his gut. Wolfram let his head fall forward.

"I want to help you." The hand left on his thigh traveled-- in-- higher-- touching--

"No."

A sigh. "I could take care of you... before they come back." Hot breath on his cock.

"No."

The hand moved away. "All right, Prince Prude... but just know you're torturing me now."

*Good.*

All contact vanished for a moment-- then hands returned-- wet-- more soap-- but this time they moved faster, didn't linger on places that made him squirm. Wolfram kept his eyes closed. He had to.

It was difficult. He had to lift himself up-- give Pretend Yuuri access to places he had wanted to save for Real Yuuri-- not that he would ever get the chance now. Pretend Yuuri's movements were methodical, precise, reassuring.

Eventually, Pretend Yuuri stood to wash his back and shoulders, and Wolfram had to lean forward to give him access. Wolfram opened his eyes-- watching the water slide along the floor in puddles beneath his feet. Bubbles of soap floating on top of-- what must be strips of his own dirty skin. Blood trickled down his left knee from when Lesser Braid had kicked over his chair. Wolfram had hardly noticed... Pretend Yuuri had kept soap from entering the wound, and now he was moving gently around what must be bruises on his back.

"Why?" he breathed.

The hands stopped for a moment before they continued their methodical cleaning.

There wasn't an answer.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********

Gwendal pressed his seal into hot wax before sliding the codex back into the locked drawer of his desk. Hopefully Flurin would be able to keep their arrival in Caloria quiet. They would have to dock at night--

The door swung open.

"Gwendal-- I'm glad you sent for me! According to the Princess, His Majesty woke up for a
moment a few minutes ago--"

Gwendal stood. "Good-- Have someone fetch the Sage. His Majesty should be awake fully in a few hours and we should have everyone ready for a meeting at once--"

"But Gwendal!" Gunter wailed. "His Majesty needs rest! Surely you don't--"

"Gunter."

The other man paused, growing serious. "What's happened?"

Gwendal sat and sighed, pressing his tired eyes into the heels of his hands. "I have to tell His Majesty first."

He could hear Gunter's careful footsteps approach. "Then why did you send for me?"

"I wanted to make sure you were alright being left in charge until things are-- dealt with. His Majesty will want to leave--" A pause. "And I will be going with him." He took his hands from his eyes and looked up at his former teacher.

Gunter's face was nearly white. "But-- go where? You know better than anyone how dangerous--"

"I know."

Gunter took a few steps back before falling into a nearby chair. After a few moments, the pallor faded and he fixed Gwendal with a hard stare. "What has the selfish loafer gotten himself into this time?"

Gwendal's vision actually spun at the accusation. He really did need to be sleeping more...

Approaching footsteps. A hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry-- Is he--?"

"I don't know," Gwendal managed. "I don't know."

"How long?"

Gwendal drew his hands into fists, desperate for something to focus on. "Nearly two weeks. I shouldn't have made him go-- I should have sent more besides just his Corporal-- I should have--"

"No," Gunter interrupted, hand on Gwendal's shoulder tightening. "You did exactly what you should have done." A sigh. "Sometimes things are outside control."

Gwendal cleared his throat. "Yozak is on the trail. Anissina's already been altering one of her inventions to carry more passengers and--"

"I understand." Gunter's hand fell from Gwendal's shoulder. "You should wait to tell His Majesty at the meeting." Then he stood. "I won't force you through it twice. In the meantime you should get some rest."

Gunter was looking down at him like he was ninety again and they were only discussing a particularly troublesome political theory. It was-- oddly comforting-- and allowed Gwendal to push the reality of the situation just far enough away that dealing with it no longer seemed an insurmountable task.

He nodded and Gunter's lips twitched up in a sad sort of smile. "His Grace is in the dungeons trying to talk to the Master Taibhsear again. I'll make sure he knows to be prepared for a meeting as soon
as His Majesty is awake."

"Thank you."

The Sage had spent the last three days trying to wrap his mind around the Master Taibhsear's audacity-- or so he claimed. But at least that problem was safely locked away-- until the political storm arrived from Lesser Gael.

Saralegui's guard had also survived the Maou's rage-- unfortunately-- and for the time being was under confinement with his king in their room in the North Suite. Gwendal didn't like him there, but Reyes had reacted to protect his king against an assassination attempt, and as much as Gwendal would have privately enjoyed watching the man drown, the severity of his reaction was the only true fault.

The girl had been so young... hardly older than Greta.

Gwendal realized he had lost himself again and snapped his attention back to the moment at hand. "I'm sorry to be leaving you with the situation with Lesser Gael--"

Gunter hushed him. "I was the one who taught you about political relations, if you'll recall. Don't make yourself more wrinkles."

Gwendal sighed. "Fine." Then watched Gunter's face as a dozen connections seemed to draw together at once.

"This is where all your guard have gone--" A pause. Then Gunter turned slightly, eying the map on the far wall. "Lesser Gael won't back an assassination attempt of this magnitude, any approval or instigation will be denied--"

Gwendal was about to agree but quickly recognized one of Gunter's tirades, and experience had taught him long ago it was best not to try to interrupt.

Gunter began to make his way toward the door, flurry of words getting farther away. "The meeting should be held after dinner-- His Majesty has to eat something, I insist-- but for the conference-- I should have the maids lay out the green linens-- It's nearly spring--" The man's voice was cut off as the door to Gwendal's office slammed shut behind him.

The room seemed empty. Gwendal hated leaving things up to other people. Even if Gunter had instructed him in politics, Gwendal always liked to figure out everything himself-- weigh every side of the problem. He would be gone soon-- leaving Gunter to deal with the problems of Shin Makoku.

Which meant the only problems left to distract him would be his own.

*******

*******

Elsewhere

*******

Pretend Yuuri had finished washing him and was now carefully wrapping clean bandages around Wolfram's damaged fingers.

"You're almost fixed-- here, anyway." He finished the last knot and kissed it gently. "Try not to encourage them to knock you around so much." A warm hand slid lightly along Wolfram's
stomach. "I don't like these bruises."

"Neither do I," Wolfram grumbled, wishing Pretend Yuuri would keep his hands to himself.

Pretend Yuuri sighed and reached into his pocket. "I have to use the brush just a bit, you know-- I'll try not to make it too unpleasant."

"It's fine." Pain would be better than this strange kindness. Less... humiliating.

Pretend Yuuri pulled his hand from his pocket and looked up at him with sad eyes. Then he stood and put his mouth by Wolfram's ear to whisper, "They want you to read today--" Then he moved back and held a familiar black cookie before Wolfram's lips.

Wolfram paused. He had figured out that the worst of his visions had some sort of connection to whatever poison was in the little black disks-- but he could never remember exactly where he had seen them before-- or why it was important.

Pretend Yuuri had been so... gentle.

Maybe it was just a trick to make him eat the cookie? But if Velasco wanted him to eat something-- he could make him. So was it possible that Pretend Yuuri had a separate agenda from his other captors? Or was it all just an elaborate plot conceived to make him even more unhinged?

Wolfram's head ached. His body ached. It was so much-- so much-- constant-- constant. Pain. Whatever Pretend Yuuri's-- anyone's-- intentions, in this moment Wolfram would take the spinning darkness and fleeting terror of his mind to the simple presence of reality.

He opened his mouth.

Pretend Yuuri threaded his fingers gently through Wolfram's wet hair as he chewed.

Wolfram shivered.

"Let's get this over with so I can get you dry." The hand left his hair and Pretend Yuuri picked up the brush.

It didn't hurt too terribly. Just rough-- dry-- but as it scratched his skin it only seemed to make him more itchy. Soon Wolfram's skin was hot-- red-- stinging even as Pretend Yuuri avoided more sensitive places with the utmost of care. Wolfram tried to hold still-- let his head fall back to look at the cracks running in lines along the boards that made up the ceiling.

A hand on his cheek. "Stay with me just a little longer, Wolf."

"Why?" he breathed.

Pretend Yuuri's thumb ran along his cheek. "Can't I be lonely too?" Then he stood, shadow leaving the room before Wolfram had a chance to murmur another question.

Soon the others would come for him-- he was clean now. Wolfram's heartbeat rose, running wild in his chest. He had forgotten.

Wolfram had forgotten what came next.

He had to get out.
His wrists were fastened to the chair, but the chair wasn't fastened to the ground-- He was sitting
deep in the wooden chair, the way his arms were trapped left him little choice but to press his spine
along the back of the chair. Wolfram tried scooting forward, using his weight to make a short hop
along the floor toward the door. The crack of the chair's legs falling back against the floor rang in
his ears and Wolfram paused to breathe-- listen--

Silence.

Wolfram rocked the chair forward-- bare feet on wet floor-- hunched so he could see a shadow of
of his own predicament reflected vaguely above his toes. He took a step-- another-- toward the
door. Pretend Yuuri had left the door open. This was his chance. He could get out. He could get
out. He could get out!

Laughter.

But not his own.

The legs of the chair clattered against the floor and Wolfram looked up. Velasco's face laughed
down at him.

Wolfram's skin prickled-- humming between pallor and a blush. His stomach churned. Lesser
Braid was there now too, and the two of them picked up Wolfram's chair and moved it back to its
place in the center of the little room.

"Don't... Don't touch me!" Wolfram tried to snap-- ashamed of the tremor in his voice.

Velasco stopped laughing long enough to smirk. "You misjudge me." He leaned forward, trailing a
finger beneath Wolfram's jaw. "I am not... broken inside like you are, Wolfram von Belefield.
Despite your perverse hopes-- You are disgusting." The finger went away and Velasco's face
hardened. "I would never touch you. And with the exception of our mutual friend--" His eyes
flashed to Pretend Yuuri, who had just slipped through the door carrying the familiar little table.
"No one would want to touch you."

Wolfram closed his eyes, but it only made it worse. How could he have thought...

War... How could he have thought-- Wolfram didn't want it. He had only been afraid-- Only afraid--

"And even if he wants to-- you would kill him. And he's too useful for me to let you kill him. He
brought you to me after all." A pause-- breath on his face. "You were stinking up the room so I had
you cleaned. No matter how much you might want it, I have no desire to fuck the demon king's
whore."

CRACK.

********
********
Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********

Murata had never cared for dungeons, but then again he couldn't imagine that very many people
did. Which, he supposed, was the point of dungeons. Dark, moldy, dank things that were built for
discomfort and solitude.

However, as far as dungeons went, the Master Taibhsear could have done a lot worse. It was the
same type of cell that had once housed Sir Weller after his temporary defection to Dai Shimeron. Hardly any smaller than a standard soldier's quarters and equipped with all the comforts of home. Except, perhaps, a window.

When he arrived, the Master had been sitting at the small wooden desk with his back to the door. Simply sitting. It had taken some time for Murata to convince the guards that it was safe to leave him alone with the other man, but eventually he was seated on a spare chair brought in from the hallway.

Waiting.

But Murata didn't have time to wait forever. "I'm truly sorry for your loss."

The Taibhsear turned to face him, but otherwise remained silent. It was something, at least.

Murata continued, "She was much too young--"

"It doesn't matter." The Taibhsear interrupted, voice broken. "With our failure, it will be the world's time soon enough."

Murata frowned. Prophecy was a tricky business that in the end came down to interpretation. One sentence-- each word-- could be taken a thousand different ways. With the right interpretation, every prophecy was true.

Once upon a time, Murata had written off prophecy as nothing more than the prediction of vague outcomes and the celebration of coincidence. But that day in his first life when he and Shinou had been privileged to see part of the Temple of the Prophets in Lesser Gael himself-- He had changed his mind.

The people of Lesser Gael, the ancestors of all mazoku, had come up with an ingenious strategy of organizing prophecy. The Taibhsears and Prophets of Lesser Gael recorded prophecy in a language of knots-- related prophecies literally tied together to create an enormous web of past, present, and future. Room after cavernous room filled with a complicated latticework of ropes tied into the most elaborate knots imaginable. On that day they had only been allowed to enter one of the smaller rooms, but as he had walked along the narrow path between the ropes-- the air had gone cold as one thread of rope, still entwined with others, burst into flame. The fire lasted only for a second before smoking into black-- still intact but charred. None of the hundreds of other ropes nearby had burned-- other ropes that had touched the flame.

The Taibhsear with them had explained that they had witnessed a lost prophecy. Destiny had chosen another path rendering that future impossible-- The prophecy had erased itself from the woven history of the world. Black-- but still a record of what could have been.

Of course it could have been a hoax-- but then--

The magic he had felt that day-- In the air for that one moment. It was so different from any one element-- Not even the magic of healers or Shinou's unique power.

It had felt like time.

And so, even though it would be so easy to leave the Master Taibhsear in his cell-- or at least leave his mind to the pressing matter of the plague and Gwendal's sudden summons-- Murata had to come and interrogate the Taibhsear. This man-- had sacrificed his Prophet. The relationship between Taibhsear and Prophet was as renowned for its intensity as it was scrutinized for its mysterious intimacy by skeptics-- humans. For this man to say his Prophet's death didn't matter--
He must truly believe the end was near as well as absolute.

Murata needed to know why.

He licked his lips. "You said before-- that you were here because Shibuya might be your King of Gael and that he may be in danger." A pause. But the Taibhsear remained silent. "If your plan to kill King Saralegui had succeeded-- Is he really that dangerous?" Murata hated this. This not knowing. He sighed. "I have to protect my king. Surely you can understand my concern?" Another pause. "Please-- I know you cannot tell me the words of the prophecy that brought you here, but there must be something-- There must be something I can do. I don't want this world to end any more than you-- Even if I can't get you out of this cell-- There must be something I can do." Murata was breathing hard.

"Strong words, for one who does not follow the True Faith." The Taibhsear tilted his head, eyes still sad but now alight with contemplation. "Would you complete my mission, Sage of the False God?"

Murata's hands tightened into fists. "If I believed it would save my king."

For a moment the Taibhsear simply watched him. "A pity, then, that it is already too late." The man looked down at his own hands, folded neatly in his lap. "The order has been sent. The damage has been done... Our King will fall to destruction... The third king's death is nothing now-- " Emotion halted the Taibhsear's voice.

*Third king?* Saralegui. Saralegui was the third... and now his death was nothing. Whatever Saralegui was supposed to do to harm Gael's king... had already been ordered... But King Saraleugi and his guard were not permitted to send unsupervised messages-- How could Saralegui send an order that would cause destruction?

After a moment the Taibhsear continued. "Your Maou is as safe as any of us until the True King is born from ash."

Murata's mind raced. The True King is destroyed... but not yet born? He would have to ponder that more later-- For now... King Saralegui, Shibuya, and another king who was supposedly the King of Gael. Shinou? But he was dead-- "Shibuya-- You came because you believed Shibuya to be Gael's king-- Then who--"

"You tell me." The Taibhsear's voice was dark. "Old magic. Far older than should be remembered by anyone outside the True Faith. Our King has hidden himself away."

*Or maybe he's already dead.* But Murata didn't dare voice that thought aloud. If he could only keep the Taibhsear talking, perhaps he could learn something else.

"But... If you came to protect your king from harm by killing King Saralegui... If Saralegui has, as you say, ordered the destruction of your king, and nothing can be done to stop it-- How can your king cause this world's end?"

The Taibhsear scoffed. "As if death is the only outcome of destruction."

There was a knock at the door.

"Your Grace," came a soldier's voice, muffled through wood. "His Majesty is awake. Sir Voltaire requests your presence in the Spring Conference Hall."

Murata nearly cursed aloud. He let his eyes show disappointment as he looked at the Master
Taibhsear. "I'm sorry, I have to go." He bowed his head. "But I do hope to continue this conversation at a later time."

The Taibhsear nodded slightly, and then turned back to his desk.

Murata stood. Of all the times for an "Emergency Conference". He hoped it was nothing truly important-- This prophecy business was going to haunt him until he managed to put all the pieces together.

*******
*******
Elsewhere
*******

Wolfram was sick. Sick with himself-- *Sick*.

He didn't want this man to touch him-- He didn't want anyone to touch him. Not ever again.


How could he have thought they would touch him. Dirty mind. Filthy.

Broken.

He didn't deserve to get out. He was going to die here. Alone. In darkness.

Wolfram almost wished they would hurt him more. Almost.

But that *Almost* made it easier to ignore Velasco's demands that Wolfram translate the stack of messages that had been placed on the table between them.

There was blood in his mouth. His cheek hurt. Everything hurt, but not nearly enough. Wolfram wanted the colors to come. He wanted to drown inside his mind.

Waiting.

Velasco wasn't happy. He wanted Wolfram to be more broken-- to tell him things. Things Wolfram didn't know.

Wolfram wondered-- if he did know-- if he could translate the letters-- would he still be silent? The knowledge-- Wolfram's knowledge that he *didn't* know what Velasco wanted, that the most he could do in Yuuri's silly Earth Squiggles was write his own name-- The knowledge-- this *secret* gave him power.

The only power-- the only control Velasco hadn't stripped away. Wolfram could delay. Wolfram could hurt them back the only way he could.

He could protect Yuuri.

"You're being difficult, Sir Belefield." Velasco didn't like his lack of progress-- the emotion was starting to show in his voice.

Wolfram smiled.

*CRACK*. 
For a moment his vision swam... but it all came rushing back.

Velasco held a paper up to his face. "You aren't giving me a lot of options, Wolfram. I thought you could be reasonable." His voice was cold. "I take no pleasure in the more primitive methods, but you have given me little choice." He nodded at Lesser Braid, who exited the room, before leaning back into his seat.

Wolfram watched the other man leave-- eyes grateful for something to follow besides Velasco's twisting face. They were going to hurt him again. He already hurt so much--

"You think you are being noble, Sir, but what is nobility besides the people who have left you here to die?"

No one was coming for him. Too dangerous-- Wolfram tried to be glad-- Gwendal would do the right thing-- be responsible.

Leave him alone in his room.

Why wasn't anyone coming for him? Wolfram bit his lip-- tried to look anywhere but this human's filthy face. Wolfram didn't want to die. He didn't want to be alone. But it had already been too long. No hope. If a soldier vanished from the field-- was assumed captured-- Three days. Three days and you were assumed dead.

And as much as time made no sense in his little wooden world, Wolfram was sure three days had passed.

But-- he didn't want to hurt. He knew he shouldn't-- he shouldn't-- He wished for someone to come.

But it was too late.

The man tilted his head to the side. "Is there really meaning in your suffering, Wolfram? Is your life so worthless in your eyes that you would continue it in this shame? Have you no pride, no honor, in yourself?"

He didn't. Wolfram had no pride, no honor-- besides a rank he didn't earn and a fiancé who didn't want him. But he didn't have that anymore, did he? Was the king from Shou Shimeron just another one of his dreams? Another construction of his tortured mind?

No one would know.

No one would know how he'd died-- what he'd fought for-- how long he'd waited. No one would ever know. He would be chucked on the roadside of a human village. Another useless corpse for the crows to feast on.

No funeral pyre. No family to mourn him--

He would disappear.

Everything hurt so much. A tear rolled down his cheek. It didn't matter. He was no one.

Lesser Braid reentered the room, and for a moment Wolfram was grateful that the presence of the Cursed Stone stayed where it was. Somewhere close enough to ache, but far enough not to make him want to vomit. But then there was the wondering... fear.

What now?
"They have betrayed you."

_They never did anything else._

"Would you prolong this pitiful existence-- "

_No one ever wanted him to exist._

"All you have to do is tell me and I will take away all your pain-- your suffering."

_Wolfram wanted it to stop. Please-- Gods-- Ethne-- Make him into nothing._

Velasco raised a hand-- taking a small jar that Lesser Braid had brought. "How much suffering have you caused in your life, Sir Belefield? Your only virtue-- your power over fire-- how many lives have you taken? You cannot use that power now, the stone prevents it, so what does that make you? Does it make you human?" Velasco leaned forward once again and dumped the contents of the jar onto Wolfram's arm. "To use fire-- I wonder, Wolfram, if you've ever truly appreciated the destruction you once wielded. Something you'll never control again."

_Oil._ Oil for lamps-- candles-- The smell curled in Wolfram's nose. Lesser Braid was holding his chair again-- he couldn't move. "No..." He breathed, then louder. "Please... Don't."

"Then read." A smile. "Give your life meaning."

They were going to-- He was going to burn-- Wolfram had been burned by his own flame so much as a child-- stupid-- stupid games-- He knew what it would feel like. But this-- He couldn't stop it-- He was nothing more than a human, unable to heal his own wounds-- Unable to fix his own mistakes.

But he was nothing. He was too weak. He had nothing-- He would never have anything--

Except for Yuuri. Except for Greta.

Even if their family was all he had-- He would do it all over again-- To let it be him instead of them.

Wolfram's body was so tense-- sweat falling over skin-- prickling with fear-- Heart so fast-- so fast-

"No." Wolfram licked his lips. "I refuse."

The match snapped to life in Velasco's hand-- sparking for a moment-- a tiny light falling through the air.

"You did this to yourself." Velasco's voice came in slow motion. Low-- an arch of fire.

Wolfram saw the flames rise-- running along the liquid's path-- over his bare forearm-- following a trail over his thigh. He saw the light, blue at the base, seconds before he felt the burn.

He screamed.

They were all holding him now as he tried to move-- He kicked his leg-- Tried to move his trapped arm-- instinct only fanning the flames that tore into his flesh. He could smell it. He could smell himself burning-- See the skin on his arm fall away.

Over his own cries, the others were shouting too-- Orders-- Words that didn't make sense. Nothing
could make sense. Nothing but pain. He screamed even as the blanket fell over him-- tugging at loose flesh-- pushing the fire closer-- hotter-- hotter and then out. And then it pulled away-- taking flesh and smoke with it-- tearing him open.

His head was light-- He hadn't eaten in days but the room smelled like burnt flesh-- cooking meat-- Gods.

Wolfram felt like he was floating above his body as he retched the contents of his empty stomach onto himself. His face was wet with tears-- dark-- too dark-- pain swirling into nothing. He wanted to disappear.

He wanted to die.

"Tell me." Valesco hissed into his ear, voice slicing through pain. "Tell me and I'll make it stop."

Wolfram choked-- his body trying to pull his stomach up his throat-- His face was wet-- soaked in tears and sweat. He could see his flesh-- he could see inside himself-- black and red-- blood coming up in domed spots, bubbling out of cauterized flesh. More and more. More outside himself with every second as his body seemed to realize it was broken-- he should hurry up and bleed.


Wolfram closed his eyes. Yuuri.

Just once more. Just once more. He wanted to watch him sleep-- sun on his face-- soft bed-- pretending not to be alone.

The air was water... taking him away-- somewhere else. He could hardly breathe-- Heartbeat-- Heartbeat-- Heartbeat.

The colors came back. Nothing mattered. Velasco's voice was far away. Nothing mattered.

He was dead. He was nothing. He was pain.

But in moments he wasn't even that. He was shapes and darkness-- sound and tastes. Blood in his mouth-- pooling with vomit on the floor.

Wolfram smiled.

********

********

Western Caloria

********

The town was small, a fishing village on Caloria's western shore, but it wasn't so small so as not to have a place for weary travelers to rest their heads. Yozak allowed himself a grim smile of satisfaction as he and Lucien received their bowls of dinner stew from the small tavern's cook.

It wouldn't be long now.

They had picked up the cold trail back where they had left it in Maxine's small village. A carriage had left with three strangers only there for the night. But it was no ordinary carriage. It was big, the type that bands of travelers and performers built specially to take their acts on the road. Large enough to carry horses-- tents-- contain multiple compartments.
Large enough to hold a prisoner.

The carriage was slowly creeping its way south-- too large to follow anything but a main road. It was unique, out of place. The type of thing that everyone in a small town remembered passing through.

They didn't think they were being followed.

South.

The way the letter left with Lucien had instructed. The letter that at first Yozak had thought was meant to lead them astray. Why would Sir Belefield's captors leave directions?

There was more to this than he knew-- but for now Yozak was only concerned with finding what was left of Sir Belefield. If the carriage kept its pace it would cross into Shou Shimeron within a week-- but he and Lucien would intercept it days before then.

Across from him, Lucien's eyes drooped as he tried to stay awake long enough to eat his stew. Yozak had been pushing them both harder than he should-- but given the circumstances he would forgive himself nothing less. Sir Belefield had a good Corporal in Lucien. The man followed orders without complaint and was nearly as good as he was at spotting their particular carriage's tracks amongst all the others pressed into the mud of the road.

The boy was also tearing himself apart with guilt.

Yozak looked around the empty tavern and sighed. "We're doing all we can--"

Lucien nodded weakly and took another sip of his stew.

Another sigh. "Look, remember the bird I got this afternoon?"

Lucien nodded again and looked up.

"Sir Voltaire will be telling His Majesty soon--"

"What... No." Lucien's eyes widened. "I'll be--"

"Stop that." Yozak raised a hand to rub the headache forming on his brow. "The Kiddo's not going to punish you. I'm just saying that in two days-- It won't just be us. Once we find them, we'll rendezvous with Gwendal's guards. And more than that-- Captain and Sir Voltaire himself-- Hells, the Maou will be there to confront the bastards." He grinned. "They won't know what hit 'em."

Lucien tried to look reassured, and failed. "What if he's--" A pause. "What do they want with him? What are they doing? What if we're too late--"

"Gisela is coming too-- If anyone can help it's her." Yozak's voice was firm. "There's nothing we can do now but keep going. And hope."

Lucien met his eyes. "And pray."

*******

*******

Elsewhere
The first night in four long months that Wolfram was back in his own room he had lit his bed on fire. Wolfram could never remember the dream that must have caused it, but he could remember the burns-- his mother's tears as Susannah Julia healed his skin with green light and gentle hands.

It had been so hard to breathe-- his lungs ached from inhaling the smoke of his ruined bedroom.

It had hurt too much to cry.

They had said this sort of thing wasn't unheard of. A child fresh from his rites would get angry and blow a book from its shelf or cause the ground to shake. It was even said that once a child drowned himself in his bath before he learned to control his new gift.

But Wolfram had always been causing fires-- even before he'd had his rites. The guards at his door had been on alert for smoke since his early twenties.

That night half of the royal wing had gone up in flame. It was a blessing no one had been killed.

Wolfram could remember weaving in and out of sleep. Thinking he was back sleeping on the ground in some forest beyond the borders with Marques and Lucien. Thinking dreams were real and that his skin felt hot-- pulled-- new. Julia had soft hands--

But Wolfram liked Yuuri's better.

Yuuri's hands were rough, clumsy, shaking as they pressed salve into his burnt flesh. There was fear in his eyes as he covered his arm in bandages-- his leg. Around and around and around. White fabric going clear-- red-- white again with layers. Yuuri didn't use magic-- and the pain pulled Wolfram in and out of consciousness like waves.

The colors helped too-- the light around Yuuri's face. The words that didn't make sense whispered softly against his ears.


Wolfram tried to make Yuuri feel better. He had to take care of his wimp. It was so much easier to take care of Yuuri than let himself be cared for.

Yuuri.

Wolfram had missed him so much-- He couldn't remember why it seemed like it had been so long. Yuuri was right here. Yuuri was safe-- He was with Yuuri--

Yuuri was the only thing that wasn't pain-- the only thing that made the burning bearable.

Wolfram was safe. He was safe in Yuuri's arms.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********

Everything was soft. There was light on his cheek, and sleep still clung to the edges of his thoughts. Dreams. He would wake to flailing limbs and a familiar smell-- Yuuri had never fully appreciated that ridiculous nightgown before, but it did have a way of slipping off. Yuuri smiled
sleepily and rolled his hips against the soft mattress beneath him.

Wolfram was good sleeping-- not good at sleeping, though. He was probably the worst person at sleeping in the entire world. Wasn't the whole point to stay still and get some rest?

But Wolfram-- He was good sleeping.

When Wolfram was asleep Yuuri didn't have to worry about what he would say-- worry about hurting him. Yuuri could look at him without feeling guilty-- or as guilty. Maybe if he fell asleep this time Wolfram would touch him. Hot hands-- lips-- feelings he had never felt. He rubbed his hips against the bed again, moving his right hand down so he could--

Someone coughed.

Yuuri froze, turned red, and opened his eyes in a single heartbeat.

Gisela smiled down at him as if nothing was wrong. "Good morning, Your Majesty."

At least it wasn't Conrad-- Or Greta-- Yuuri swallowed. And now all thoughts that made him hot were safely banished once again to the realm of dreams. "Good morning, Gisela," he managed, voice still shaky with shame.

Gisela shifted in her seat, turning to the side so she could reach a tray perched on the bedside table.

Yuuri took the opportunity to sit up, crumpling the blankets strategically in his lap as he rested his back against the headboard.

"I hope you can manage to eat something. Sir Voltaire seems to have quite a lot to talk to you about-- I won't have him worrying you on an empty stomach." Gisela handed him the tray.

Yuuri smiled nervously and took it. There was something about her tone that suggested he had little choice but to finish the meal that had been prepared for him. His stomach growled loudly as the first whiff of hotcakes and tea met his nose. Well, at least his task wasn't too hard. But-- "What does Gwendal want to talk to me about?"

Gisela's eyebrows furrowed. "Your Majesty, how much do you remember-- from before you used your power?"

Yuuri blinked. "Ohh..." There had been the performance-- The girl-- Frith.

Reyes' string-like weapon had cut her open-- blood on his face-- Greta. She had come at Sara with a knife-- but the small trickle of blood staining his friend's collar seemed like nothing compared to the pooling crimson on the marble floor. She had just-- stopped-- Thrown back with such force-- Tiny body falling with a sickening thump. It had all been so wrong.

So wrong.

Everything had happened at once. So much shouting. So much rage.

Conrad had severed Reyes' weapon-- but too late-- too late. The Taibhsear had rushed forward-- eyes wild-- burning-- Coming for Sara.

Yuuri hadn't had a choice-- submit to the rage-- Justice.

Yuuri had used the Maou's strength. He had held Reyes-- the Taibhsear-- to keep anything else from happening. To stop the death. Yuuri didn't want anyone to die. But the Maou only wanted
justice. It was terrifying. It was always terrifying. So much power-- not being able to hold himself back from so much destruction. The booming voice in his mind. Kill. Kill. Kill. Because the Maou's justice was absolute. A life for a life.

Everything was so well defined within the Maou's justice. There was no confusion-- no will to save everyone-- no good at the heart of all. The Maou gave no second chances.

But Yuuri wasn't the Maou. He didn't want to be. He had never wanted to be--

It was so hard to use this power in a way-- in a way that didn't make Yuuri hate himself--

But this time-- There had been something else. Something... something...

_Burning._

Yuuri hissed and grabbed his hand as another wave of pain assaulted his nerves.

"Your Majesty!" Gisela held him steady, keeping him from knocking his tray of food all over the royal quilts. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Yuuri ground out, drawing a breath as the more powerful wave subsided. He wasn't sure why he'd lied. The ring hurt him-- but-- if Gisela knew that, she would try to take it away. Wolfram had given it to him-- Yuuri didn't want her to take it. His right hand covered his left-- knuckles white.

"Let me see--"

Yuuri closed his eyes. "No..." he whispered.

"Your Majesty," Gisela's voice was warning. "It is my duty to make sure you're alright. You're obviously in pain. Let. Me. See."

Yuuri swallowed thickly. "It's not so bad, really. It's just--" He opened his eyes, pleading.

Gisela face was a mask of determination. "Be that as it may..." A smile, too sweet to be real. "Let me see your hand, Your Majesty."

Yuuri looked down at his own hands, shaking slightly as he uncovered his left. The ring was so silver, almost white. "It only stings a little. Only sometimes." Gisela's hand fell over his.

"Wolfram-- Wolfram gave it to me. It has some of him-- some of his magic is in it. I think Anissina helped him make it for me. He said--" Yuuri babbled on, afraid of silence. "Wolfram said it was a king's ring, and that I ought to have one." Green light slid over his hand, tinting the sheets and dulling the ache.

"It's alright, Your Majesty." Gisela soothed, sensing his discomfort. "I'm sure Sir Belefield would never give you anything harmful-- that he knew of." Her fingers fell onto the ring itself. "Can I see it, for just a moment? I won't take long, I just--"

"It doesn't come off." Yuuri said in a rush.

"Humm." Gisela frowned.

Yuuri didn't like that sound. "And-- and it doesn't hurt for long-- when it does." Yuuri laughed nervously. "It's like Wolfram's here-- you know? I'm sure I do stupid things every day-- It's like the ring reminding me-- reminding me not to be such a wimp all the time."
"All the same..." Gisela murmured, deep in thought. "I'll have to talk to Miss Anissina about its construction. There are a lot of reasons it could be... reacting..."

"Like what?" Yuuri took his hand back from Gisela, rubbing the ring and his finger lightly. There was-- something-- ominous. It made him slightly sick... but he didn't know why... didn't want to think about it.

Gisela sighed. "Well, the most simple explanation would be a conflict of magic. Water and fire are opposites... It could just be a power clash."

Yuuri nodded. "That makes sense I suppose..."

"At any rate," Gisela's voice lightened, "I'll be able to talk to Miss Anissina about this soon. There's still a meeting to be held. A pause. "Once you finish your meal of course."

Another nervous laugh. "Right." Yuuri looked down at his food. It suddenly didn't seem as appealing, but Yuuri was hungry, and after a few minutes he had managed to eat enough to satisfy Gisela.

Gisela insisted that she make sure he could stand up without feeling dizzy before she left the room for him to change. "I'll be right outside. We can go to the Conference Hall together."

Yuuri nodded and headed over to the wardrobe as the door clicked shut. Wolfram's ring burned slightly as Yuuri did up the buttons of his uniform. The shot of pain seemed to travel up his arm, settling in his elbow until Yuuri shook his hand to jostle it away.

Water and fire are opposites...

Yuuri frowned and made his way to the door, pausing for a moment as he passed the mirror. His hair was sticking up more than usual and there were still lines on his cheek from his pillow. His school uniform made him look young-- feel younger than he should.

"Your Majesty?" Gisela's voice from beyond the door.

Yuuri shook his head to clear it. He didn't have time to doubt himself-- to be a wimp. "Coming!" he answered, and opened the door.

* * *

The Conference Hall seemed too large for the small gathering of people clustered around one end of the long table. Conrad had been waiting with Gisela outside his room, and as the three of them entered, the Conference Hall fell silent. Gwendal, Gunter, Murata, and Anissina were all waiting for them.

Murata in particular seemed to be in a foul mood. "Now that Shibuya is here," he snapped in Gwendal's direction, "will you please tell us what all this is about?"

"In a moment." Gwendal's face was odd. So pale. Yuuri had never seen him look so tired.

"Gwendal, are you alright?" Yuuri asked as he approached the table.

Gwendal didn't answer.

"Have a seat, Your Majesty." Gunter chirped with his usual enthusiasm, gesturing toward the larger chair at the head of the table.
Yuuri had a Bad Feeling about this whole thing. He sat, stomach already tying itself in knots. "What's this all about then? Has something happened--" He had forgotten to ask Gisela-- he couldn't remember if Reyes and the Taibhsear were alright. Had he killed them? Yuuri's chest filled with dread.

"If everyone could please be seated... I will begin." Gwendal's voice was firm-- but softer than it should have been. "Except Sir Weller-- It's best you stay by His Majesty."

Yuuri looked up at Conrad, who moved to stand by his right, pleading with his eyes for some clue as to what was going on. But Conrad seemed to be as in the dark as he was. Everyone else took their seats-- Gwendal in the chair directly to his right.

After an uncomfortable silence Gwendal began. "I have called this meeting to inform His Majesty of recent events." Gwendal seemed to be addressing everyone, but his eyes stayed fixed on Yuuri. "I have been... remiss in telling you things in the past, and I have promised to do all I can not to keep you in the dark to even the most unpleasant matters."

Yuuri nodded. He didn't like this at all.

Gwendal continued. "There is something I have to tell you, Your Majesty. It is something that cannot wait-- Which is why with your permission I will tell you in the presence of those who will also be called upon to handle this matter. If you find this unacceptable I will tell you first, in private."

It was so surreal. What could have Gwendal acting this way? "Of course... If it will save time..."

Gwendal nodded slowly, and his eyes rose to Conrad. "Sir Weller, I will ask you to respond as His Majesty's protector for the moment. I will ask everyone to keep their emotions in check so that the situation can be handled as promptly as possible."

Yuuri looked up at Conrad to see that the other man's face had gone hard. His hand drifted down to settle on Yuuri's shoulder. A lump formed in Yuuri's throat. "Gwendal..." he croaked. "What--"

Gwendal got out of his chair and knelt in front of Yuuri. "Your Majesty, I understand that you will not be happy with me for keeping this from you. It was not-- It was not an easy decision, and I did it with the best intentions for the kingdom in mind. Once you knew, there would be no stopping your departure-- The situation with King Saralegui was far too delicate--"

"Gwendal--" Yuuri managed, heart beating out of his chest. A cold sweat forming on his skin. "What--"

"You cannot use your power now, Your Majesty. You are only just recovering-- You will be leaving as soon as you are able-- Please-- If you use your power now-- It will only take longer for us to get to him."

"Him?" Yuuri breathed.

He had just used his power... sleeping for three days... Wolfram should have been back by now. Wolfram should be here--

Oh god.

"What--" Yuuri's voice shook-- It was something else. It had to be something else.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Sir Belefield-- Wolfram was taken on the road to Lesser Gael. Yozak
and his Corporal are close-- They know where he is-- We can meet with them in Caloria and be upon Wolfram's captors within three days--"

The hand on his shoulder tightened. Yuuri couldn't believe it. "Wolfram's magic-- Wolfram-- He made it to Lesser Gael first though, right?" Wolfram could be-- he couldn't be-- Wolfram had to go to Lesser Gael because if he didn't he might die. If Wolfram hadn't even made it to Lesser Gael-- How much time did they have-- "It's been a month-- if he was just taken--" Something in Gwendal's face made him stop.

"Wolfram has been... in the hands of others for more than two weeks... He didn't make it to Lesser Gael. He had no chance to reaffirm his rites."

Conrad's hand clenched-- almost painful. "He can't be dead," Yuuri said... almost to himself. "Gwendal-- Wolfram-- Wolfram--"

"If they wanted to kill him-- they would have done it." Gwendal's voice was clipped, all emotion cut away. "They are taking him somewhere-- I've asked Anissina to modify her... boat for more passengers. It would make no sense for them to carry him so far if they did not want him alive for some purpose."

"But why--" Yuuri's face was wet. Tears. It wasn't real. Why was his body reacting if it wasn't real? "Why Wolfram? What do they--"

"I don't know."

All Yuuri could do was look at Gwendal's face-- but not even that-- the space between them. His mind buzzed. This wasn't right. Wolfram was supposed to come home-- Wolfram was-- Yuuri was finally starting to figure things out-- Wolfram was going to-- He was going to-- Wolfram was so... alive. He was so there and real and Wolfram. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't have been taken-- couldn't have been taken for two weeks-- couldn't be suffering.

Yuuri hissed-- clutching his hand. Burning.

Oh god.

He was going to be sick-- He was going to be sick--

"Your Majesty!" Conrad's voice-- Gisela's-- Gunter's panicked wail-- as Yuuri's vision blurred and he scrambled to the side-- out of his chair-- forward-- half falling-- hot cakes coming back up-- choking until he swallowed-- the taste of sweet dough and almost-vomit lingering in his mouth.

It had been two weeks since his ring started to really burn-- burn enough for him to notice-- burn enough for him to think about telling Murata so they could figure out what it was. "My ring--" Yuuri breathed, panting, breath coming too fast. "It's been hurting-- It's been hurting-- Wolfram's hurting, I know it. I KNEW... I should have--- I should have--"

"Shibuya--" Murata snapped, kneeling beside him. "If that's true--" His friend turned his face from the ground, making Yuuri look at him. "If that's true then we know Sir Belefield is still alive."

A shred of relief tore through him as his body shook with another wave of sobs. Conrad wrapped an arm around him.

Wolfram was taken-- alive-- hurting. Wolfram was taken--

Yuuri would get him back. He struggled for a moment to get his tears under control before wiping
his face with his sleeve. He stood. He couldn't cry now-- He had to do something. "You said Anissina had boats?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, the banana boat has been specially altered to seat six passengers."

"Gisela will be necessary," Gwendal started talking again, face still slightly pale. "And I will be coming too, along with Your Majesty and Sir Weller--"

The door swung open with a crash.

"Yuuri!" Sara screamed, tears falling down pale cheeks as he stood in the doorway-- robe nearly falling off his shoulders. A dozen guards stood behind him, looking distressed and out of place. Sara rushed into the Conference Hall, only to be stopped as Conrad stepped between him and Yuuri. Sara shrunk back and collapsed to the floor. His hair was disheveled and there was a large bruise blooming on his cheek. "Yuuri..." he whimpered, shaking.

"Sara?" Yuuri blinked. What else could possibly be going on?

"He's gone!" the other boy wailed. "He left me and I'm afraid he's done something terrible!"

This was all too much. "What?" Yuuri managed, falling into a nearby chair.

Gwendal's eyes narrowed. "How convenient."

"What?" Yuuri jumped to Sara's defense. "How is that--"

Murata stepped closer, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "Shibuya. Who exactly do you think took Sir Belefield?"

"What..." Yuuri breathed.

Murata continued. "Sir Voltaire said we'd be heading to Caloria. Sir Belefield was apprehended before he reached Lesser Gael-- They are taking him south." A pause. "Shou Shimeron."

This was too much. It didn't make sense. Yuuri couldn't think about all of it at once. "Stop..." A whisper. Then, "STOP!"

A room full of shocked faces.

It was all too confusing. Yuuri had to fix it. "Everyone sit down again." He forced himself to soften his voice. "You too, Sara."

The guards excused themselves, but assured Gwendal that they would be waiting just on the other side of the door if they were needed.

Yuuri took a breath. The most important thing was getting rid of all the confusion so he could go and get Wolfram. He didn't want to waste any time. "Sara-- Will you try to explain to everyone what exactly is happening?"

Sara looked shocked at being addressed first, and his eyes shifted about the room. "Yuuri... I just wanted to tell you--"

"Tell everyone." Yuuri was too determined to allow his fear to choke him. He had to do this. "I'm sorry, Sara-- I don't have time for you to tell me first. There is something I have to--" Another breath. "I would appreciate it if you could trust my friends. I trust everyone in this room completely. You don't have any reason to be afraid."
For a moment it seemed like Sara would refuse. His head fell forward-- hair covering most of his face. "Reyes is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Gunter snapped. "Your chambers were under heavy guard--"

Yuuri cut him off. Sara was scared enough to speak as it was. "It's alright, Gunter." He looked at Sara and forced a smile. "Why did he leave?"

Sara didn't look up. "I can't be sure... I tried to stop him..." The boy reached up to touch his wounded cheek. "He knew-- He must have known you'd find out--"

"Find out what?"

Finally, Sara's eyes rose, shining behind his tinted glasses with unshed tears. He looked at Yuuri. "I'm not sure what it was-- otherwise I'm certain he would have done worse to me before he left. He knew we were friends, Yuuri. He didn't trust me not to tell you any longer..." A line of wet slid down his cheek.

"Not to tell me what?" Yuuri pressed.

Sara took a shaky breath. "That he's the reason I'm here. He's the one-- who insisted I propose-- live here--"

"But what does that--" Yuuri started.

"He was convinced you wanted to conquer us-- all human nations. But Shou Shimeron has a smaller army than Dai Shimeron-- Fewer people than Subralea. It only made sense that we would be the first target--"

"That's preposterous!" Gunter wailed. "His Majesty would never instigate a war!"

"I know that!" Sara yelled. "I know Yuuri would never-- but Reyes-- my advisers wouldn't believe me. Reyes came with me to get close to your castle-- your troops-- how many men were ready for battle-- when you would attack. But I wanted him to stop-- I'm afraid..." Sara's eyes fell again. "I'm afraid he's panicked that he'll lose power in our court if he's proven wrong-- I'm afraid he'll do something drastic."

"For a man with the title of 'king' you seem to have little power over your kingdom." Gwendal's voice was cold.

Sara bristled. "Not all kings are as blessed as Yuuri in their advisers, Sir Voltaire."

"That," Murata started, "is very true. I'm sure you'll forgive me this, King Saralegui, but I'd like to insist that Lady Gisela check your... injuries."

Sara's hand came up-- tightening his robe around his neck. "I'm fine."

"I apologize, Your Majesty." Murata's voice was firm. "But given your state of dress and your mentions of... abuse... I'm sure you understand that any infidelity, forced or otherwise, suffered by the fiancé of the crown is treason-- and warrants the immediate dissolution of then engagement if not--"

"Enough!" Yuuri snapped. Sara had started crying in earnest--making his head ache.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Yuuri. I'm so sorry..." Sara mumbled, rocking slightly in his seat.
Yuuri ran a hand through his hair. "Look, we'll talk about that later. For now-- If there's nothing that can be handled immediately, we really should be going--"

"Where are you going?" Sara snapped out of his depression enough to look at Yuuri. "Don't leave me here... You don't know what they'll do to me! They all hate me-- Yuuri--"

"Okay," Yuuri interrupted. "Gwendal." He looked to the other man. "You said it seats six?"

Gwendal gave a terse nod. "But the passengers have already been decided--"

"Don't worry, Gwendal," Anissina spoke up. "I'll be happy to stay and assist Sir Christ in your absence."

Gunter paled.

"Besides," Anissina continued, now looking at Yuuri. "I think the princess will need some looking after with both her fathers absent." She smiled at him, just the smallest bit.

It was enough to keep him going. He was doing this right. Yuuri was finally doing something right. He would make Wolfram proud.

The conversation continued around him.

"But what about your ship?" Gunter asked. "Won't they need you to--"

"It's already been fully charged, thanks to Gwendal. And you should know better than most that once the coordinates are set there's little for the passangers to do--"

"So then we can go?" Yuuri interrupted, spinning Wolfram's ring on his scarred finger. "Is there anything else we need to do before we leave-- I want to go as soon as possible!"

"It will take a moment to gather my things..." Gisela's forehead was pinched in thought. "I want to be prepared for anything we may encounter."

"Of course." Yuuri licked his lips. "I want to be sure-- that you have everything you might need." A swallow. "For when we find him."

Gisela nodded and stood, excusing herself to prepare.

"The more I think about it," Murata said, fixing Sara with a hard gaze. "It may be beneficial to have His Majesty Saralegui with us. After all... any agents from Shou Shimeron should follow their king's orders..."

The voices around him began to fade as the adrenaline of shock finally started to drain away. There was still too much to even think about. So much that Yuuri could only let his mind cling to one thing:

Wolfram was in trouble, and Yuuri was going to save him.

********

********
Elsewhere

Everything was hot.


With each exhale Wolfram tried to push the pain away, but it kept coming back in. Out. In. Out.

The floor was hard beneath his back. Too hard against his skin. Too hot from the heat of his own flesh, but everything hurt too much to even consider moving.

He was alone again, and Wolfram was glad. He was grateful for the darkness, for the lack of abrasive cloth. Wolfram was still naked except for the bandages Yuuri-- not Yuuri-- Yuuri had put on him.

They were tight. Comforting. They held him. The bandages kept the fire from blooming from his arm and thigh like it felt it was slowly going to. Fire consuming his flesh-- the smell--

It was always like this. It had always been like this. There couldn't have ever been anything else. In the darkness he didn't have to close his eyes to become nothing.


Wolfram could hear his heartbeat echoing in his ears. He couldn't sleep. If he slept he would stop breathing-- every time-- slipping into unconsciousness to wake-- gasping. He had to focus on the breathing, on the way each heartbeat reminded him he was alive.

He didn't want to die.

Each heartbeat told him he was still alive-- How many seconds of silence meant his heart had stopped? Heart beating faster-- he was so anxious for each one--

But what if he thought about it too much and made his own heart stop? What if he didn't think about each beat? If he stopped thinking about his heart-- what if then it stopped beating?


His face was wet-- soaked in sweat and tears, and so when the air shifted beneath the tiny crack Wolfram felt it.

They were coming.

Then the light came beneath the door. A stripe of blinding yellow spilling over his face. Squinting- - A single figure in the doorway.

Relief flooded him. "Yu...ri..." His voice was so torn that Wolfram could hardly recognize it as his own.
"It's okay, Wolf." Yuuri's voice was soft-- his arms were strong as they helped him off the floor to lean against the wall. "It's time to change the bandages."

"No!" Wolfram hissed-- struggling only made the pain travel to his spine. Everywhere on fire. The bandages stuck to his skin-- taking flesh with them each time they were changed. "It hurts..."

"Shh," Yuuri soothed, before kissing him softly. His breath shook against Wolfram's cheek. "It's better if I change them-- If we leave them too long..." A pause. Another kiss-- tongue sliding gently between his lips. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes," Wolfram whispered. It was true. He could do anything for Yuuri.

Wolfram held as still as he could while the pain drove him in and out of consciousness. In and Out. Gentle hands. So much pain. Yuuri's voice-- his touch. The sound of flesh ripping away.


Yuuri's breath ruffled his hair. The new bandages were nearly finished-- clean white winding over broken skin.

It still bled through.

"How is Greta?" The question wasn't his-- the person he used to be...

"She's fine," Yuuri answered him in a whisper. "She's so clever-- You taught her so much."

Wolfram smiled. Adopting Greta was by far the best decision the wimp had ever made. "Wimp," Wolfram reminded him.

Yuuri put a hand on Wolfram's cheek. "Yeah..." Yuuri kissed him one more time and then pressed a familiar disk between Wolfram's parted lips.

Wolfram obeyed-- chewed and swallowed the sugar-coated dirt.

The colors would help-- let him fade away-- become nothing and everything at once-- the boundaries of his body and mind dissolved in the sweet taste of colors.

Yuuri stood-- turned-- and for a while Wolfram was alone. His heart beat. He breathed. The pain came in waves but the colors came up and swept him away. Drowning.

The others came again. They always came. In and out and in and out. Hurting him. It had always been like this. They would come and then they would speak words.

Yuuri was there-- standing to the side-- watching over him.

The others spoke-- black mouths wide, gaping holes that tried to suck him in. The others were hollow. They didn't have colors inside.

Wolfram's head hurt-- always hurt-- but somehow so much worse. They had a stone--

It hurt too much to run away. Always hurt--

"No!" His own voice was far away-- an echo in his mind.

No.
They wanted something-- asked him things-- words that didn't make sense. Things he didn't know.

It hurt, but he was outside his own reality. He could feel their hands-- their breath-- as they ran the stone over him. Hot pain lancing through him and lingering in patterns through his veins.

And suddenly it didn't hurt at all. The touch became something else entirely. He arched into that touch of pain-- pleasure in places and ways he had never thought. The world dissolved. His body fell away. Nothing left, only feeling. Touching-- touching-- more.

He came.

********
********
Still Elsewhere
********

He couldn't stand it any longer.

Marques had to leave the little room-- sounds of Wolfram's pain and broken pleasure lingering behind him, chasing him as he turned the corner and opened the door to the outside of their oddly constructed carriage. He sat on the edge-- feet on solid ground-- and tried to breathe.

They wouldn't miss him now. Not for a while at least.

The sky was clear. Not a single cloud in the entire expanse of blue. The sun warmed his face as he shivered.

He could never have imagined it would be this hard to please a god.

He must have done something wrong. This couldn't be right. Someone should have found them by now. Was Sir Grier's reputation all talk? Was it possible that he wasn't even looking? Was it possible something had happened to Luke-- Had he dropped the note?

Marques kept running everything over and over in his mind. If no one else came-- he would have to rescue Wolf. But if that happened-- The entire world would burn--

Or so he had been told.

Marques had never been particularly religious. Not like his parents back in Voltaire or Luke, leaving offerings at temples or praying for things. He had always assumed that if there even was an After World he would do something to damn himself eventually-- lost along the lay lines with no place for his soul to rest for all eternity. Marques was a soldier-- he could die at any time-- and so had always lived like every day would be his last.

That day-- two men from his platoon had died. Those things kept coming. Puppets without strings that didn't die or bleed. Didn't tire.

They had said the entire world was at war. Every soldier in the continent at arms against an undefeatable army from the south. Even Lady Cheri was fighting-- protecting the inner castle gates.

He and Luke had been stationed to the west, between the outer wall and one of the abandoned sectors of the town. The places between houses had been small-- so hard to even wield a blade-- so easy to get lost.
Marques had gotten turned around-- separated from Luke-- from everyone. Death and fire clouded his lungs and his ears had been too full of distant crashes and screams. And then suddenly the sounds of screaming-- of death-- stopped. The world fell into an eerie silence outside the ringing in his ears. There was a beam of light in the sky-- a flash.

He had ducked around a corner-- waiting for the world to end. Then, by his feet, what must have been a dozen crumpled soldiers. The puppets had stopped-- His Majesty-- The Maou must have done something-- saved them all.

Marques turned again-- trying to go back the way he came-- to make sure Luke had survived-- and there before him stood the Original King.

Lord Shinou.

He was exactly the same-- He looked exactly like he did in the painting that hung in the East Hall.

Marques blinked, but when he opened his eyes... *He* was still there.

Smirking.

*Am I dead?* The thought flashed through his mind-- running on a loop. But-- Marques was sure he would have remembered dying-- But no-- Marques hadn't died that day. Shinou had given him a task but--

He must have done something wrong.

This couldn't be the way it was supposed to happen.

Marques took one final deep breath of clean spring air and stood. He had to get back. His hand lingered on the wooden door-frame to the outside for a moment-- A swallow. He *hated* that room.

The carriage was actually quite remarkable-- perfectly crafted to serve its morbid purpose. From the outside it looked no different from the dozens of carriages that routinely made their way across the countryside housing performers and traveling merchants. It had three separate compartments and took two strong horses and a smooth road to move at a crawl.

They kept Wolf in the back room-- Marques had never seen anything like it before. A box inside a box-- on wooden sliders on all sides so that inside felt like nothing even when the wheels caught a bump or they pushed the horses to trot. And the inside-- the inside was impossibly dark.

So dark that when Marques stepped back inside the carriage and turned the corner that blocked the view of outside from Wolf’s room, everything was green for several seconds and Marques had to pause to blink. Once his eyes readjusted he could see that Wolf was where he'd left him-- still propped against the wall-- so pale. He could also see that Velasco was smiling.

"Clean him up and put some clothes on him-- Our Sir Belefield deserves a little reward for his performance."

Marques fought a frown and managed a brief nod, spinning on his heel to go and fetch some spare clothes from his bag. The ones Wolf had from before were beyond ruined.

As he walked he tried to suppress the dread that welled in his gut. What had Wolf done? Had he broken? Had he deciphered the code?

If Wolf gave that away-- Marques could only begin to imagine the consequences. That code-- the
code that Sir Voltaire must have implemented after Shou Shimeron's numbers were discovered--
those strange markings had opened a floodgate of paranoia within Shou Shimeron-- Marques
couldn't imagine what might happen if any of Shou Shimeron's fears were remotely confirmed.

And Wolf-- What had he done to Wolf? It was the only thing he could do to help. Marques
suffered every day from the presence of the human stone-- and what Velasco and Julian had put
Wolf through-- no one could withstand that forever. Not even someone as stubborn as Wolf.

Giving him those cookies-- that poison-- was the only thing that Marques could do to keep him
quiet. To protect Wolfram from himself. But that could only be a temporary solution-- Velasco and
Julian hardly trusted him as it was-- probably planned to dispose of him soon, now that he had
served his traitor's purpose. The poison only stayed in the blood so long and Velasco was already
suspicious. The poison made it harder for Wolf to heal, too-- It had been a risk, sneaking them to
him.

Marques pulled a clean shirt and trousers from his pack and prepared a clean towel and small
bucket of water, before heading back to Wolf's room.

He ran into Julian in the small space between chambers. The other man smirked and flicked his
braid over his shoulder. "Your little wolf wrote his name. That should be enough to work
something out by nightfall. His Majesty should be pleased."

Marques swallowed. "Well it certainly took you long enough." Then he brushed past and continued
on his way.

Wolf was alone in his little room. Velasco must have gone outside to prepare the horses so that
they could start moving again. Marques left the door open-- letting the sunlight ricochet into the
room. Marques took a few steps forward so he could kneel beside Wolf. His friend was still
propped against the wall, staring in to space with over-wide pupils and a blank expression.

It scared him.

"Wolf..." he whispered, and moved some stray strands of damp hair from Wolf's forehead.

Wolf blinked and looked at him-- brow furrowed in concentration. "Yuuri..." he breathed.

Marques had no idea why Wolf had decided he was his former fiancé-- but it had certainly made
handling the Prince Prude more manageable. "I'm going to clean you up a bit, alright? And then
some clothes--"

"No." Wolf interrupted with a frown. "Hurts."

"I'm sorry." Marques leaned forward to kiss Wolf's damp forehead. As nice as it was to get to see
Wolf naked, it was cold in the dark room and Marques didn't want to add to Wolf's pain more than
he already had.

"I remembered." Wolf's voice was broken-- forced to rasps from so much screaming. "I
remembered how to write my name."

"Oh..." Marques managed, and leaned back to wet the towel in the bucket of water.

"The 'o' is small... just like you taught me-- silly scribbles." Wolfram licked his cracked lips and
smiled.

Marques pressed the wet towel against Wolf's cheek. "That's good, Wolf." The damage had already
been done and Wolf seemed pleased-- He wouldn't take that away. Marques let his eyes wander down Wolf's body. The poison was keeping Wolf's bruises from healing-- not to mention the burns.

What if he had been giving Wolf too much? His reaction to the pain today-- the poison had twisted his mind until torture became confused with ecstasy. Marques had only seen it happen once before, with another man he had assisted with during his attempts to gain Velasco's trust-- and that man hadn't survived much longer--

Marques leaned forward to lick the remnants of half-dried come from Wolf's chest. It would be such a waste to wash away--

"Don't." Wolf's good arm came up to try to push him away. "Dirty."

Marques ran his tongue over a particularly tantalizing drop before he sat up. At least Wolf remembered something about where he was. Velasco used that white powder trick nearly every time. Salt. It was common salt but it did wonders for terrifying his captives-- made them feel corrupted both inside and out. "It's okay, Wolf--"

"No."

Marques sighed. "Alright." And then continued cleaning Wolf with the towel.

The room rocked for a moment-- and the pattern of light through the branches that bounced into the room shifted. Julian must have started the horses.

"I hate boats," Wolf whispered, turning a bit green.

"I know," Marques soothed.

Once Wolf was as clean as he was going to get Marques began maneuvering his feet into the legs of the clean trousers. He paid special attention to Wolf's bandaged leg when he reached it. Wolf squirmed and protested until Marques silenced him with kisses. Once Wolf was relatively calm again Marques moved his attention to Wolf's arm-- blood was already soaking through the bandages-- He would need to change them again soon--

This couldn't be right. Where was Grier? Where was Luke?

He must have done something wrong.

******

******

Southern Caloria
Nine Hours Later

******

Yuuri was sure he would never be able to sleep again. His heart was still pounding from their swift ride across the Great Sea. His palms were slick with sweat and his clothes were damp and stiff with half-dry salt.

The plan had been to stop and rest for a few hours once they made landfall-- but Sara was the only one who seemed to be able to get any sleep. As soon as they could, Yuuri would have to go and wake him. He couldn't wait.

There would be time to sleep later. After they rescued Wolfram.
The sun had risen about an hour ago—blinding them for the last part of their journey—but now the orange light bathed the beach with color as Conrad and Gwendal moved the boat on land and hid it under the brush. Sara had walked inland a bit, but was still in sight, curled up to sleep under a tree. For now Gisela was watching him.

Yuuri paced along the beach, sand grinding its way slowly through his socks as he watched the boat slowly disappear into the scenery just off the shore. He wanted things to move faster. He wanted to be doing something so he could concentrate on anything but thinking. Anything but the dread and relief he felt every time Wolfram's ring burned.

Alive but hurting.

"You should rest, Shibuya. There's nothing you can do right now."

Yuuri stiffened. He had forgotten Murata was there. "I can't," he managed, turning to look at his friend.

"Sir Grier won't arrive with horses for another few hours—If we have to stop later because you're too tired to ride—"

"I won't be!" Yuuri snapped, tightening his hands into fists. "I-- how could you even think--"

"I'm just trying to make you see reason, Shibuya. Everyone's mind dulls without sleep—Besides, Sir Belefield wouldn't want you to put your health at risk." Murata put a hand on his shoulder.

Yuuri frowned. "I don't think sleep deprivation is anything compared to what--" He paused. Yuuri couldn't even imagine— he didn't want to. "Wolfram..." he whispered, and reached to twirl the ring on his finger. "He'll be alright." Yuuri said almost to himself. "He has to be alright... Murata... Why-- How did this happen?"

The hand on his shoulder tightened. "Shibuya... This isn't your fault."

Yuuri looked down, watching the sliver band catch the light as he twirled it. "But it is." Yuuri had to say something—explain—before Murata told him it wasn't his fault again. "It's... If Gwendal didn't have to worry about how I would react— If I had been better— If everyone actually trusted me—" He pulled out of his friend's grasp—anger rising in his gut. "How many times is something like this going to--!"

"Shibuya, stop it!" Murata yelled back at him, before glancing at the quiet beach surrounding them and starting again in a lower tone. "This is not your fault-- I'll tell you a hundred times if I have to—but that would hardly be a good use of time. You impressed everyone last night with how you handled--"

"But that's the problem!" Yuuri continued. "I should be able to handle everything well! Everyone expects me to fail--"

"No," Murata interrupted. "Everyone just wants to protect you. You are our king and--"

"I don't care!" Yuuri's voice had started to rise, and it took almost all of his self control to keep it in check. He felt like he was going to cry again. "We should have been protecting Wolfram, he--"

"Sir Belefield is a Lieutenant," Murata snapped. "This is a risk of his position. Do you think he would want us to spare you any protection?"

Yuuri didn't have any words left. He made a noise of frustration and sat on the beach, back to
Murata sat beside him, and for a while they were just quiet. Then, "Shibuya, you need to rest."

"I can't," Yuuri breathed. "I promised myself-- I promised myself that first time-- when Shinou took his heart and he died. I promised myself I would protect him. That I wouldn't take him for granted. But then I did. I was so caught up in other things-- I should have noticed sooner-- I should have found you or Anissina when the ring first started to burn."

Murata sighed. "Even if you had told me, there's no way I can be sure I would have made the connection. Everyone has had lot on their mind-- And I promise you, Shibuya, you're not the only one who is wasting their thoughts on guilt. I'm sure both of Sir Belefield's brothers are giving themselves just as hard a time."

Yuuri pressed his forehead against his knees-- curling into himself. "I hate this."

"We all do," Murata answered solemnly.

Yuuri swallowed thickly. He had to ask. "What... What are they doing to him?"

"Shibuya--"

"No! I want you to tell me, Murata. Stop protecting me from things because I might-- Please."

Yuuri raised his head to look Murata in his lens-covered eyes.

"There is no way to know for sure." Murata's voice was dark. "We lose scouts occasionally in human territories-- Especially in Shou Shimeron." A pause. "We can't know what happens to them because they don't come back."

"But--" Yuuri sputtered, appalled. "Don't we look for them? Those soldiers have families, too! Friends! People who-- People who care about them and we just let them disappear?!"

"It's not as if nothing is done-- It's just that after a certain amount of time it becomes unlikely that anyone captured is still alive--"

"They've had Wolfram for weeks!" Yuuri couldn't take it. He squeezed his knees tighter-- tears welling in his eyes-- his voice. "They've been hurting him for weeks. I've felt it-- What are they doing to him? What do they want him for?"

Silence.

"If you really want the answers to that, Shibuya, then I'm not the one you should be asking." Murata's glasses had caught the light. Deep orange.

Yuuri didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I wouldn't be surprised if your newly-ex fiancé was behind Sir Belefield's disappearance--"

"No!" Yuuri interrupted. "You saw it too-- Reyes was the one who--"

"We have nothing to base Saralegui's innocence on besides his word."

"Why is that never good enough?!

Murata looked at him. "Have you forgotten King Saralegui and Sir Belefield's little sword fight?"
Sir Weller told me a few of the more interesting details. King Saralegui lied about the sharpness of his blade-- Sir Belefield could have been injured then, or worse."

"But..." Yuuri managed... Had Sara's sword really been that sharp? "Nothing bad happened-- they were both fine-- Sara was just a bit... jealous."

"So because Saralegui was not successful in his attempt to harm Sir Belefield you will forgive him?"

"No!" Yuuri paused. "I..." This was all so hard. "Even if Sara did lie about the sword-- that's different then being behind something like this. Besides, Sara was with us most of the time at the castle, and Conrad said he couldn't even send unsupervised letters back to Shimeron-- And Sara didn't even know where Wolfram was-- Sara thought Wolfram was in Belefield!" Yuuri took Murata's silence as encouragement and so he continued. "And you said scouts occasionally disappear-- how do we even know that the people who have Wolfram took him on purpose-- or even know who he is?"

Murata sighed. "You'll never think badly of anyone will you, Shibuya? You'll apologize to the man holding the knife that cut out your heart. That terrifies us, you know. Me, Sir Weller-- Everyone. The world is full of darkness, and perhaps it's true that you've been protected from too much of it. There are people who are not good-- who you cannot change with kindness-- who will hurt others without remorse. That you do not recognize this makes you kind, Shibuya. But it is also your greatest weakness."

Yuuri frowned. He knew there were cruel people in the world-- he just didn't think that Sara was one of them. "Well I still think you're too hard on Sara."

"Believe me, Shibuya. If one of us has to be wrong on this I hope it is me. But I have to help prepare you to face the worst scenario if it comes. It is my duty to advise you the best that I can."

Yuuri sighed and looked out at the water. "Thanks."

The waves kept crashing on the shore-- rushing in and out. It was so beautiful-- so peaceful despite the storm of thoughts that raged in his mind.

* * *

Yuuri's body jerked back into awareness and he opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep against Murata's shoulder.

"It's alright, Shibuya. You weren't asleep ten minutes. Sir Grier hasn't arrived."

Some of the panic left, but not all. His heart raced. "Right." Sleep still clung to him-- making everything tired and slow despite the rapid beating of his heart. "I guess I'll go further in if I'm going to try to sleep-- besides, if I sleep on you then how will you get any rest?"

Murata smirked at him. "Well, a cuddle with you would be worth it."

Yuuri mumbled something vague before he blushed and stumbled off toward the line of trees. He decided that wandering too far wouldn't be the best idea, and so he made his way to where Sara was sleeping beneath a tree.

The other boy stirred and looked up at him with bleary eyes at his approach. "Yuu... ri?"

"Sorry to wake you." Yuuri smiled, sitting against a tree of his own a few feet away. It was odd--
His conversation with Murata-- Yuuri didn't know how he was supposed to act around Sara anymore.

"It's okay." Sara sat up. "I'm still too nauseous to sleep." He shuddered. "That boat-- how can you stand it?"

Wolfram was always nauseous on boats. Yuuri swallowed. "I suppose I'm too worried to be seasick."

"Yuuri..." Sara looked away. "What exactly is going on? Why are we here-- no one tells me anything. I feel like... I feel like a prisoner."

Even through his exhaustion Yuuri managed to feel somewhat relieved. If Sara didn't even know why they were here-- there was no way he could have done anything to hurt Wolfram. "Don't worry, Sara. You're not a prisoner. It's my fault you're here--" Yuuri let his head fall back against the tree behind him. "You said you were uncomfortable staying in the castle while I was gone-- and since we were in such a hurry I decided that the easiest thing would be for you to come too."

"Oh," Sara answered softly. "Why are we in such a hurry?"

Yuuri's entire body tensed. To put it in words-- to think about it again-- but he was always thinking about it... how would it hurt? "It's Wolfram... He's been captured-- and they're hurting him-- and we have to save him."

Sara worried his lip. "But we traveled into the sun-- we came east. You told me Sir Belefield was seeing his family in his home country."

Guilt.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I lied to you about that-- You know how paranoid... Anyway, I had to because Wolfram was going somewhere really dangerous and so we had to make sure nothing went wrong." Yuuri screwed his eyes shut. But something did go wrong-- very, very, wrong.

"And so... Sir Belefield?" Sara questioned.

Yuuri forced his eyes open. "He got captured. They're hurting him. I have to save him."

Sara was quiet for a while. "How can you know someone is hurting Sir Belefield? If he simply disappeared isn't it also possible he simply deserted? That sort of thing is not unheard of--"

"No," Yuuri snapped. "Sorry, Sara, but you don't know Wolfram. Besides... I know he's in pain."

Sara tilted his head. "How can you know something like that?"

"My ring," Yuuri answered, twirling it on his finger. "Wolfram gave it to me-- It's magic-- Even though Wolfram didn't mean it to work the way it does-- it hurts when he hurts-- or at least we're pretty sure that's what's happening--"

"But what if you're wrong?" Sara interrupted. "He could be fine! Besides, why would anyone want to take Sir Belefield?"

Yuuri paused. He couldn't help but remember Murata's suspicions. "I don't know. But-- Sara." A breath. "We're pretty sure that whoever has him is taking him toward Shou Shimeron-- You wouldn't have any idea why, would you?" It all came out in a rush.
Sara's head fell forward, glasses catching the light. "Why are you so sure it's Shou Shimeron?-- Demons in the woods-- Sir Belefield could have been their latest victim."

"What?!!" Yuuri sputtered. "What do you mean 'demons in the woods'??"

"Like that poor girl." Sara looked up at him. "Reyes killed her because she tried to kill me-- but I still pity her. Stolen child. The demons in the mountains-- Lesser Gael-- They take human children and replace them with their demon filth. Children that age too slow. They steal human children to use for their dark magic-- to rape with their false gods and prophecy."

Yuuri had never seen Sara look or speak this way before. It was scary. "Um..." Yuuri managed. "I don't think anyone from Lesser Gael took Wolfram..."

"Maybe not," Sara snapped. "But you shouldn't be so quick to assume that the people who have your Sir Belefield are human."

Yuuri raised a hand to rub his tired face. "Alright," Yuuri sighed as his head fell back against the tree again. He could still hear the waves crashing on the beach. Such a steady sound. The world went on around him even when his own little world seemed like it was going to fall apart. "Alright," he whispered again.

And then he fell asleep.

*******

*******

Southern Caloria
Fifteen Hours Later

*******

It was dark.

The campfire crackled, sending shapes and shadows into the surrounding woods. Occasionally an animal would scurry in the underbrush or an owl would cry out, making him stiffen in alert for half a moment. Tonight he had first watch, but Conrad was too full of thoughts to sleep. Maybe he would just stay up tonight, let the others get their rest.

The fire settled with a soft crash, sending sparks and smoke into the air. He would have to feed it soon.

Conrad could smell the smoke, the fire, the outside. It had been a long time since he'd had to keep watch around a fire. Keeping watch always used to calm him. The sounds of the fire, being under trees and stars. But now the fire reminded him of his little brother-- of how he'd failed to protect him. Again.

It was so easy to remember a time when Wolfram followed him everywhere. When he was "little big brother" instead of Weller. He had always--

Losing Wolfram had always been the worst consequence of his mixed birth.

Gwendal had always known what he was. Was too level headed to get overly attached-- too busy. But Wolfram-- Wolfram had been his baby brother, his family. Conrad had done everything to please him-- keep him close. But the one thing he couldn't control had driven him away and for a while Conrad had lost his reason to be good. To want skill for anything but death.
And then there had been Julia. And then there had been Yuuri. And even though he had done his duty--protected Yuuri--his king--It still hurt to have failed as an older brother. Especially now that Wolfram had finally started to accept him again.

Thanks to Yuuri.

Wolfram trusted him to take care of Yuuri, and Conrad had done it--but who did that leave to look after Wolfram?

It was true that Wolfram had been trained to handle this kind of scenario--as well trained as anyone in his position in the army. But that training--it only offered hope for three days. It taught soldiers that it was alright for them to die to protect their king.

Conrad knew that Wolfram wouldn't hesitate to give his life for Yuuri--the same way he would. Conrad knew he should be able to respect that. But...to think of his little brother suffering under weeks of torture--to think of coming too late...

And even if they did find him--put his body back together--there was no guarantee that his mind--that Wolfram would ever be the same again. Two weeks was more than enough to break any man.

What was worse, whoever had Wolfram knew what they were doing. Not many could elude Yozak for this long.

Conrad sighed.

Any comfort he might have gotten from his friend's presence was extinguished by the darkness of his brother's circumstances. Normally when he and Yozak met they would have time to drink--to talk. The drinking helped with the talking when it came to Yozak. Made it possible to ignore all the complications.

Made it possible to forget...lose himself in flesh and sweat...

He blinked. Now wasn't the time.

But Yozak's abilities as a spy were one of the few things that gave him any comfort--that and the slow rise and fall of Yuuri's chest as he slept a few feet away.

If anyone could find Wolfram it was Yozak.

Conrad shifted slightly, putting more weight on his right leg. Even though they were in the scarcely inhabited southern region of Caloria, he had to be prepared for anything. He forced the worries down to a dull hum in the back of his mind as he sharpened his senses to the area around him.

Most of their party was sleeping soundly, exhaustion drowning out the worry they all felt. Yuuri's brow would wrinkle occasionally with troubled dreams--face half hidden in shadow. Conrad hoped he wouldn't remember them in the morning--he certainly had enough to be worried about.

Yuuri was really growing up. Despite the agony and shock that they all had felt to hear of Wolfram's capture, Yuuri had managed to keep control of the difficult situation. He had been so focused in his goal of getting to Wolfram as quickly as possible that he had seemed to glaze over the termination of his engagement to King Saralegui.

Conrad was certainly glad that business was finished. They were closer and closer to revealing the snake that Saralegui really was. If he had anything to do with Wolfram's capture--Conrad wouldn't
need a sword to squeeze the life from the human king’s pale neck.

He hated being forced to allow Saraleui to sleep anywhere near Yuuri. Close enough to touch. Conrad's eyes narrowed despite himself as he watched them.

And then, almost before he realized why, his hand was on the hilt of his sword. Saralegui had shifted-- just turning-- no-- sitting up. Conrad's hand tightened. The human king moved silently, sitting up-- looking around. Saralegui looked at him, eyes small without his glasses-- and paused.

Then he lay down again-- feigning sleep.

Conrad didn't take his hand from the hilt of his sword. It was going to be a long night.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
Next Morning

********

They left her.

Both of them.

But the worst part was that Wolfram was in trouble and there was nothing she could do to help.

Yuuri had come into her room suddenly-- waking her. He was distracted and disheveled-- like even coming to tell her had been a last-minute afterthought. He had told her what was happening. Where he was going-- Why. Yuuri had promised he would bring Wolfram back to her safely.

There was a time when Yuuri saying that sort of thing would have made her feel better...

But that had been before. Before Yuuri left them for a year after promising to return. And he did come back-- it wasn't that Yuuri had broken that promise. He came home. Greta had been so happy when he did-- But--

But more and more Greta had realized that Yuuri's return had been outside of his control. And that Yuuri had chosen another life over the one he had with her-- with Wolfram.

So Yuuri had promised to bring Wolfram back, and Greta knew he wanted that to happen-- But-- so much was outside of her father's control. How could Yuuri make a promise he had no way of keeping? How could a promise like that make her feel better?

Wolfram hadn't promised he would come home safe-- That night when he had left.

Greta was starting to understand why.

And it was scary. It was so scary that Greta wished she didn't understand. That Yuuri's promise could make her feel better.

Now nothing could ease her worry-- her terror over what might happen to her Papa Wolf.

Why did it have to be Wolfram?

Greta wanted to cry-- to scream and complain and do something. But there was nothing inside she
could make come out. No one she could bear to talk to.

Anissina had stayed, but Greta-- she knew that Anissina would listen to her-- try to make her feel better. But talking wouldn't change what was happening to Wolfram, and Anissina was so strong-- Greta was sure she was being silly, worrying about things she couldn't change by worrying. Greta didn't want Anissina to be disappointed in her.

And so Greta tried to forget, spend whole seconds not thinking about Wolfram and Yuuri and how alone she felt without them. How scared she was for Wolfram. Yuuri had said he was taken-- but she didn't know by whom-- or why.

And Greta knew about torture. About what happened when people got taken.

They had hurt Hube-- in that dungeon-- she brought him food when the guards weren't looking. But Wolfram was all alone--

Who would sneak him food when the guards weren't looking?

Tears started to build in the corners of her eyes as Greta watched Wolri play with a bit of string on the edge of her bedroom carpet.

Everything was so wrong.

Wolfram was supposed to be here with her-- teaching her riding and swordplay and history-- He was supposed to take care of her. Of Yuuri.

Yuuri was supposed to be here-- make her smile-- to love her no matter what.

But now both of them were gone and she was a little human orphan in a fancy demon dress. In a big room with soft pillows and curtains on her bed. She didn't belong.

Greta let a few tears slide down her cheeks before she wiped her face with her handkerchief and picked Wolri off the rug.

She had to get out.

* * *

In the end Greta didn't go very far. Her mind got lost and her feet carried her out of the main gates and around to the stables. Wilfrido's father was nowhere in sight, but Greta kept her footsteps quiet as she slipped through the big doors. Even from here she could see that Ao's stall was empty.

She leaned back, closing the door behind her so she could put Wolri down without worrying about him getting lost outside. The little cat moved slowly for a while-- careful paws-- sniffing everything. Greta made her way to Hidlefuns, who snorted at her approach.

Greta held up her hand so he could lick the salt, big hooves thumping on the ground as the white stallion shifted in his stall.

"He bites, you know."

Greta froze. Her heart sped up like it always did around Wilfrido. She didn't know why she had come here-- she certainly didn't want to talk to him about what was happening. How she was feeling. "Not me," Greta snapped, coming to Hidlefuns' defense. "He must only bite people who are mean."
"Hey, I treat him good!" The boy came to stand beside her, now talking to the horse. "Who brushes you every day? Don't you like being all clean and pretty?"

Hidlefuns stopped licking Greta's hand to snort and turn around in his stall, flipping his tail.

Greta laughed despite herself and turned to Wilfrido. "I guess he just likes me more."

"Well it's hard not to like the little princess," Wilfrido answered, making her blush. "But what is the little princess doing out here in the stables? Here to help me clean the troughs?"

"Do you need help?" Greta asked, maybe a little to eagerly. Cleaning-- doing something with her hands was sure to keep her distracted.

Wilfrido looked at her like she had grown another head. "I was kidding." A pause. "If you really want to help me you can keep your little monster from eating any more birds." Wilfrido turned and made his way back to the other side of the stables, where he must have been working before she arrived.

Greta frowned. "He's not a little monster!" Tears welled in her eyes. "Wolfram-- Wolfram gave him to me! He's just a little kitten! He didn't know not to eat your father's stupid bird!"

Wilfrido kept his back to her. "Fine." Then he entered the far stall and started sweeping out the dirty hay. Ao's stall wasn't the only empty one-- half a dozen of the places reserved for the royal horses were empty-- They had gone to find Wolfram.

Greta knelt by where Wolri was exploring a small pile of clean hay-- little nose twitching rapidly as he tried to take in so many new smells at once. Greta picked up a particularly long strand of hay and dragged it temptingly along the ground until Wolri's tail twitched and the little kitten pounced.

It was strange how easy it was to lose herself in such a simple game, though Greta supposed she did want to be lost. Greta didn't look up again until her feet went numb and she had to change positions-- no longer caring if her dress got dirty. Wilfrido had finished sweeping three more of the empty stalls and had started covering the ground inside with a fresh layer of hay. Greta caught his eyes for a moment when he snuck a glance in her direction. Wilfrido looked away quickly, his now messy braid flipping over his shoulder.

Greta half suppressed a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Wilfrido grumbled-- acting like she hadn't caught him looking.

Greta shook her head. "Nothing, really... It's just--"

"What?" Wilfrido crossed his arms, now standing straight as he looked at her from across the stables. His proud stature made the strands of hay and mussed hair sticking out at odd angles all the more ridiculous.

"Your... hair..." Greta managed before a proper laugh bubbled up inside her. But then she had to close her eyes to keep the laughter from melting into tears. When she opened them Wilfrido was only a few feet away.

"Well, not everyone has servants for that kind of thing," he humphed, and then reached to pull the tie from the end of his dark hair.

Even though Wilfrido had had long hair for the entire time she'd known him-- Wilfrido's father and Gwendal too-- it was still a bit odd that a boy would have longer hair than hers.
Normally Greta would have snapped when Wilfrido accused her of having servants to do her hair--The maids only helped before balls and other functions!-- but she didn't feel like fighting anymore, and so instead Greta stood and held out her hand for the little black tie. "Let me do it-- It must be annoying to do it yourself."

For a while Wilfrido just looked at her-- silence stretching out and making her palms sweat. But then, slowly, Wilfrido handed her the tie.

Greta hid the sudden fluttering in her stomach behind a grin. This was going to be fun. "Come sit down-- It will be easier." She turned and scouted out a small wooden stool, gesturing for Wilfrido to sit.

Wilfrido made his way to the designated seat slowly. "Don't do anything weird, okay? Just a normal braid." He sat, back rigid with nerves. "I'm not some doll."

Greta's grin widened-- imagining all the things she could do with the arsenal of rarely used ribbons and ties she had in her room. "Don't worry," she assured, running her fingers gently through his hair to remove the last of the braid. "We'll keep it simple this time."

Wilfrido's hair was straight and thin-- so different from her own half-curly mop of thick, unmanageable brown. If she had hair like Wilfrido's it would certainly save the maids time when it came to putting it up. Without the braid, Wilfrido's hair went well below his shoulder blades. It smelled like horses and hay and... boy.

Greta could feel her cheeks heat has she pulled strands of hay and debris from Wilfrido's hair. "Where's your father?" she asked without thinking. Anything to fill the silence. And besides, she certainly didn't want to have to explain what she was doing to anyone, and Wilfrido's father was the one most likely to come in at any time.

If possible, Wilfrido's shoulders stiffened even further. "He's retrieving horses from the docks."

Oh. They had all gone after Wolfram-- Wolfram-- Right this very moment Wolfram could be--

Greta forced herself to breathe-- anything but think -- as she started collecting three even clumps of hair to braid. "Why always a braid?" she asked.

"It's tradition." Wilfrido answered quickly. "Long hair-- braids symbolize honor and--" he paused. "It's tradition."

"Oh." Greta started weaving the clumps of hair together. Over, under. Over, under. Over, under. Over, under. Tight enough not to fall loose but not too tight to hurt. "It's nice-- that you can be like your father then..." Silent tears fell down her cheeks, but she couldn't wipe them away or Wilfrido's hair would come undone-- he would notice she was crying. Greta bit her lip as hot tears escaped from her eyes. She had to stop. She had to stop. Stop it-- stop.

She could barely see her fingers through the bubbles of wet as she finished tying Wilfrido's braid and let the hair fall from her grasp. At once she reached up to wipe her tears. She was being silly. Tears wouldn't help. It was no use being so jealous she could scream that Wilfrido's father was here-- even if she didn't like him.

But Wilfrido started to turn--! And the tears were still coming and her face was red and he was going to see her! She had to stop it. Stop it. "Stop!" she sobbed aloud-- ashamed-- so ashamed. "Don't look!" Greta turned around, facing the wall, holding herself with her arms. "Don't look... don't look at me..."
Wilfrido didn't move. She could hear his stillness through the blood rushing in her ears and her own pathetic sobs.

"Greta..." he began.

It only made the tears worse. She couldn't stop. Like a flood inside boiling out of her in hot salty sobs. "He's gone." Everything. Everything was pouring out.

"It's okay--" Wilfrido's voice was raw-- near panic. "His Majesty will only be gone for--"

"Wolfram!" she nearly screamed. "Wolfram-- he-- he--" Another wave of sobs. She couldn't breathe-- "He--"

A hand touched her shoulder.

It was too much and not enough all at once-- Greta turned and hugged him-- she just had to-- she had to hold onto something. Wilfrido was taller than she was-- not like the last time they were this close when she had tried to dance with him at Elizabeth's wedding. She used to be taller even though they were two years apart-- but not anymore.

"You were right-- You were always right-- I'm not a little princess-- I'm-- I don't belong here."

Wilfrido's arms came up to hold her-- "It's okay--"

"No!" She had to stop him. The lie was too big, it felt like nothing would ever be okay. "Wolfram loves me! He-- He takes care of me-- I am a little human in a mazoku kingdom! I don't fit! I'm not meant to be here but Wolfram-- Wolfram makes me fit! He's done so much for me! Yuuri... I know you don't think--" She had to breathe-- his scent-- his weight keeping her up. "Wolfram makes us a family! You can't imagine-- Without Wolfram-- Without Wolfram..." She couldn't even say it aloud.

"I'm sorry, Greta." Wilfrido's voice was a whisper. "You'll never know... how sorry."

He held her until the tears stopped

********

********

Southern Caloria

Later That Day

********

Shibuya was sleeping.

The inn was small-- not even enough beds for their party of eight. Murata was in the small tavern next door with Sir Grier, updating himself with the spy's progress thus far.

Sir Grier and the young corporal had managed to fix a definite location on the carriage they all hoped would contain Sir Belefield. It had been a difficult decision to stop and wait another few hours to rendezvous with the troops Sir Voltaire had sent weeks ago-- finally arriving via their slower land route.

The waiting was hard for everyone. They were all aware of the difference a few hours could make.

But Shibuya had only just fallen into an exhausted sleep against Sir Weller's back on their way
here-- and Murata needed Shibuya to be as rested as possible when he confronted the ones who had
taken his Sir Belefield.

There was no way Shibuya would be able to withhold the Maou's call for Justice.

This far into human territory-- Such a powerful and emotional magical exertion could prove as
deadly for Shibuya as waiting a few extra hours could for Sir Belefield.

And Shibuya was...

Murata had been forced to insist that no one wake him. This way at least the others would have
him to blame instead of themselves if the worst occurred. Murata already blamed himself. He
hadn't even noticed Sir Belefield's absence-- too wrapped up in his inability to solve the mysteries
of prophecy and plague.

Murata's hands tightened around his ceramic mug of now-flat beer. Beer, not water. It was normal
in a town so small-- even one with a stream running peacefully by. But Murata still couldn't quite
shake the image that had greeted them-- that very stream spotted with floating, bloated corpses.

This town had been hit by plague.

Sir Grier had scouted it before they came-- questioned the townsfolk. The worst of the plague had
hit months back. This town had been one of the very first to fall victim to the mysterious illness.

But those here who were going to die of the disease had already perished. There was no one in the
town showing symptoms now. Of course, those left behind had all been affected in some way-- the
loss of family and friends-- a lingering madness or a missing limb. Gisela had been producing a
small scale healing aura-- as much as she could do without exhausting herself completely before
they went for Sir Belefield. Her magic healed the air surrounding His Majesty as he slept
peacefully upstairs.

They wouldn't stay here long.

Which was good for everyone. Sir Weller was on the verge of murder upstairs as he watched his
precious Shibuya sleeping in the same room as Saralegui. And because they had left in such a rush
Sir Voltaire had failed to bring his knitting or anything else to keep his hands occupied and was
probably biting his fingers raw as he waited outside for signs of his men on the horizon.

"Less than an hour..." The young corporal muttered into his tankard, face pale with worry.

Sir Grier shot him a silencing glance but Murata's concentration was already shattered.

Murata sighed. "Worrying gets us no where... and besides, there's no guarantee we would be able
to reach him that quickly. We have to assume they're moving."

Sir Grier nodded grimly. "And besides, Kiddo needs his rest." His eyes were challenging.

"You know what could happen if he were to use his power in a weakened state," Murata answered
calmly before taking a sip from his tankard. Half-Bloods always had trouble appreciating the
consequences of magic.

"Then what about our Lady Captain?" The young corporal spoke. "Miss Gisela is using her power
now..."

A question Murata didn't want to answer. "You should know that protecting His Majesty is of the
"There are only three of them. I could--" Sir Grier was interrupted when the limping bar keep came over to bring their food. Two bowls of stew were placed before the corporal and Sir Grier while Murata was served a plate of bacon sandwiches.

When the man left, Murata began. "It is very probable that you could. But if something does occur-- If Sir Belefield's condition is dire-- then having some of the Maou's power might not be unwanted."

The corporal put down his spoon. "Your Grace, forgive me, but it sounds like you're... depending on His Majesty taking advantage of his power."

Murata took a bite of his sandwich. He barely managed to swallow, with the help of his beer. Sir Grier smirked at him. "It's not exactly palace fare."

"Apparently," Murata coughed. "It tastes like dirt-- and I've had rye before-- this is inedible."

"Come now, Sage," Grier grinned. "It's not so bad. Keeps peasants from starving all across the kingdom. I lived off the stuff for over thirty years and look how well I turned out."

The corporal shook his head. "But in all seriousness the stuff is vile. Brings back bad memories."

He looked away.

Murata pinched off some dry bread from the top of his sandwich. Smelled it.

Something was definitely wrong. This went beyond stale-- beyond a bit of mold.

Mold.

"No..." Murata breathed. It couldn't be. It was too simple for him to have missed.

His mind spun in a thousand directions at once. The bread-- Peasant's Bread. Something no nobility would touch...

No one in a position of power had died from the plague.

Shou Shimeron's only export...

The plague spread out from Shou Shimeron.

They never had been able to figure out how the plague spread. No respiratory symptoms...

The plague traveled along trade routes.

Shin Makoku-- Demon Nations didn't accept bread trade from Shou Shimeron.

The bread. The rye bread.

Murata stood, knocking over his chair in the process. "Mold..." he said again. There had to be a cause. Something simple...

Why hadn't he figured it out before?!

Rye bread. Bread mold. Crop infection.
Murata hardly managed to breathe in his excitement. He certainly didn't have time to process the shouts and following footsteps as he ran from the small inn and out onto the street of the town. There had to be a field-- A way to check--

And there it was! To the right beyond the last few houses.

Fields of grain swaying in the breeze.

Murata ran. The others followed but it didn't matter. He had to be sure. He had to be sure.

He was panting by the time he reached the field-- crashing through the waist high stalks--

And there it was.

On nearly every plant.

Black grains.

*Tooth of the Wolf.*

********

********

Meanwhile

Two Miles South

********

---------------------

Recipient,

They are coming for you. The Sender is with them.
I suggest you finish the task before they arrive.

~Messenger

---------------------

Marques looked down at the letter on the table. A neat row of numbers.

Even after all this time he still couldn't read them.

The letter had arrived a few hours ago, and since then their carriage of "inquisition" hadn't moved. Whatever the letter contained had Velasco truly disturbed. He was in *there* now. Alone.

With Wolf.

Marques tried to lean back casually in his seat and keep his hands from shaking. Velasco had ordered Marques and Julian to wait outside. And now the two of them were sitting in the small room in the middle of the carriage.

And the bastard Julian wouldn't stop staring at him. Smirking. "Too bad for you now, eh?"

Marques narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Boss will kill him before you get a chance to fuck him again. Aren't you disappointed?" The smile widened.
Marques ran a hand through his hair. "You're just jealous I don't think you're pretty enough."

Julian's face went red. "Don't be disgusting. I'm of second class! I would never waste my energy on someone who couldn't continue--"

"Yes, yes," Marques interrupted. He couldn't handle another one of Julian's deranged sermons. "It's all for the good of the empire. But sometimes fucking is simply fucking." Marques licked his lips and let his hand wander over his crotch for emphasis until Julian was forced to look away. "By the way," he continued now that Julian was distracted, "What's got our fearless commander in such a state? We were almost across the border... I was looking forward to playing with my dear old Lieutenant a bit more before he was given to the gods."

"As if the gods would have him." Julian scoffed. "The demon filth lied. The symbols he wrote don't appear on any of the documents we've collected so far. I'd imagine Boss is giving him a good, hard, lesson in morality."

"I suppose so," Marques licked his lips again. Thinking. "But shouldn't we be doing something?"

Julian reached for an apple that was sitting on the little table they brought in sometimes when they were questioning Wolf. He took a bite. Swallowed. "Boss doesn't like for us to see when he works up a sweat."

Marques had to look away, run his finger absently over one of the grain lines on the wooden table. Bastard. "But I'm bored..." He whined. Julian hated it when he whined.

"Well just try to enjoy your little break," Julian snapped and took another bite of his apple, juice running down his chin.

Marques frowned. He could feel his heartbeat speeding up-- sweat on his palms. He had to do something. If he didn't he would end up running into that room-- stopping whatever Velasco was doing to Wolf. It would probably get both of them killed and more than that-- more than that it would be going against his instructions.

No. He couldn't. Not now. Not yet.

And so for now he had to do something.

Marques let his hand wander back to the front of his trousers, spreading his legs to be sure that Julian had a full view. It had been weeks since he'd had a proper fuck-- not since he had run into Luke...

And Luke always had been something special.

"What are you doing?!" Julian's shaking voice interrupted his concentration.

Marques glared, fingers not pausing in their teasing strokes through stiff cloth. "Enjoying my break." He let his tongue slip past his lips, wetting them, feeling for a moment like someone else's against his own. "It's a pity you're not my type or I'd let you help. Besides," his fingers moved to undo the buttons trapping his growing flesh. "You already said you weren't interested."

"You're sick." He stood. "Filthy Demon traitor... I don't know why--" Julian's mutterings followed him out of the room.

Marques closed his eyes. It didn't take him long to finish-- moving quickly-- just trying to get it done.
His orgasm was laced with fear, anxiety returning before the last shudders of come made their way onto his handkerchief.

Marques cleaned himself up as quickly as he could. He had to see what was happening to Wolf.

* * *

Velasco was angry. And what was worse, scared.

Marques knew all about being scared. He was scared now, on his knees, scrubbing vomit and blood off the wooden floor. The pain in his head-- in his body-- was strong. Amazing that so much pain could come from such a small stone.

Marques couldn't even imagine what it was like for Wolf...

When Marques had come to the door Velasco had ordered him in. Ordered him to clean up the mess Wolf had made-- he had made.

Velasco was desperate. He had to be. It was the only explanation. It was the only explanation for--This.

Wolf screamed again.

Marques didn't look up. He couldn't.

But hiding didn't matter-- Marques already knew what was happening. Over and over again.

There was the cursing-- the fighting-- the gagging-- as Velasco held Wolf's jaw open-- forced the stone past Wolf's lips and teeth-- down his throat. And then Wolf would fall-- gasping-- choking-- twisting in ways that seemed impossible for such a form. His bandages had come undone-- open burn scraping on the floor-- bleeding-- bleeding.

Marques couldn't watch. But he could hear.

He could hear Wolf finally wrestle the stone out of his gut. He could hear the splattering of bile and blood on the floor.

He could smell it.

“Tell me!” Velasco hissed-- somehow loud over the sound of Wolf's torment. His pain. His struggling, wet, panting. “Tell me and I'll stop!” The sound of impact. A boot against flesh and another gasp of agony.

Wolf tried to breath-- talk-- only sounds came. Wet-- bloodied breaths. Then finally. “Please-- I can't-- Please-- I don't know-- Please--”

“T've told you, that isn't good enough!”

Marques looked up in time to see Velasco reach for Wolf. Preparing to start the process all over again. But Wolf's body couldn't take it, and he passed out the moment Velasco lifted him from the floor.

Dropped with a thud.

"Wake him."
It took Marques a moment to realize Velasco was talking to him. "What?"

"I want you to wake him. Ask him." Velasco's eyes were wild. "He knows you. You make him tell me."

Marques' eyes widened. "I can't-- If he won't tell you, why would he tell me? He must hate me even more-- for betraying him."

"You think I haven't seen you with him? He thinks you are his Yuuri. You let him so you can touch his flesh. I've had enough of your games, traitor." Velasco glared down at him. "You will make yourself useful. Now."

Marques scrambled to his feet to take a few steps over to where Wolf had fallen. It was amazing he was still breathing... but Wolf always had been remarkably stubborn. Marques leaned down to kiss his forehead, slick with sweat and pain. Marques' hands came down gently, moving Wolf into a more comfortable position-- rubbing uninjured flesh softly in the few places he could find it. "Wolf..." he whispered. Another kiss. "Time to wake up."

Slowly Wolf stirred, whimpered, tears fell down his cheeks. "Yuu... ri... It... hurts..."

"I know. I'm sorry." Marques licked the tears away.

Wolf's good arm came up to grip his shirt. "Yuuri-- I'm sorry." A sob. "I can't. I can't I can't I can't. I'm sorry, Yuuri. So sorry-- I can't I can't I can't--"

"Shh," Marques hushed. This was too much. Wolf couldn't survive this. No one could.

He must have done something wrong.

"It's okay." There were tears in Marques' eyes now, too. "Wolf, it's okay. Just tell him-- I won't get mad. Please, just tell him."

"I can't!" Wolf's voice was raised as loud as it could go, spit and blood coming up to wet his face. "I don't know the stupid scribbles. You know I don't know-- I can't tell him-- I can't I can't. Yuuri please--"

Marques could feel Velasco approaching from behind-- see the fear in Wolf's eyes.

"Don't let him-- Yuuri-- it hurts-- Please--"

Marques was shoved out of the way. Velasco picked Wolf up by his neck and forced him against the wall. "DEMON SCUM!" he screamed. Marques had never seen him so angry.

Velasco was not a man accustomed to failure.

And he had failed. Wolf didn't know what he was after. No one-- no one could hold out against him.

Velasco reached up-- forcing Wolf's jaw open-- forcing the stone into his mouth-- down his throat. Wolf tried to fight but he was too weak.

And then there was a sickening pop.

Blood ran down Wolf's neck-- stalling to pool in all the places Velasco's fingers pressed against his flesh. What had to be a shard of bone pressed through Wolf's cheek. Velasco had broken his jaw-- trapped the stone inside.

Marques could hardly breathe. No.

He must have done something wrong.

Marques had to do something. Even if it wasn't time. But before he could, Velasco left the room--
heavy boots sounding over Wolf's pained noises.

Marques had to do something. He stood. There was nothing he could do for Wolf while he was
still here-- he needed to get Wolf out. Marques licked his lips, hurrying from the room as his mind
spun with possibilities.

Instructions of a god or not, it was time to get rid of the other two.

*******
*******
Back in a Little Room

*******

There was nothing left but pain.

Wolfram was agony with a soul trapped inside. Impossible to scream-- Impossible for his body to
expel the stone that melted his gut-- Impossible to choke on his attempts.

Even after everything his body still fought to survive. But it didn't matter.

Wolfram had given up.

He was going to die-- And it couldn't happen soon enough.

Death put a lot of things in perspective. Regret, of course. Regret for all the things he dreamed of--
for what small pain he would cause the ones he loved.

But they would move on. They would live.

And so now Wolfram could be glad that Yuuri had never loved him the way he wanted.

It was a small blessing that shone in the darkness of his mind. A pure small ray of white next to the
fire of rage-- The call for vengeance.

He would die-- but not yet. Not until the bastard returned.

His mind was finally clear.

Wolfram would let what little power he had left escape-- burn him. Burn them all and this little
wooden box to the ground.

All he had to do was wait-- endure his suffering until the time was right.

All he could do was wait. Breathe slowly through his nose and fight the gagging.

In-- Out-- In-- Out.

Let everything fade away.
Chasing the Dragon: Chapter 15

********
********
Southern Caloria
One Hour Later

********

Yuuri woke up hungry. His bedsheets stuck to him as he tried to stand to go and get something from the kitchen downstairs. The cold floor stuck to his toes.

He must have forgotten his slippers.

But that hardly mattered now that he was in the kitchen. The house was quiet. Empty. Yuuri went over to open the top of the rice cooker. Empty. The metal bowl was lying clean and upturned on a towel beside the sink.

Yuuri filled the bowl with rice-- grains making the familiar-- homey-- sound. Raw rice on metal-- like rain. Then he went to the sink-- filling the bowl with water-- watching the white dust swirl toward the surface. Pour out. New water. Pour out.

Yuuri put his fingers in the bowl. Cold water-- grains of rice between his fingers-- slipping-- his fingernails against the metal bottom of the bowl.

And then his hand was stuck. The rice in the bowl was little things-- little bugs-- sharp teeth that trapped his hand-- cutting into his finger-- burning-- burning.

_Burning_.

Yuuri woke with a start.

The end of the day leaked red through an open window in the corner of an unfamiliar room as Yuuri's eyes opened in shocked pain. The ring had never hurt like this before.

"Yuuri!" Conrad's concerned voice beside him. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Yuuri hissed, pulling his left hand from beneath the sheets. He couldn't resist the urge to shake his hand-- do something-- anything-- to dampen the pain.

A flash of silver flew across the room, tinkling into a corner.

Yuuri froze. "No..." It couldn't be. But there on his finger-- no ring-- only a blister-- only blood.

"No," he said again, throwing off the covers-- bare feet on the floor.

"Yuuri!" Conrad followed him across the room. "What--"

"The ring! Wolfram-- It burned and now the ring is gone-- It's never come off, Conrad." A pause. Yuuri sank to his knees. "What does it mean?" Shaking fingers running along the floor-- searching--

_Cold._

Conrad's hand was on his shoulder. Warm. The only solid thing in his spinning world.
"Conrad," Yuuri whimpered. "It's cold." No. No no nonono. "We have to go!" Yuuri jumped to his feet. "Why are we even here--"

"You fell asleep-- The Sage insisted no one wake you-- that you needed rest."

Yuuri nearly screamed. And then he did. So much rage and frustration-- so close to Changing.

But no. Not yet.

"Yuuri!" Another voice. Sara. Sitting up in the room's other bed. "Yuuri what's happening?"

Yuuri growled. He didn't have time. Time was passing and he wasn't where he was supposed to be. The red light outside the window had faded gray-- sun falling below the line of trees-- visible in the window over Conrad's shoulder-- beside his worried features. But there was something else--

Smoke.

Yuuri ran to look-- clutching the now-cold circle tightly in his sweating palm. Smoke poured out above the line of trees-- Fire-- Burning-- Just beyond the river. "There!"

The ring had burned-- Wolfram was hurting-- burning-- There was fire on the horizon. Yuuri couldn't wait another second. He looked down. They were on what must have been the second floor-- but it was no more than six feet to the ground--

Conrad's shout followed him as Yuuri put one bare foot on the windowsill, jumping onto the grass-covered ground-- legs stinging on impact-- hands into the dirt-- knowing that Conrad would follow him.

"Horses." Yuuri licked his dry lips-- pacing-- needing to move. "It will be faster with horses."

"This way," Conrad answered. He seemed so calm-- so able to deal with this. But he-- Conrad had to be as worried about his little brother as Yuuri felt. Conrad had to be just as anxious for an excuse to go after Wolfram. And it was that knowledge that made it easier for Yuuri to ignore any hesitation-- any distraction. It made it possible to ignore any doubts about this sudden desperate ride toward a fire in twilight.

The horses were tethered on the other side of the building, and Yuuri shifted his weight anxiously from one foot to the other as Conrad efficiently prepared two horses to ride. They were silent-- the need to move driving them both beyond words.

Seconds seemed to stretch into years.

Yuuri slipped the cold ring back onto his blistered finger-- sliding over cracked skin lubricated with clear liquid and blood. He needed the pain-- He needed to know that Wolfram was alive.

And then the horses were ready-- Conrad's hand on his back as he mounted-- horse obediently turning his head-- following the pull of the reins as Yuuri turned him toward the fire-- kicked--

Moving.

Even after so much time in this world Yuuri still hadn't perfected the art of riding. Conrad and his horse caught up quickly-- He must be holding him back--

Yuuri couldn't ride like Conrad-- Like Wolfram-- all those times he rode behind that blue uniform and blond hair. The way Wolfram's hips rolled with the horses steps-- And for a second an
inappropriate thought-- how much Yuuri longed to feel those hips as he had so many times before-- those strong muscles moving under the cloth beneath his thumbs as Yuuri held on to Wolfram's waist to keep his balance. Wolfram moved so gracefully-- efficiently-- part of the horse he rode. If he closed his eyes he could smell Wolfram's hair...

But Yuuri-- The faster a horse went the more his thighs strained against the frenzied bouncing of the gallop-- His body lurching up awkward inches only to fall back down painfully against the hard leather saddle. Every other second Yuuri was sure he would be flung off into the brush.

*You can go faster without me!* Yuuri wanted to scream. To order.

But he didn't. Conrad wouldn't go without him-- even to protect his brother.

Once Conrad had gone to save Wolfram-- followed an order. But that time there had been Gwendal to look after him-- Conrad would never leave him alone.

"Faster... Faster..." Whispered exhales on every breath.

Two horses racing into the night.

*******

*******

Southern Caloria
Thirty minutes before

*******

It was so much easier than it should have been.

Velasco and Julian were arguing in the carriage's main compartment. They hardly paid any attention when Marques walked in-- leaned against the wall-- thinking.

It would be such a pleasure to kill them-- an honor, after all they had done to Wolf and countless others. But Marques had never killed anyone without a sword-- without his fire.

Both of them were trained soldiers of Shou Shimeron. Both of them carried the concealed string-like weapon that was their army's trademark.

It was a clever thing, that weapon. Marques imagined that Lady Karbelnikoff would have quite the time if she discovered what it was. Somehow Shou Shimeron had managed to stop the destructive polarity of the cursed stones-- they took hoseki that had already absorbed enough magic to sustain itself and spun it into string as strong and sharp as stone. The stolen magic made it possible to wield. And since the hoseki no longer absorbed magic, the concealed weapon was undetectable by mazoku-- they no longer felt the telltale ache of their life being drained away.

Velasco and Julian were talking-- arguing-- voices raised-- but Marques couldn't understand a word. It was the language of religion, of power, in Shou Shimeron. They always spoke it when they didn't want him to understand.

But now it didn't matter. Marques was going to kill them before they could do anything else...

But how?

The light in the room fluttered-- like a beacon to draw his eye to the oil lamp perched upon the table in the corner. Marques moved--- Just a few steps to his right to stand beside it-- thin glass
containing flame. Oil.

Marques lifted the glass and blew out the dancing flame. The light in the room dimmed-- but there was a tiny window in the main compartment, no bigger than two hands on either side. The red light of late sunset trickled in, coloring the room but still bright enough for Marques to see Velasco's angered glare.

They kept talking.

Marques replaced the glass cover and picked up the lamp-- heavy with liquid fuel-- and slowly walked from the room. He closed the door behind him.

The only door. Thick. Well made. If they had the need the room could double as a less disorienting cell for another captive. Marques reached forward and twisted the first lock shut.

Simple.

It took them so long to notice. They were so absorbed in each other's words.

And Marques had been so good-- so obedient-- for so long. They had let their guard down.

Marques had lowered the final wooden bolt-- begun drizzling the lamp oil on the door-- before the first enraged banging reached his ears.

So simple.

It made all of Wolf's suffering seem so avoidable, so unnecessary. But Marques had tried so hard to wait-- to follow Shinou's instructions so all of Wolf's pain wouldn't be for nothing-- so the world could survive to see the age of peace.

But Shinou's conditions weren't met. No one was coming for Wolf. No one. Even His Majesty-- Wolf's beloved king-- was far away. Safe in his castle while Wolf slipped toward death on a cold wooden floor. Marques must have done something wrong, but he wouldn't allow himself another mistake-- He wouldn't let Wolf die this way.

Marques would do all he could to save him.

If it wasn't already too late.

The main compartment was at the front of the carriage-- Wolf's cell at the back. Marques unhooked the horses and tethered them a few yards away before returning to spread the oil as much as he could around the entire circumference of the main chamber, grin widening at the sounds of rage trickling out from the tiny window. And from there all it took was a bit of flint--

A single spark.

The fire roared. Marques had to step back-- face hot from rogue flames. In seconds the fire spread-- racing along the path of oil-- crackling into wood. Fast. Too fast.

Marques ran. The back of the carriage was safe for now-- but only minutes. Only minutes if he was lucky.

Wolf was curled on the floor where Marques had left him. Even after so little time his face had started to purple and swell from the break, blood pooling around his cheek where the splinter of jaw protruded. Marques paused. Wolf had his back to him, but without the sound of his own
footsteps the sounds of Wolf's struggled, hissing breaths became that much more audible over the crackling of fire, over the screaming in the distance.

Again and again Wolf would gag-- body shaking as it tried to purge the agony of the human stone trapped within his gut-- But the stone couldn't make it's way past his broken jaw. Trapped in a cycle of...

How could Marques ever help him after this? What could he possibly do to heal Wolf when the human stone inside him-- the source of so much pain-- kept Marques from using his own magic to heal him?

Marques did his best to push those thoughts away as he knelt beside Wolf's shaking form. If he could get Wolf to the king-- if he could keep him alive long enough to follow Shinou's orders-- than maybe it wouldn't all have been for nothing.

Slowly, he laid a careful hand on Wolf's shoulder--

A hand closed around his wrist-- faster and stronger than he would have imagined possible from such an injured--

Pain.

Marques vision spun into a colored pinpoint as the smell of burning flesh curled in his nose. Wolf's hand melting his wrist-- fingers sinking into burnt flesh as Wolf's magic forced its way out.

Too soon! It was too soon! Shinou had said-- He had said--

But if he didn't do it now, Marques had no way of knowing what would happen to Wolf--

A breath.

Before Marques met Wolf's fire with his own.

It should have been impossible-- neither one of them should have been able to summon so much as a spark-- and yet here it was. Power. Raw and warm and pooling in his gut-- out of him and into Wolf through the mangled, burning flesh of their physical connection.

So intimate.

Wolf's eyes were wild-- black with pain-- power. Marques wanted to kiss him but he couldn't make his body move.

His fire was no longer his own-- Wolf had gone past-- reaching inside and scooping him out-- pain.

"Stop," he breathed, barely a whisper. "Stop."

The hand on his wrist only tightened-- fingers reaching bone until Marques' mouth fell open in a silent scream. Breath lost.

Fire spun above them-- breaching out from their connection-- onto ceiling-- walls-- smoke filled the tiny room.

Too hot. Not safe-- He had to get Wolf out!

Fire. Everywhere flame and pain and impossible hope. Wolf was too light in his arms. Two powers one destination-- merged through flesh and magic and agony.
Marques fell to his knees a few feet away from the burning carriage.

Drained.

Wolf dropped his wrist-- eyes still wild and looking at him with a terrible need.

Hunger.

Marques was so exhausted. It felt like there was nothing left inside him-- just a shadow of the power that once was.

But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop.

He had to save Wolf.

********

********

Yozak had left the inn the moment the first winding trails of smoke breached the sky. It could have been anything-- innocent travelers-- a campfire that hadn't been properly extinguished run wild. But Yozak was restless-- tired of the young corporal's guilt-ridden looks as they were forced to remain still.

And the fire was to the south. If nothing else it was an excuse to find out exactly how much progress the carriage containing Sir Belefield had made-- From a careful distance of course.

Yozak and Lucien had passed Gwendal on their way out. He was still standing just outside the front door of the inn-- waiting for a sign of his men on the horizon. His eyes were raw-- too many feelings to hide.

The Sage was mad-- forcing them all still. Running off into the fields like his mind had actually left him before shutting himself in a room with Gisela. He claimed to have had some sort of epiphany about the plague-- Sickness of the rye. But Yozak had lived off of peasant's bread for half his life. Dry and wretched and black-- mixed with dirt and dust and sod to sit heavily in more stomachs. All sorts of things-- bugs and bad stalks-- routinely made their way into the dark bread, and Yozak had a hard time imagining something as simple as a bit of mold causing so much destruction.

He let Lucien follow him. Two horses traveling south, over the stream and past the line of trees beyond the farmland. Fresh, heavy carriage tracks were pressed in thick grooves into the road. But the carriage should have kept moving-- should be miles ahead if it followed a steady pace. The fire was probably of innocent origins-- but it was still good to be out. To be moving.

They kept the horses at a trot-- not wanting to risk them being too tired to run later if necessary.

It wasn't long until the fire was close enough to smell. Yozak signaled Lucien to stop and stay with the horses before he dismounted to take a closer look on foot. The sounds of fire crackling up ahead served to further silence his footsteps and the source of the flame slowly came into view.

Yozak didn't know what he had truly expected to see-- but the very carriage they had been chasing engulfed in flames hadn't entered his mind.

A blink-- A single glance to be sure it wasn't a trap-- but that blaze-- no one could possibly survive. Yozak got as close as he could-- sweat beading on his face-- flames already beginning to spread to the surrounding grass.
No.

No no no. They wouldn't have kept Wolfram alive for so long only to burn him now-- wouldn't waste such a uniquely constructed carriage. Unless-- unless the ones who had Wolfram knew they were close-- destroying evidence to protect national anonymity.

*Damn.*

Yozak kept his eyes sharp-- examining any possible way to breach the flame-- but then-- Horses? The horses were tethered nearby-- to protect them from the fire?

This was planned? But why hadn't they made their escape?

A trap--

Yozak's full attention turned to the surrounding woods-- his back to the flame. But if it was a trap why leave the horses in plain sight? Yozak continued his journey around the carriage-- searching for something-- anything-- that could tell him what had happened here...

His eyes widened and he hurried his steps-- Yes! Tracks!

Blood.

One person dragging another-- stopping long enough for the blood to pool but not to congeal-- barely minutes ago--

"Here!" A shout. A voice he didn't know. Yozak's eyes left the ground at once-- a figure standing in the woods-- a dozen yards away-- too dark in shadow to see his face. "Here!" The figure said again-- then ran-- awkward steps-- clutching an arm--

Yozak narrowed his eyes.

The figure stopped-- farther off-- "Idiot! Come and get him! There's no time!"

*Damn.* This was so stupid. Running blindly into a trap-- but his feet were moving-- legs carrying him into the woods-- over shrubs and roots and--

Something blocked his path. Dirty, bloody, bruised, but blond.

*Wolfram.*

Yozak knelt-- his own blood hammering in his ears as he touched him-- looking for a pulse-- a breath-- but the breaths were so wet-- so strained-- pain obvious in swollen face and twisted limbs-- not like last time-- the sleeping prince without a heartbeat.

This time Sir Belefield was broken.

It was so difficult to find a place to touch-- a way to hold him that didn't cause sounds of pain deep in the young soldier's chest. The boy's jaw was swollen shut-- Yozak could see blood drying around the bone-- torn flesh. Eyes black and wild and lost.

"It's alright kiddo," Yozak breathed, pulling Wolfram into his arms as gently as he could. "You're safe now..."

Wolfram's body twitched as he adjusted to the new position-- choked breaths accelerating. He was so light.
Yozak stood. Watched the man who had called him disappear into the woods-- into the distance. Yozak couldn't chase him now. Gwendal's scouts would have to find him later-- find out what had happened here.

Right now the only thing that mattered was getting Wolfram help.

********
********

Yuuri nearly flew off his horse.

They were so close to the fire now-- just out of sight beyond the trees-- but Conrad suddenly pulled the reins, forcing Yuuri's horse to stop just as abruptly behind him.

"Conrad what--" Yuuri started, but then he saw him too. Lucien was waiting anxiously beside two more horses-- now standing at rigid attention at their approach.

"Sir!" Lucien licked his lips nervously, then seemed to notice him. "Your Majesty!"

"What's going on here?" Conrad snapped.

"Sir Grier, Sir," Lucien answered. "He went to investigate the fire."

Conrad's pause was brief. "Alright. I'm here now-- go back to the inn and report to Sir Voltaire-- Lady Gisela-- We need her here at once!"

"Yes, Sir!" Lucien was on his horse in seconds, racing back the way they came.

"Conrad..." Yuuri whimpered anxiously. They weren't moving...

Conrad drew his sword. "Stay behind me."

Yuuri nodded and they were off. Each second-- each breath-- brought them closer--

Closer.

There! The fire still raged-- blackened wood visible inside. Yuuri's eyes widened-- then closed reflexively as the roof collapsed in on itself-- sparks flying into the new night.

No.

He couldn't think. Couldn't-- couldn't--

"Captain!" A familiar voice. Yozak. Yuuri's eyes snapped open-- turned. Yozak standing nearby-- arms full-- arms full of--

"Wolfram!" Conrad's voice spoke Yuuri's thoughts-- his fear.

"Alive." Yozak answered quickly, moving to stand beside them. "We should get him to Gisela as soon as--" He paused as Wolfram struggled-- forcing Yozak to put him down. It was so dark. Fire burning out half his vision-- everything in rigid shadows--

But it couldn't hide everything.

Wolf was hurt-- he was so badly-- badly hurt. And Yuuri was numb.
Worse than dreams.

Wolfram's feet touched the ground-- but Yozak still held his weight. Wolfram's head rolled forward like an impossible burden-- hands reaching toward his brother's horse-- the pouch attached to his saddle. Like the walking dead in some kind of terrible movie-- terrible game--

But this was real--

What had they done to him?

Wolfram-- his hands-- he couldn't open the bag. Yozak helped him. Wolfram's fingers were so dark-- covered in blood-- reaching-- searching. And then something came out of the bag.

Yozak and Conrad shared a look before Conrad helped his brother with the bottle he had pulled from the bag-- something poured onto a ragged sleeve-- Wolfram pushed it against his own face.

And then went limp. Dead weight.

"What--" Yuuri croaked-- surprised he had even managed to speak.

"He's sleeping," Conrad answered as he carefully took Wolfram's limp form from Yozak-- up into his arms.

He looked so small. So broken.

Conrad's face was a mask. "It's an oil-- the smell puts you to sleep. It's part of a soldier's emergency pack. Standard." Conrad kept Wolfram against him with his right arm, pulling the reigns with his left to turn the horse. "Normally it's used to silence guards for a few hours without having to kill them."

"Oh."

Oh.

It must hurt... Conrad held Wolfram so carefully-- Yuuri couldn't see his face. Couldn't see the damage--

What had they done to him? What had he let happen to Wolfram?

Wolfram was hurting so much he had to put himself to sleep. Wolfram was so strong. So strong and he just wanted everything to stop. Everything had to stop. Too much pain... Yuuri could hardly breathe.

What had he let happen to Wolfram?

Conrad was-- Conrad was holding Wolfram like a doll-- chest to chest-- head resting on Conrad's shoulder. And all of the dark places-- all of them couldn't be shadow. Conrad nodded-- they should go back.

Yuuri turned his horse in a daze-- slowly followed Conrad's lead. He couldn't take his eyes off Wolfram.

Was that really him? Golden hair-- clean smell-- yelling-- *living* Wolfram? He was so limp-- Even though Conrad held him close-- walked the horse as smoothly as he could-- Wolfram's legs were jostled awkwardly-- one on either side of the saddle-- like he was riding, only backwards. His legs were hooked over Conrad's thighs-- bare feet visible-- bouncing with every step.
Bounce, bounce. Bare toes. Where were his boots?

He must be cold. Wolfram's feet must be cold-- there was nothing Yuuri could do. There was nothing he could do about that either.

Wolfram's feet were the most Yuuri could see-- legs under brown pants. Conrad must have tucked Wolfram's arms between them. Wolfram's head against Conrad's neck-- all Yuuri could see was hair.

Yuuri wanted to hold him.

Yuuri wanted to be the one to feel Wolfram-- feel him close. Feel his breath on his neck. His heartbeat. He wanted to feel-- to know Wolfram was alive. That his heart was still beating. That his body was still warm.

It made sense. It made sense that Conrad would hold him. Conrad was stronger-- bigger-- better at staying on his horse.

But Yuuri watched Wolfram's feet-- his hair-- moving. Yuuri wanted-- he wanted to be the one to hold him.

They had to go slow. It made sense the more Yuuri thought about it. They didn't know what was-- what happened. Riding fast-- all the movement could make things worse.

But it was so slow. So slow when they needed help-- they needed Gisela. They needed to help Wolfram.

Yuuri wanted to be the one-- the one to hold him. To feel that Wolfram was still alive.

Yuuri's hands were shaking-- knuckles white on the reins. He couldn't breathe. Too fast-- too shallow-- too-- too-- hard to see--

"Don't, Kiddo." Yozak-- walking beside him-- hand on his thigh-- looking up. "Calm down. Breathe. You don't want to panic and take Gisela's attention away from him."

Yuuri swallowed thickly. Tried to breathe slowly. Slowly. In, in, out. In, in, out.

The blackness dancing around his vision faded-- less light-headed. He couldn't panic. He couldn't panic.

"We," Yuuri tried-- tried to talk-- do something. "Lucien went to get Gwendal-- get Gisela."

Another breath. "They should be coming." Yuuri looked ahead-- willing to see them speeding down the road toward them. "They should be coming."

But they weren't. Or at least, Yuuri couldn't see them. Yuuri was still in the woods. So many trees. He couldn't see the path ahead.

He could only see Wolfram-- part of Wolfram-- Wolfram's feet. He could see Conrad's back-- not his face-- not anything that would reassure him.

They were all going so slow!

There was nothing he could do. There was nothing he could--

A hand tightened on his leg. Reminding him. Reminding him.
Breathe.
In, in, out. In, in, out.

The path was dark. They could barely see now, with the fire so far behind them. Hopefully it wouldn't spread-- but there was nothing Yuuri could do about that either. He couldn't do anything until he knew Wolfram would be alright.

Wolfram's feet-- his legs were so limp.
There was wind-- more wind once they left the line of trees. Into farmland. Small lights of the village visible in the clear night.
There were so many stars. So many patterns of light he didn't know.
They were in the fields now. Grass swaying in starlight-- like water.
Wolfram's toes caught the light-- his hair.
And then there was more sound-- besides the rustling and the wind-- besides the slow footsteps of their horses.
They were coming!
If possible, Yuuri's hands gripped his reigns even tighter. They were coming. They were coming. They were coming.
Horses were racing down the road toward them. Racing shadows. Yuuri couldn't tell-- he couldn't tell if Gisela was with them. The horses were coming toward them-- racing down the road. But it still didn't seem fast enough.
And then Conrad stopped his horse-- Yuuri's horse stopped on its own-- used to following-- well trained.
Why had Conrad stopped!?
But then Yozak moved forward-- beside Conrad instead-- taking Wolfram down from his arms.
Oh. It made sense-- getting Wolfram down-- they weren't going very fast anyway. The others would make it to them soon. Soon.
They needed Gisela now.
Yuuri dismounted, letting his horse wander off to graze by the road.
Yozak held Wolfram now-- strong arms-- placing him gently on the ground. Yuuri was-- he was far away-- He could see them-- He could see Wolfram's body on the ground. So still. Too still. So still.
He couldn't move.
Yuuri couldn't make his legs move. Couldn't get closer-- Couldn't breathe--
In, in, out. In, in, out.
"What's going on!" Gwendal's voice! His shape in the dark-- in the moonlight-- getting off his
horse.

"Gisela..." Yuuri whispered to himself, "Gisela..."

"We found him." Conrad-- so cold. So closed. "He's sleeping-- dosed with Papaver Dreams--"

"And why was that?" Gisela! Gisela's voice. So precise.

Gisela would know what to do! Gisela could help him!

"Sir Belefield made the decision himself." Yozak answered. "Given his state, we wouldn't deny him."

Gisela knelt beside him-- Gwendal was close, too--

Yuuri couldn't make his feet move.

"What on--!" Gwendal cursed. "Idiots!" His hands-- reaching for Wolfram-- tearing at his shirt.
Gisela's hands were on him too. "I know! Gods-- where is it?!"

"What..." Yuuri whispered-- couldn't hear himself.

"What is it?" Conrad's voice shook. Just the smallest bit.
Gisela half screamed in frustration. "There's a stone on him! I can't heal him until I find it--"

A stone.
A human stone. They hurt. Those stones hurt demons-- would hurt Wolfram.

And they hadn't even known.

He hadn't known... he couldn't have known. He couldn't have... He was only half. Only half... Conrad... Yozak too. Only half.

Yuuri was nearly sick. Mouth watering. Jaw tingling. The world spun.

In, in, out. In, in, out.

They had removed all of Wolfram's clothes-- thrown into the fields.

"Bruises," Gisela said aloud. Listing injuries. "Burns--"

"He was outside the fire," Yozak supplied. "It's possible--"

"No." Gisela clipped. "Already healing." Another sound of frustration. "It can't be... It can't..."

Gwendal had left Wolfram's side for a moment-- now back-- another bottle-- something poured in cloth and put to Wolfram's face.

Wolfram's body arched. Gasping-- nose hissing as his back left the ground.

"Where is it?!" Gwendal yelled, pulling Wolfram forward-- into him-- hand on his chest.

Wolfram didn't answer. Only sounds. Terrible sounds.
"His jaw is broken--" Gisela said. "The bone--" Another pause. "I think they made him swallow it-- but the bone is broken-- he can't open his mouth!"

Wolfram gagged-- clinging to his brother. Head fallen back as he tried to pull himself up.

Yuuri couldn't make his feet move.

Gwendal reached forward-- holding Wolfram's cheek.

"Gwendal what are you--" Gisela started.

"Quiet!" Gwendal roared.

And then there was a terrible crack.


Terrible sounds.

Wolfram-- Wolfram was-- Eyes wide-- wild. Even as Gwendal held him he struggled to cling to him-- to support his own weight in Gwendal's arms. His face-- almost unrecognizable-- swollen and dark. Wolfram kept trying to breathe-- hissing-- the darkness now running from his nose.

Gwendal turned Wolfram over-- blood dripping onto the ground-- gagging-- choking--

Wet falling onto dirt.

Then there was something-- more than blood-- more than vomit-- thumping to the ground.

"Fuck." Yozak cursed. "Sick... fuck."

Gwendal tossed the stone away-- into the fields. They moved Wolfram onto his back-- But he wouldn't stop choking-- wouldn't stop-- blood went up-- Wolfram's blood on Gwendal's face.

They kept talking-- Gwendal-- Gisela-- But sound seemed to fall away.

Wolfram's body-- shaking-- he was seizing-- limbs wild-- Gwendal holding him down-- It was too much--

It was too much!

What could Gisela possibly do?

It was-- It wasn't right-- he couldn't-- Yuuri couldn't--

Yuuri couldn't make his feet move.

It wasn't right.

This wasn't right.

He would have Justice.

Power flooded his veins. Rich and terrible and full of rage. Wind howled around him-- shouting-- panicked horses.
This one wasn't meant to die. This one wasn't meant to suffer.

He wouldn't allow it.

Rage to blood. Destruction to healing. Power to bone.

Everything. All he could.

Inside. Inside.

*Fix him.*

His broken soldier-- His loyal one.

*There will be Justice!*

********
********
Southern Caloria
Three Days Later

********

Conrad couldn't forget.

That feeling-- that his brother was going to die in his arms. That there was nothing he could do.

Conrad had failed.

He had failed so many times.

And now-- now all he could do was watch them sleep. Hope that both of them would wake.

Whole.

Yuuri-- the Maou-- had fixed Wolfram's body. Not a scratch remained on his pale skin. Even the scars were hardly visible--- places where power took over only after Wolfram's body had started to heal on its own. Gisela said she had never seen such severe wounds heal so quickly.

Conrad hadn't imagined Yuuri could use the Maou's power in such a way-- hadn't even known it was possible. But it was easy to understand how Yuuri was the one able to turn such destructive force into such-- care.

The Sage hadn't seemed surprised. Sitting on his horse-- watching Yuuri-- Yuuri who couldn't see anything but Wolfram-- his hurt.

Conrad couldn't forget-- holding him-- wet breaths hissing against his neck-- thick with blood-- slowing-- He had been so sure Wolfram's breaths were slowing. Weaker with every second--

And now-- even though Gisela had seen most of his injuries before-- even though Conrad could smell burnt flesh when he held Wolfram close-- they still couldn't be sure what those bastards had done to him.

Or why.

Conrad had failed. He had left Saralegui alone-- he had followed Yuuri without even alerting
anyone that they were gone. And in the rush-- the panic-- the confusion of finding Wolfram-- the young king had vanished.

It was all his fault.

Yozak was still out searching-- for Saralegui and the mystery figure that had led him to Wolfram. But even with the arrival of Gwendal's troops-- there were only so many men-- and the woods were large. And to the south, the mountains surrounding Shou Shimeron were only a few miles away and filled with a thousand caves to hide in.

And now Conrad couldn't leave Yuuri's side. He had used so much magic... Yuuri had been sleeping for three days. Yuuri hardly slept this long when he traveled between worlds-- it was like in the beginning-- when Yuuri wasn't used to using his power-- Conrad felt the same worry he had felt so many times before. But now-- now Yuuri was so still-- He had used so much magic--

It was how Julia had died. Saving someone else.

Conrad wanted to be able to hate magic-- for all it took from him-- for all the ridicule not having it caused him in his younger years. For all the moments he'd spent watching Wolfram burning from the inside. But wherever magic hurt-- it also healed.

Wolfram would be dead. His wounds had been too severe.

Without the Maou's magic Wolfram would be dead.

And now they both slept, in two slim beds, in the top room of the inn. The room was small-- hardly enough space to walk between the sparse furniture. But it was the nicest room the small town had to offer.

There was nothing Conrad could do but wait-- relive his mistakes in his mind.

They had been waiting three days. It would be cruel, Gwendal had decided, to send word to mother-- to Greta that Wolfram had been found-- was safe-- if only to retract it later.

They were both so-- so peaceful sleeping. Yuuri had started to dream a few hours ago-- a sign, at least, that he was on his way to waking. But Wolfram-- Wolfram was so still. No dreams. No flailing or quiet snores--

Conrad could remember the times when Wolfram was young-- when he would crawl into Conrad's bed and cling to him like he was one of Gwendal's knitted animals. Wolfram didn't kick so much-- as long as he had something to hold.

Wolfram's body had been healed. But Conrad-- no one-- could know the effects his imprisonment would have on his mind. If Wolfram would ever be himself again.

Conrad had seen men-- strong soldiers-- captured in the war. Tortured. Everyone breaks under torture-- usually in less than a day.

They had had Wolfram for two weeks. What had they done to him? What did they want?

Conrad cursed himself again for letting Saralegui escape. That snake had something to do with this-- Conrad had such a strong feeling. Saralegui had never liked Wolfram-- tried to kill him in a false duel-- Conrad didn't doubt that Saralegui would be more than happy to see Wolfram suffer.

But of course Conrad couldn't be sure. And Yuuri trusted "Sara".
But Yuuri also trusted him. And Conrad knew he was undeserving-- He had failed so many times.

Conrad let his hands curl into fists-- nails cutting into palms.

If nothing else-- Saralegui must have known something-- must be guilty of something.

If Saralegui wasn't guilty, why would he run?

********

********

Southern Caloria
Twelve Hours Later

********

Yuuri woke. Too groggy to focus. Too tired to move.

He groaned-- tried to shift to a position that wouldn't push on his bladder-- He just wanted to go back to sleep.

He was so thirsty. The sheets were rough and the bed was lumpy-- stuffed with hay and smelling of unfamiliar sweat.

Where was he?

Yuuri opened his eyes-- rubbed away the sleep that stuck to his lashes. There was a wooden ceiling-- a window on the far wall--

"Welcome back, Your Majesty."

"Conrad," Yuuri whined, and closed his eyes.

"How are you feeling, Yuuri?"


The chair creaked as Conrad stood. "I'll alert Gisela you're awake. It will only be a moment."

Yuuri only opened his eyes again when he heard the sound of the door closing. The ceiling was still unfamiliar-- made of wood. There was another bed in the room. Wolfram was still asleep.

Wolfram was--

Wolfram--

It all came back. The pain. The fear.

The helplessness.

Wolfram had been so hurt. Yuuri forced himself to move-- to stand-- the world seemed to tilt slightly to one side-- his vision spun away and made his head sting-- but he could still feel the bed-- crawl over-- wait for focus to return while he tried to look at Wolfram's face.

And when he could see-- he almost couldn't believe it. Wolfram's face-- perfect. As perfect as it always was. Yuuri moved back-- feet on the floor so he could pull the blanket down. Clean pajamas. Smooth-- pale skin wherever it was exposed-- a line along his stomach-- above the
waistband. No dressed wounds. Wolfram was-- Gisela must have healed him-- Wolfram was alright!

But why was he still sleeping?

"Wolfram--" Yuuri croaked-- reaching for his shoulder. "Wolfram wake up!" He was so still. Too still.

It was so similar-- too similar to when Wolfram was in Anissina's invention-- frozen without a heart.


He was touching Wolfram.

How many times had he wanted-- had he dreamed-- Yuuri swallowed. Wolfram's body was warm. Yuuri's heart raced in his chest and he moved his hand away. He pulled up the covers again and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Wolfram..." he tried again. "Why won't you wake up?"

Wolfram looked-- Yuuri didn't like seeing him this way. Even when Wolfram slept he was so alive, but now he seemed almost--

The door opened.

"Good evening, Your Majesty. I'm glad you decided to finally join us." Gisela was smiling, holding a tray of steaming food. "I hope you won't mind a day of bed-rest too terribly. You used quite a bit of magic."

Yuuri tried not to look guilty about being caught on Wolfram's bed. "But-- What about Wolfram? Why won't he wake up?"

Gisela's smile faltered. "His body went through a lot. It's natural that he need time to recover-- Now back in bed, Your Majesty. I don't want you getting too cold outside your covers."

Yuuri reluctantly followed his orders and accepted the tray of food onto his lap. "Gisela--" he started and blushed.

"Eat first. I'll have Sir Weller accompany you downstairs to the privy as soon as you're done."

Yuuri nodded gratefully and took a bite of his stew. Swallowed. "Gisela... What happened? Normally I remember more-- lately anyway... What happened this time?" Yuuri dreaded the answer. He dreaded the answer every time he had to ask.

Gisela surprised Yuuri by smiling again. "You saved him, Your Majesty. Without you Wolfram wouldn't have made it-- You saved him."

"What?!" Yuuri couldn't believe it. The Maou's power-- normally it was all he could do to keep it from hurting people. The Maou's power was terrible. Terrible and absolute. "How?"

"I don't know," Gisela answered. "But the Sage suggested that the Maou saw Sir Belefield's... condition as an injustice."

"Oh..." Yuuri managed and took another bit of his stew. Normally the Maou only punished
injustice-- but this time-- with no one to punish maybe he was able to prevent injustice instead?

But if that was the case-- Why had he ever allowed the Maou to hurt anyone before? What if people had suffered-- suffered because of him when they didn't need to-- when they could have been saved?

Like the little girl from Lesser Gael.

Yuuri forced himself to take another bite of his stew. But-- he had saved Wolfram. He had saved Wolfram. He couldn't change the past. "But..." Yuuri started. "If Wolfram is better now-- Why is he still sleeping? The Maou doesn't normally-- What if I made a mistake? What if I didn't heal him properly?!

"Calm down," Gisela soothed, eyes as strict as ever. "I've checked Sir Belefield myself several times. His body is completely recovered--"

"Then why--"

"Your Majesty," Gisela interrupted. "Please stay calm. You need to rest. I can assure you that Sir Belefield's body is completely fine."

Yuuri put down his spoon. "Gisela." A pause. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Your Majesty, I--"

"No." Yuuri clenched his hands into fists. "I know by now how all of you-- how everyone acts when they're trying to protect me from something."

Gisela looked down-- sat on the edge of his bed.

"Please, Gisela," Yuuri begged. "I shouldn't have to order you to tell me."

"I'm sorry, Yuuri." Gisela folded her hands in her lap. "I didn't want you to worry."

"I promise I'll worry more if you don't tell me what's going on." Yuuri tried to smile and take another bite of his stew to convince her how well-adjusted he was-- but he doubted Gisela would be convinced. "Please tell me."

Gisela sighed. "The truth is I'm not sure why Sir Belefield is still asleep. His body is healed but..."

She trailed off.

Yuuri couldn't help but look to the side-- Wolfram's sleeping profile. "You're not sure, but you must have some idea."

"It's only a theory--"

"Gisela, please."

Another sigh. "Alright." A pause. "Sir Belefield's magic was too low-- It's why he had to travel to Lesser Gael to begin with. And when we found him-- he had a human stone inside him."

"I remember," Yuuri started. "I remember..." It was like a dream-- Wolfram-- his jaw-- Gwendal broke Wolfram's jaw so he could get rid of the stone. The stone-- it was hurting Wolfram. "So..." Yuuri licked his lips. "Wolfram might have internal injuries... things I couldn't--"

"No," Gisela interrupted. "Your Majesty, I wasn't lying when I told you Sir Belefield's body is in
perfect health." Another pause. "Do you remember what the human stones do? Why they hurt full-blooded demons?"

Yuuri had to think. He knew-- He must have known at some point-- He could remember Wolfram quizzing him on it before. Wolfram-- "It's because of their magic, right?"

"Yes," Gisela confirmed. "The human stones steal demon magic--"

"No!" Yuuri nearly shouted, pieces falling into place inside his mind. "But he didn't have enough magic to begin with! Gisela-- What happens when mazoku run out of magic?"

They die.

Gisela only looked into her lap.

"But--" Yuuri tried again. Frantic. "He's healed-- His body is healed-- what-- What if he-- Oh god-- Gisela what if Wolfram is dead but his body is still alive-- some mistake with the Maou's power-- What if I killed him?!"

"Yuuri, calm down." Gisela ordered, voice sharp. "You're panicking. Sir Belefield is very much alive and healthy. He has lost a large amount of magic, yes. But his body also went through the stress of being healed very quickly of very severe injuries. You performed the healing and you were asleep for nearly four days. I am not surprised in the least that you were the first to wake. Let's give Sir Belefield some more time to recuperate before you work yourself into a panic."

Yuuri swallowed. Nodded.

Gisela gave him a small smile. "Besides, what would Sir Belefield say if he saw you making such a fuss?"

Wimp.

Tears welled in Yuuri's eyes.

"Your Majesty--"

"It's fine..." Yuuri stopped her. "Do you think you could get Conrad now-- To help me downstairs?"

"Of course," Gisela answered quietly, and stood.

* * *

It took Yuuri another day and a half to convince Gisela he was well enough to end his bed-rest. All he could do-- every moment-- was will Wolfram to wake up.

But he hadn't. He hadn't even moved.

Conrad-- Everyone tried to reassure him-- but nothing they said could help. Nothing they said changed that Wolfram--

Even now that his bed-rest was over, Yuuri didn't want to leave Wolfram's side.

Conrad had convinced him to go for a ride this morning-- in the sun and fresh air. It had taken an hour to walk the horses around the fields surrounding the town, and Yuuri had been on the edge of his seat the whole time. So anxious to get back-- to see if Wolfram had woken up.
He hadn't.

And somehow Yuuri had felt a tiny bit relieved. He wanted to be there when Wolfram woke up.

It was almost impossible to think about anything else.

But there was plenty he should be thinking about. Murata had figured out the plague—some type of rye fungus that had gotten into people's bread. The cure was simple: Don't eat the bread. And if you had, stop. As long as no one ate the infected bread, no one would get sick—would show any symptoms.

After he had returned from his ride with Conrad and checked on Wolfram for a few hours, it was Murata's turn to come upstairs and pull him away.

Conrad, who had been keeping him company at Wolfram's side, stayed upstairs in case Wolfram woke up. No one wanted Wolfram to wake alone. Everyone wanted him better. The air was so thick with everyone's wanting that it was sometimes hard to breathe. Especially—especially in that room. The air was so thick with it that he and Conrad had been silent the past few hours—watching Wolfram sleep.

Murata came upstairs—told him to come down for more stew. Yuuri was sick of stew, but he went downstairs anyway because he knew everyone wanted him to.

They were all trying to distract him. It would be better for them if they thought it was working.

Once he was downstairs, seated across from his friend at the table, Yuuri took a careful bite of his stew— to show he was capable of eating. That he was capable of being normal, before he put down his spoon. "I haven't said thank you yet— for figuring out the plague. It's a huge relief."

Murata leaned onto the table, resting his chin on folded hands. "You shouldn't thank me, Shibuya. I should be apologizing for not figuring it out sooner... for spending so much time chasing the wrong leads."

"Don't apologize!" Yuuri leaned on the table too. "I didn't even know that bread could make people sick."

"I had forgotten, honestly." Murata sighed. "On Earth—here too, most diseases are viral or bacterial—I completely ruled out fungal without looking into it. If I hadn't been so stupid, hundreds more people might be alive."

Yuuri blinked. He had never seen Murata so—so down on himself before. Murata was so brilliant—had memories from over a dozen lifetimes—

But then again... Murata had probably gotten used to knowing everything... And before... Before Murata had had Shinou. Murata wasn't an all powerful god-king. He couldn't know everything—and yet everyone—Murata expected himself to know everything.

"Don't be ridiculous." Yuuri grinned. "That you figured it out at all is amazing!"

Murata snorted.

"I haven't even heard of this kind of thing happening on Earth—Is it something that only happens in this world?"

"Hardly." Murata took a bite of his stew. "It was mostly a problem in the middle ages in Europe. It
was around the time of the Black Death-- but because of that, people don't tend to pay much attention to a bit of moldy rye."

"But," Yuuri started, "Conrad said you called it 'tooth of the wolf'. What does it have to do with wolves?" Yuuri swallowed. He couldn't help but feel the tightening in his chest as he was reminded of Wolfram.

"Nothing," Murata answered. "I'm sure it has other names-- I don't remember enough about it. I need to do more research. I can only remember a few things..."

"Like what?" Yuuri asked.

"Well, for one thing, the Earth drug LSD was created by manipulating the same chemical that is in the fungus that infects the rye. That's why one of our plague's major symptoms was hallucinations and madness."

"Oh..." Yuuri hardly knew anything about Earth drugs... His mother still insisted he gargle whenever he got home to prevent colds.

"In any case," Murata continued, "I'll have to do more research before we take definite action-- I don't want to risk forgetting something important."

"That makes sense," Yuuri nodded. "It's nice though-- to have something to be hopeful about."

Murata looked at him. "Don't give up on Sir Belefield just yet. He's escaped death several times these past few years-- I imagine he has more experience staying alive than anyone."

Yuuri tried not to look as depressed as he felt. "But he's so still-- and he's been sleeping for almost a week. I know Gisela said his body needs time to recover, but what if he never wakes up?"

"Shibuya," Murata sighed. "Thinking like that doesn't help anything. And the Maou is more clever than you think. He wouldn't have used his power to heal Sir Belefield if he was beyond saving." He took another bite of his stew. "I know it's difficult but just try to be patient. Alright, Shibuya?"

Yuuri nodded and pushed his stew around with his spoon. "I'll try," he mumbled, and kept eating.

* * *

Another evening at Wolfram's bedside. Another night of watching him lie still.

The oil lamp on the table flickered-- moving shadows along Wolfram's face-- his hair. Yuuri was happy to have Conrad's support. To feel his presence beside him.

It kept him from doing... Things.

Things like reach forward and move that one strand of hair that twitched whenever Wolfram breathed. To touch his cheek-- his jaw-- feel that everything was alright. Wolfram had a small scar now-- white and hardly visible against his skin-- right where his jaw turned up toward his ear.

Yuuri looked at the scar a lot. Wolfram's neck. Sometimes during the day-- when the sun was bright-- he could make out Wolfram's heartbeat, just by watching that certain part of his neck flutter. Wolfram never moved-- never rolled or kicked out his legs-- never woke to call him a cheater and then fall back asleep.

And so all Yuuri could do was watch. Try and understand how Wolfram's face could be so perfect.
His nose—his lips. When Yuuri closed his eyes he could remember how they felt—wanting—demanding—taking—

So warm.

Things—Things he still wasn't sure how to feel about. Wolfram was always pushing. Yuuri used to hate it, but now—now without it he felt lost.

It was good that he had company. It kept Yuuri from opening his mouth—asking Wolfram all the questions he couldn't answer. If everything—all the new things—the new feelings Yuuri had felt—If they had ever happened—If they were just the exaggerations of his memories.

Yuuri wanted—he wanted to be sure. He wanted Wolfram to wake up—to not be so still. He wanted to feel—to feel his heartbeat—to crawl into bed next to him. Just to feel that familiar heat—that smell. Yuuri’s fingers itched to touch him. So close.

So—pretty. Prettier than any boy had a right to be. Long—almost clear lashes—deep green eyes with flecks of gold—

Deep green eyes.

Yuuri blinked—convinced it was a dream—but—it wasn't! Wolfram's eyes were open! Looking at him—searching—as if unsure it was really him. "Wolfram..." Yuuri breathed, breaking the stillness of the room.

Wolfram blinked. Looking at him—

"Wolfram!" Conrad echoed, voice flooded with relief.

Green eyes snapped to Conrad. Widened. He tried to speak—coughed. Then a quiet, "Brother..." Voice raw—rising. "I need—I need—Brother!"

Yuuri looked at Conrad, who stood and headed for the door. "What—Conrad?"

"He means Gwendal," Conrad answered quietly and rushed down the stairs.

"Gwendal!" Wolfram was shouting now—struggling to get out of bed—hardly looking at him.

Yuuri tried—tried to keep him still. "Wolfram, it's alright—Gwendal's coming!" He—Yuuri’s eyes were wet again. Wolfram had woken up. Wolfram was alright! Yuuri wanted to shout with joy—hug him—but Wolfram wouldn't hold still enough to be held.

"Wolfram, stop it!" Yuuri said again—leaving his chair—He had to—he had to hold him—feel him. "Wolfram..." Yuuri's voice was choked with tears. "I'm so glad you're alright."

Wolfram tried to break away. "Have to—Gwendal—"

"It's alright." Gwendal's voice behind them.

Yuuri let go of Wolfram. Blushed.

Gwendal froze for a moment in the doorway. "I'm here."

"Report--" Wolfram gasped, eyes wild. "I have to--report--"

For a second more Gwendal was still. Then "Alright—Your Majesty—Would you mind leaving
us?"

Yuuri blinked. Wolfram had just-- he had finally woken up and now they wanted Yuuri to leave?

"Please!" Wolfram's voice was still near panic. "Gwendal!"

"Alright." Yuuri stood in a daze. Feeling more rejected than he probably should. Wolfram was panicked-- wanted Gwendal-- Yuuri wouldn't upset Wolfram by staying.

Gwendal thanked him with his eyes as they passed at the door.

And then Yuuri was on the stairs.

The door was closed behind him.

He felt... useless.

********

********

Gwendal crossed the room as fast as he could, sitting in the chair closest to Wolfram's bedside. He was nearly shaking with relief. They had come so close-- so close to losing him. He almost hadn't believed it when Conrad had come for him.

Wolfram was awake.

Awake and screaming for him. Gwendal had to force himself to remain reserved. By the time he sat, Wolfram had moved up in bed-- leaning against the headboard. He looked so small-- so young with wild eyes.

"Gwendal," Wolfram started, fingers gripping at sheets. "I--" Eyes down-- not focused-- not seeing anything-- Face lost in the pain of memories. "I..."

"It's alright, Wolfram." Gwendal leaned forward and rested a hand on his brother's head. "The report can wait. We're all just glad-- so glad you're alright." Gwendal swallowed hard.

Wolfram needed him to be strong.

Wolfram closed his eyes, shaking now. "I talked-- I broke-- I-- I failed..."

Gwendal moved to the bed-- pulled Wolfram against him-- hugging him close. "Wolfram, it's alright."

But his words didn't work. Gwendal could feel Wolfram shaking-- silent tears.

"I failed. I talked." Over and over again. Wolfram whispered into his chest-- refusing to look at him. "Weak-- too weak..."

Gwendal held him tighter. Wishing he could kill whoever did this to his little brother a thousand times over. The little brother he had failed so many times. Whom he had helped teach that it wasn't alright to be weak sometimes-- to cry. "I'm so sorry, Wolfram," Gwendal whispered into golden hair. "This isn't your fault-- It's mine." He took a breath, needing to steady his voice. "You are not weak. You are strong. So strong to come back to us alive." Gwendal moved a hand along his back-- rubbing-- soothing. "Everyone breaks. That you are here now is only proof of your courage. You are not weak."
Wolfram only cried harder-- silent-- stifled sobs. "I-- I wrote my name-- It was the Earth Scribbles they were after-- I didn't know-- I didn't know-- If I had known more I would have told them. I would have... I would have... I only knew my name. I only wrote my name. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..." His words dissolved into staggered breaths.

Gwendal rocked him-- rubbed his back like he was small. "It's alright, Wolfram. You haven't given anything away. Nothing is ruined. You haven't betrayed anything."

The Earth Scribbles. The Sage had given him a chart of sounds-- all the rulers of kingdoms allied with Shin Makoku had the same chart. They had used the code to combat the strangeness of the numbers. To create their own way of communicating in secret. But if they needed to they could always make a different one. Nothing-- nothing could have been told--

There was no secret Gwendal wouldn't give to have Wolfram safe.

* * *

After less than ten minutes Wolfram was asleep again. Exhausted. Gwendal hoped he had managed to reassure him... put him back to bed and brushed his hair from his face. He still needed more rest, but now... Wolfram had woken up.

He was going to be alright. He was going to get better. Gwendal would make sure of it.

He took a moment-- just to watch him sleep-- before heading down the stairs.

Once at the bottom he was greeted immediately by His Majesty's worried eyes.

"Wolfram is sleeping again," Gwendal told the room. Most of their remaining party had congregated around the tavern's small tables.

"Can I see him?" His Majesty stood.

Gisela answered for him. "Sir Belefield needs rest. But I should go and check on him. As long as we don't wake him it should be fine."

His Majesty smiled, relief evident. "Of course."

The two of them headed upstairs.

Gwendal crossed the room. He and Conrad shared a glance. Shared their guilt-- relief. Now that Wolfram was awake they could start moving again. They needed to get back to the palace in order to set things in motion-- It would also be safer. They were beginning to outstay this small human town's hospitality.

Gwendal sat at the largest table, between his brother and the Sage.

Conrad leaned forward in his seat. "What was Wolfram so eager to report about?"

Gwendal sighed. Had to close his eyes for a moment. "Whoever had him was after the code. But Wolfram didn't know more than his own name-- at any rate it would be best to change it."

"That won't be necessary," said the Sage. "Sir Belefield's name-- those characters weren't used for our code. They're part of a different character set, used for foreign words."

"Alright then." Gwendal rubbed his brow. He could already feel the headache growing behind his
eyes.

For a while the table was silent.

Then, "Did Sir Belefield say anything else? Anything that might help us identify--" 

"No," Gwendal snapped. "He wasn't awake for long."

Gwendal hoped that Yozak and Wolfram's corporal would at least return with one of their two missing persons. His troops had finished their investigation of what was left of the burned carriage and had confirmed the remains of two humans.

It was such a disappointment. Being burned alive was not the most pleasant way to die, but Gwendal would have liked to have had the pleasure himself.

"We should inform Mother," Conrad sighed.

Gwendal nodded. "Yes, of course."

"I need to go back," the Sage muttered.

Gwendal raised his eyes across the table, meeting the Sage's light-shrouded lenses.

"I need research," the Sage continued. "I'll have to go back to Earth for supplies as soon as possible. We've been inactive on the plague for far too long-- and I can't be sure how long the journey will take."

Gwendal leaned forward, resting his forehead on his thumb and forefinger. His Majesty wouldn't like the idea of leaving so soon after Wolfram's recovery. Like last time, Wolfram's endangerment seemed to have clouded His Majesty's judgment. Gwendal didn't enjoy the idea of him leading Wolfram on in such a state-- It would be best if Wolfram were allowed to recover without His Majesty's influence.

Once more, Gwendal looked up at the Sage. "Do what you need to do."

********

********

Even after Wolfram woke the first time Yuuri found it difficult to leave his bedside. At least the first waking seemed to have cured the death-like quality of Wolfram's slumber, and now with every snore-- with every toss and turn-- Yuuri could feel more assured that Wolfram would wake again.

And Wolfram did.

Every few hours Wolfram would wake and Gisela would check him-- make him eat. Conrad and Gwendal would occasionally help him down the narrow stairs to the privy.

Through all this, Wolfram was mostly silent. And he hardly looked at Yuuri.

It hurt.

But then again, everything-- it was all his fault. Wolfram had every right to blame him for it.

Still, Yuuri couldn't bring himself to leave Wolfram's side for very long. Even though all he could do was watch him-- twist the ring over his freshly healed-- newly scarred finger and wish he had
done something differently-- anything that would have spared Wolfram the pain he had suffered.

They still didn’t know what exactly Wolfram had gone through. Everyone seemed to be too afraid--
too full of guilt to ask. The times that Wolfram was awake, it all seemed like a masquerade.

No one said-- that Wolfram had been captured-- probably tortured for weeks.

No one mentioned the way Wolfram wouldn’t look at him.

It was such a change. Yuuri had never not been the center of Wolfram's attention. It was-- it was--
It hurt.

Sure, if Wolfram didn’t-- wasn’t interested in him anymore-- Maybe Yuuri could be normal again.
Forget anything-- anything other than normal had ever made him--

*Feel.*

But every time Yuuri convinced himself-- It never seemed to make a difference. He would catch
himself looking at Wolfram-- his face-- his hair.

Yuuri would catch himself *wanting.*

Yuuri wanted to touch him. He wanted to feel Wolfram again-- remember things he had never
wanted-- things that now Yuuri was terrified he couldn’t live without.

Once more, Yuuri spun Wolfram's ring on his finger-- stopped.

Wolfram was looking at him-- not him-- his hand.

Yuuri could feel his face heat up. He licked his lips. "Wolfram-- I-- I'm so glad you're alright."

Wolfram's eyes didn't move. "You said that already."

*Wimp.*

Why didn't he say it?

Yuuri's face was burning by now. He wanted-- Yuuri wanted to touch him-- he wanted to be the
center of Wolfram's world again. Yuuri worried his lip-- fingers spinning the ring again. "This--"
He slid the ring from his finger-- holding it out. "This-- It's how I knew. It hurt-- The ring hurt--
and-- it's how I knew-- How I knew I needed to find you."

Wolfram sat further up in bed-- looking at him.

Looking at him.

Words fell from Yuuri's lips before he thought them. "I'm sorry-- I'm so sorry Wolfram. And-- And
you're allowed to hate me. I'm sorry-- I'm so sorry-- It's all my fault."

Oh god. Oh god, he was going to cry again. Yuuri bit his lip-- looking at his lap--

A hand touched his-- took the ring-- tugged forward.

"Keep it on." Wolfram's voice was distant. Fingers now tracing the raised scar around his finger.

Wolfram was touching him! Yuuri could barely even hear-- the racing of his own heart in his ears
seemed to drown everything out. Were his palms sweating? Was his finger sweating? What if he started sweating and Wolfram didn't want to touch him anymore?! "Wolfam..." It was all he could say. He wanted-- He--

Yuuri wanted to hold him-- say Wolfram's name a thousand times against his neck--

Lips.

Oh god. He was-- He was getting hard. What if Wolfram noticed? What if he had to stand up in the near future? Oh god-- oh god.

Wolfram slid the ring back on Yuuri's finger. Dropped his hands.

Wolfram's eyes were on Yuuri's face. "There. That way--" A Yawn. "That way... I know... it's... you." Wolfram yawned again, slid back under his covers.

Snoring.

Yuuri's hand still tingled. He swallowed thickly, hoping that he would have a few moments to calm down before Conrad came to make him eat something.

* * *

Things with Wolfram got a little better after that. The next time he woke, both of them wrote letters to Greta to let her know they were alright.

Conrad sat with them for a while and told them about the plans to move out in the next few days. Yuuri was a little anxious to get back to the castle-- to have everything go back to the way it had been before everything went wrong.

Before-- Before-- Yuuri blinked. He had forgotten for a while-- that Sara had run away when they had gone after Wolfram. Yuuri hoped Sara was alright, but it also reminded him of something-- "Wolfram--" Yuuri started, drawing the other boy's gaze. "Sara and I aren't engaged anymore."

Wolfram blinked.

As seconds stretched Yuuri's smile began to fade.

The door opened.

Yuuri turned red and looked at the floor.

Gisela had been coming in almost every hour. It didn't seem like she would need to come so much-- if everything was fine.

Wolfram seemed to think so too. "Gisela..." he sighed. "Enough of this. Just tell me."

Gisela sat in the other chair beside the bed. "I'm not sure yet."

Yuuri couldn't help himself. "What do you mean? Is something wrong? He's getting better! Wolfram's going to be fine!"

"Yuuri."

He said his name. Wolfram said his name!
"Yuuri, calm down." Wolfram crossed his arms. "I can tell... that-- that something isn't right."

Gisela let out a heavy sigh. "This is-- the first time I've seen anything like it."

Yuuri and Wolfram both remained silent, waiting for Gisela to explain.

"You used a lot of magic, Wolfram." Gisela put a hand on his arm. "And with the human stone-- I don't know how it's even possible but-- when I read your magic..." A pause. "It's no different from-- well-- a half."

Yuuri didn't understand. "What?"

"No different from Sir Weller," Gisela continued. "You used more magic-- had more taken than any mazoku ever should. Without the Maou's power..." For a moment she trailed away. "This will affect your lifespan, Sir Belefield. Not so much now-- but in the future." The hand on Wolfram's arm tightened.

Yuuri's mind raced. "What does that mean? Wolfram--"

"What about my fire?" Wolfram interrupted, eyes on Gisela. "I can't-- What about my fire?"

Gisela shook her head. "I can't be sure. You could travel-- see Ethne-- but there's no guarantee-- In this state-- with your magic this low-- It would be like a halfblood visiting the gods."

The room was silent.

Yuuri didn't know what happened when someone-- someone who wasn't supposed to tried to get magic from the mazoku elements. He couldn't imagine it was anything good. But Wolfram-- Wolfram was fire. So much of him-- his pride was in his ability to use his magic. He-- in the beginning he had hated humans-- Conrad.

Yuuri didn't know what to do. His eyes flashed between Gisela and Wolfram-- Wolfram's closed features. This was... This was... Wrong.

Gisela bowed her head. "I'm so sorry-- there's nothing I can do."

Wolfram's lip quirked. The first trace of a smile Yuuri had seen since he'd woken up.

* * *

Hours later, eating stew downstairs in the tavern with Conrad, Yuuri still wasn't any closer to understanding Wolfram's reaction to what Gisela had said.

Wolfram had been so quiet-- so unlike himself about the whole thing. Yuuri had protested more than Wolfram had-- maybe-- maybe Wolfram was too tired-- not thinking clearly enough for the news to sink in. Yuuri just couldn't-- he hadn't been able to wrap his mind around it. Magic was-- well, at least demon magic-- was a matter of blood.

And Wolfram. His magic-- His magic was--

How could Wolfram not use his fire ever again? How could he-- how could he live the life of a half-blood? How many years of life had these two weeks of pain cost him? A century? More?

And Wolfram had practically smiled! Had looked at him and said: "It could be worse." before exhaustion pulled him back to dreams.
What if that-- What if the news had been too terrible for Wolfram to cope with? What if next time Wolfram woke he had some kind of nervous breakdown? What if he never woke at all?!

Yuuri let his forehead fall against the table with a *thump*.

"Your Maj--"

"Conrad," Yuuri groaned.

"Yuuri, you have to stop worrying."

Yuuri rolled his head to the side, looking up at his friend. "Can you?"

Conrad's smile faltered. "He's going to be fine. Wolfram's going to be fine."

"He would be better if this never happened." Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut. "I just-- I just wish I could do more for him."

A hand on his shoulder. "We all do." Conrad's voice was soft. "I'm sure-- Wolfram just needs some time to recover-- to fully process what's happened to him. He has to decide how he wants to move forward. It's natural-- after things like this-- for a person to need time to adjust to the real world again."

Yuuri opened his eyes. "This kind of thing-- does it happen a lot?"

"Less now, than during the war," Conrad answered.

Yuuri was quiet for a while. "Will Wolfram ever get his magic back?"

"There are people better suited to that question than me, Yuuri." Conrad squeezed his shoulder. "I've been lacking in that area my whole life."

Yuuri sat up, causing Conrad's arm to fall from his shoulder. "Don't talk like that, Conrad! You've done so many great things. You don't need magic to be great!"

Conrad lowered his head. "It is an honor to have you think so, Yuuri. But with that in mind-- you must have faith that Wolfram will be able to do great things, even without his magic."

*Oh.* "I suppose you're right."

What if... What if after protesting so much-- in front of Wolfram-- he made Wolfram think he didn't believe in him? What if Wolfram thought he thought that without magic Wolfram couldn't be great! He had made a terrible mistake! He had to talk to Wolfram!

"Sorry, Conrad," Yuuri said as he stood. "I think I need to talk to Wolfram for a while."

Conrad nodded, and then followed Yuuri to the bottom of the stairs to stand guard.

Yuuri took the stairs in twos. He was already so anxious-- so excited to see Wolfram again.

When he opened the door he was surprised to find Gisela helping Wolfram out of bed.

"I can stand on my own," Wolfram was growling in protest, finally reminding Yuuri of his old self.

"Good evening, Your Majesty." Gisela's smile was pinched. "Perhaps you'd enjoy helping me tame Sir Belefield long enough to get him downstairs for a bath?"
"I'm the one who wanted a bath in the first place," Wolfram grumbled, looking away.

Yuuri blushed down to his toes.

A bath.

Naked.

Naked Wolfram.

It was exciting-- terrifying. He had seen Wolfram in the bath before-- he had seen Wolfram naked before. But now-- now even the thought-- Oh god, oh god!

"Um." Was all Yuuri could manage, stepping dumbly out of the doorway so Wolfram and Gisela could pass. Wolfram seemed to be able to walk on his own-- but Gisela insisted he walk with an arm over her shoulder anyway. "Um..." Yuuri tried again as they passed.

And then somehow Yuuri pulled up all his courage. "Wolfram." The two paused to look at him. "I- -" Yuuri swallowed. "I can wash your back."

Wolfram nearly fell down the stairs. His face-- had gone so pale. Thankfully, Gisela had a good hold. Yuuri rushed forward, trying to help--

"No!" Wolfram shouted-- flinching away from Yuuri's touch-- seeming to surprise even himself.

Everyone froze.

Then Wolfram stood tall again-- looking at the floor. "Sorry, Yuuri-- I--" A deep breath. "I forgot for a moment where I-- I shouldn't have shouted at you. I--" Wolfram tried to look at him, but his eyes only made it as far as Yuuri's feet. "I don't want to let it affect-- anything. Please, forget this just happened-- I-- I'd--" Another breath. "Of course I'd appreciate the help... Wimp."

"Alright then," Gisela snapped. "Now that it's decided, let's move from the stairs before Sir Belefield falls and kills us both."

"I'm not going to fall!" Wolfram barked.

"Oh and you've proven that so well," Gisela retaliated. "Now march!"

Yuuri watched them go. He was-- he was going to wash Wolfram's back. Wolfram would be naked. He would get to touch Wolfram... Naked.

Wolfram would be wet-- skin smooth-- flushed with heat-- And Yuuri would-- would be allowed to touch him! Or maybe-- maybe Wolfram would--

Yuuri blinked. His mind seemed to have remembered-- What was he thinking? It was-- it was-- not right. If he-- if he touched Wolfram-- everything would change. It could never go back! He could never be normal again!

But-- But Wolfram-- if there was a time that Wolfram needed him it was now. But-- but--

Oh god! Yuuri didn't know what was about to happen! Anything could happen.

He wasn't ready! He wasn't-- he wasn't--
Yuuri couldn't breathe.

"Shibuya, are you alright?" Murata stood at the bottom of the stairs-- he was holding a lot.

Yuuri let his feet carry him down. Murata-- Murata would know what he should do. "Murata..." he started, couldn't go on.

Murata put down one of the things he was holding-- a bucket of steaming water-- probably for Wolfram's bath. He still had a bag over his shoulder.

"Shibuya, what's the matter?" Murata's glasses caught the light.

"I-- I just--" Yuuri rubbed his head with both hands, hoping it would help him think. "I want-- but I don't know-- And I just-- I wish I had more time-- I just need--"

"More time," Murata finished for him-- Knocked over the bucket of water with his foot.

Yuuri's shoes were wet.

And then Murata pushed him-- not with his body-- though he grabbed Yuuri's arm. Murata pushed Yuuri with his magic-- pushed him through the water.

Through the water.

Murata forced Yuuri half way through the door between worlds. Swirling darkness. Mouth full of water. It would-- They would drown if Yuuri didn't finish it!

But he couldn't! He couldn't! What about Wolfram? What about everything--

The darkness expanded-- pulled them over-- waves over skin until it wasn't even skin. Only thoughts. Scattered thoughts that wanted rest-- wanted more time.

Thoughts that wanted to hide-- to go home.

And so Yuuri finished it.

Yuuri took them back to Earth.

*******
*******
Fernan Delgato had been chosen.

For nearly a year he had lived within the white walls of the inner city. Away from the filth-- the grime-- the common cattle that infested the world. Fernan wasn't like them. Fernan had been given numbers-- clarity.

And after coming through the first gates to the inner city-- after the purge-- he had gained freedom from the whispers-- the colors that had clouded his thoughts.

Now everything-- his purpose-- had become so clear. Now Fernan could fully understand the disgrace of his previous existence. Of course, it had been an honor to tend to the crop-- now more than ever Fernan could appreciate that. But his life-- his worthless wife and children-- Fernan felt-- clean-- to finally be rid of them.

They were filthy. All of them. The Third Class humans ran rampant throughout the world-- but they were being stopped. The Beautiful King had sent forth the crop's blessing-- cleansing the world of the unworthy.

Once the crop had been purged from his dirty blood Fernan had been made a city guard. A soldier in training for the great war that would surely come. The dream, the life Fernan had wanted ever since he was a child was finally his. Now every day he bathed-- walked the streets to ensure the productivity of the nation. And every night Fernan went home to the bed of his pretty new wife.

It was the greatest duty-- the greatest honor of the Second Class. Through the mysteries of birth the second class had been able to produce the few-- the Pure. Of course the Pure had grown in number-- could breed more of their own kind-- but the nation was strengthened by the blessings of the additional Pure children the Second Class was able to produce.

Soon Fernan's new wife would give him the first of their children-- And by the time the child was five it would be clear if he was worthy.

Second Class citizens who produced Pure children were well rewarded, and for the first time in his life becoming a city guard was not the end of Fernan's ambitions. If he and his new wife could produce a Pure child they would be allowed to accompany him to the inner sanctums until he came of age-- giving Fernan ample time to create another Pure child in the hopes of extending their stay.

Fernan let his gaze fix upon the central tower-- squinting as the white stone reflected the sun into his eyes. Even the city guards didn't know exactly what was behind those polished walls. It wasn't their place.

But now-- after so much time wasted suffocating amongst the filth-- Fernan's curiosity for things beyond his spectrum of existence could not be sated. Someday he would be able to see for himself-- see the greatness that the clerics spoke of every evening at the Gatherings.

This world had suffered so much-- it was the duty of the cured to help the sick. The duty of the
pure to guide them all. For only the pure could take in the Blessing. The gift of gods.

Only the Pure were worthy-- could accept the blessing without the corruption of mind or flesh. Even the Second Class was susceptible to the madness that came from taking what wasn't theirs-- though their flesh was spared the punishment the filth acquired. But the Pure-- The Pure took in the power of the gods and exhaled brilliance.

Beauty.

The Pure-- one day Fernan would be able to meet one of the few-- the protected human deities within the innermost sanctum. Fernan wondered what they would look like-- feel like-- taste like.

Now that the fog had left his mind Fernan had gained a new-found appreciation for the joys of flesh. So much so that now even his pretty new wife could no longer satisfy his desire.

But now Fernan was a guard, and he had discovered that the third class had some uses. And as long as he kept an eye out for the rare blossom of a Second Class citizen among the muck, Fernan was free to do as he pleased.

And he did.

So did the others. Some of the guards had more eccentric tastes, but Fernan had never had a stomach for blood-- no. The third class could be quite tolerable for fucking, although lately the prettier ones had gotten rather used. But Fernan knew the countryside-- the smaller allies-- better than the others, and every now and then he would get lucky and find a new toy.

Fernan had even begun to appreciate the way of boys. Useless for breeding-- but pretty. Tight enough to be worthwhile.

The Third Class was so stupid-- so drunk and mad on a gift they didn't deserve-- they forgot him-- what he did to them. They only saw what they wanted to see. Fernan could take them as many times as he liked and they would only smile-- dumbly up at him-- as he led them into a dark corner, or walked into their homes to take them on their beds.

Fernan sighed pleasantly and stood. He had been enjoying a small lunch but now it was time to satisfy other appetites. Fernan's lips twisted into a smile as he nodded to another guard on his way past the gate.

Fernan Delgato had been chosen-- And his new life was very very sweet.

********

********

Earth
Tokyo, Japan
********

The castle was empty and dark. Yuuri had been looking for something--

A black kitten crossed his path, darting around a shadowed corner. Only the tinkling of a bell remained, getting farther and farther away.

Yuuri had been looking for something--

"-- I never trusted them! Especially that-- friend of my brother-- What have they done to my precious--"
The castle was empty-- and that was so wrong. The castle was supposed to be home. He had so many people here-- so many people to take care of--

"-- Don't be awful, Sho-chan. Mama is sure that Wolf--"

The castle was empty-- Wolfram. Yuuri had been-- Where had Wolfram gone? There were so many shadows-- the voices-- it made it harder to find his way. Distracting.

"-- Why don't we all head down and let the boy get some rest? Yuuri will be sleeping for a while and I can't wait to have some of your Mama's curry... You've had a long trip too, Shouri. How is-- "

Go away. The castle was so dark. Yuuri had to concentrate-- But the voices--

He had lost Wolfram-- but he had let them down too. His family. His earth.

Yuuri didn't know where home was anymore. The castle faded to black-- he could feel cool, clean sheets on his skin-- his body-- no-- he had to keep looking-- go back to the castle--

He had let Wolfram down.

Wolfram was waiting for him and he had-- but maybe that part had been the dream? If he could just find Wolfram--

The guest bedroom. Wolfram had had to stay there when Sara had been in the castle. That room-- Beads on the floor-- Hot--

If he found Wolfram-- maybe he would-- the pressure-- the heat-- Yuuri could remember so clearly. Lips and breath and the way Wolfram smelled. It had been so-- Yuuri had been too scared to open his eyes. How would Wolfram look?

Soft skin. Wolfram's chest rising with each breath-- golden hair.

The pressure in his stomach-- Wolfram was touching him but it wasn't nearly enough-- Yuuri wanted to press against him everywhere. More. Wolfram's hands were on him-- his lips.

But there had been something-- something he was supposed to say.

*I'm sorry.*

It was so much easier to kiss him.

*I'm sorry.*

To hold him-- Wolfram's hands digging into his hips.

*I'm sorry.*

Hot fingers sliding against him until Yuuri lost all control-- no control-- nothing to worry about.

*I'm sorry.*

But there was nothing he could do.

Yuuri had to pull away-- look at Wolfram's eyes-- see his face-- see the way he made him feel. If Yuuri had the same effect on Wolfram that Wolfram had on--
Wolfram's face. Dark.

Blood.

Wolfram breaking. Falling apart in his arms.

Running from dreams. It couldn't be real-- but Wolfram looked at him-- so hurt-- so hurt--

Yuuri had left him alone. The sheets were cool and clean against his skin-- but he was sweating--
covered-- wet--

Yuuri sat up in bed. The room was dark-- moonlight through the curtains-- hair damp. Sitting in a
pool of sweat. He was half hard-- had to pee. Nightmares fading into the seeping reality of
memory. The horror that reality was worse than dreams-- dreams he could hardly remember
besides the fear-- lingering arousal.

The house was silent.

The digital clock blinked three sixteen.

Yuuri took a deep breath and brought his hands up to cover his face. He was exhausted. His skin
was covered in sweat.

He had made such a huge mistake.

After a few seconds Yuuri untangled himself from his covers and let his bare feet rest on the floor.
It was cold. Sweat made the bottoms of his feet stick a bit as he stumbled his way to the bathroom,
head spinning at the rush of blood to his head and limbs.

Yuuri tried not to think as he emptied his bladder-- hoping that the sound of the flushing toilet
wouldn't wake his sleeping family. The sound of water rushing through pipes seemed so much
louder than it should have been.

The bathtub in the little room across the hall was full and covered to trap the heat. It was only after
the lock on the door clicked shut that Yuuri finally felt like he could breathe. He let out a sigh as he
stripped out of his sticky clothes.

It had been so long-- but the motions were so ingrained that Yuuri was able to keep his mind
blissfully numb as he went through the motions of washing-- filling the small bucket as few times
as he could to avoid the roar of running water. He took his time-- doing everything he could to
protect this small moment of alone he so desperately needed.

But he couldn't think. He just had to get clean enough to sit in the bath. In, in, out. One motion at a
time.

And then Yuuri was in the lukewarm water-- holding his knees. He must have done other things
but they didn't matter, nothing--

Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut and moved his knees enough so he could press his face against the
surface of the water. He couldn't go back now.

And even if he could it was too late. What could he possibly say?

If only Murata hadn't--

Yuuri lifted his head and sighed. But it had been his own fault-- He had been the one who had
wanted to run.

He was such a wimp.

It just wasn't fair. He should have been able to figure this out without so much... pressure. It wasn't fair that Wolfram had been forced to suffer so much-- that Wolfram had always been so---

If Wolfram had never wanted him-- never pushed to begin with-- Yuuri could still be--

Whatever he wasn't now.

Not so confused-- So miserable.

If Wolfram hadn't needed him to succeed Yuuri never would have had to fail. Again and again. Make so many mistakes. Hurt Wolfram so many times.

And now it was so fast--

If only-- If this was going to happen-- Why couldn't it have happened when he had more time to figure it all out?

But that-- It was his fault that everything before hadn't... Yuuri had been so scared. So blind. So stupid.

It was his fault.

Yuuri wanted it all to be different-- wished he had more time. He just wanted to go back to that room-- where Wolfram had stayed-- where they had had time to really be alone. That small soldier's quarters where Wolfram had helped him with his homework and sometimes there was more.

Yuuri didn't-- hadn't-- even when he'd had the chance he couldn't bring himself kiss Wolfram. And now-- because this terrible thing had happened-- so many terrible things-- It was all so much worse. If Yuuri made a mistake-- If he couldn't be there for Wolfram-- If someday he couldn't feel the way he should-- want Wolfram the way he should now--

Wolfram would never forgive him.

It was too much pressure.

And if Gwendal-- If Conrad-- if anyone found out they had even-- They would have to get married-- an even bigger promise-- more people to disappoint.

What if he tried again and failed?

Wolfram needed-- deserved so much more.

It was too late. Yuuri had already ruined everything. He could never be good enough for Wolfram.

Wolfram should have someone who wasn't such a wimp. Wasn't so terrified. Wolfram needed someone who could love him enough-- who would be sure to love him forever. Someone who would never let him down.

Yuuri was just a teenager. He wasn't sure if he even liked-- if he could only be with a boy.

As it was now Yuuri hadn't ever even kissed a girl-- never had a girlfriend. If he-- Yuuri could
never know if he would prefer to be with a girl.

He had only ever been with Wolfram.

But--

Yuuri dug his fingers into his scalp. It was so-- had been so-- Yuuri had never imagined anything could ever make him feel so desperate. So lost in heat and touching-- clinging to Wolfram like he was the only solid thing in this giant confusing void of feeling. Yuuri wasn't even sure it was possible for anyone to feel more-- hot-- lost-- more-- than he had the few times he had pushed away his fear long enough to let Wolfram touch him. And what was more-- Now Yuuri's fingers-- his hands tingled with the need to touch Wolfram again-- to make Wolfram feel all the things he had. Feel good. Yuuri wished he had been brave enough to open his eyes-- watch thick lashes flutter shut-- swollen lips--

Yuuri groaned and stretched out as far as he could in the small tub. He couldn't think about that now. If he couldn't even be brave enough to wash Wolfram's back-- He certainly didn't deserve to violate Wolfram with his imagination.

He was so hopeless.

Another sigh and Yuuri stood, covering the tub again and rinsing, before draping a towel around his hips to walk down the dark hallway back to his room.

Yuuri could barely keep his eyes open. Even just thinking-- He needed to rest. To get stronger.

It was worse. Every moment he delayed was worse. Yuuri had to go back-- had to face it eventually. Apologize to Wolfram.

The longer he waited-- He was such a wimp.

Yuuri was asleep the moment he fell into bed.

********

********

Shou Shimeron
Central Ring

********

Camilio DeLaRosa had been a servant of the gods for nearly thirty years. As the oldest of seven children he had always enjoyed teaching and caring for the younger generations. Camilio had been blessed with the gift of oration from an early age. He had been the most promising member of his circle, graduating at the age of twelve from priest to cleric-in-training.

At twenty, Camilio finished his apprenticeship. The youngest cleric in decades, he began leading one in six Gatherings in the southernmost district of the inner city of Shou Shimeron. It was hardly the most prestigious place to speak-- full of the Second Class. But half of Camilio's brothers and sisters-- both of his parents-- were Second Class, and Camilio had been eager to spread the word.

He had believed so strongly then.

So strongly it had made him blind.

Now Camilio was one of the most respected men of the faith. He spoke at Gatherings nine out of
ten days and was one of the few allowed into the central tower-- one of the few allowed to serve
the king.

Camilio paused to take a breath, to clear his mind, before he crossed the threshold to the royal
chambers. The final spiral staircase before the tower's peak. There would be four windows before
he reached the top-- four directions in which to spread purity across the world.

Camilio could feel the sweat on his palms before he even began to climb. His Majesty-- The
Beautiful One-- had summoned him by name. Camilio had-- he had told no one-- the sin of doubt
had never made it past his lips. It had stayed trapped in his thoughts. No one could know.

No one could possibly know.

He had been so careful-- his speeches were as impassioned as they had always been. He had given
them all so many times he hardly had to think the words anymore...

But that's why it had started.

Camilio had started looking-- listening-- rather than simply believing.

Camilio began to see the immorality that festered within the Second Class-- guards and others
abusing the commoners. So gluttonous that they forgot to appreciate what the gods had bestowed
on them-- they forgot completely their obligation to help the less fortunate. The ones the gods did
not choose.

And even the Pure-- Camilio feared they had all become too greedy-- taking the gods' power into
their own hands. If the Pure had been chosen by the gods-- then shouldn't those who were truly
faithful allow time to take its course? To be contented to convert those who were not chosen
slowly?

This was folly. It was too soon.

And of course the sickness-- the death of the unfortunate was necessary, for only through the
survivors could the Pure be found. But moving so quickly-- so much death at once-- was an
invitation for unwanted attention from the unenlightened nations-- for war.

Camilio reached the top of the stairs and entered the waiting chamber. He knelt before the altar and
dipped his fingers into the basin filled with blessings-- fine black dust rippled away-- floating in a
thin coat along the surface-- clinging to his fingers as he took them away. The gods' gift sat light
upon the water, dancing in its ripples to conceal the gaps his fingers had made. Camilio said a
small prayer before dipping his fingers again into a smaller basin of plain water and drying his
hands.

By the time he stood someone had come for him. A female maintainer in simple white robes and
short silver hair. The girl's pupils were wide.

She had been abusing the gift.

"His Majesty is bathing now-- the Man of Faith will avert his eyes." Her voice wavered-- as did her
step as she turned to lead him.

Camilio allowed himself a frown. It was becoming even more common for the pure to overindulge.
The pure could not live without the gods blessing-- but too much and their minds would cloud no
differently from the Second Class.
Of course the pure denied it. Camilio himself had denied it for far too long.

Camilio adjusted his features as he entered the royal bathroom. A large silver tub stood on four exquisitely crafted legs, twisted to resemble blooming stalks of rye. The room was vast and Camilio's footsteps echoed on the white marble floor.

Even with his eyes averted Camilio could tell through his peripheral vision that His Majesty was not alone in his bath. It seemed his favored guard had finally returned. The young king laid contentedly against the older man's chest as the guards black braid hung over the rim of the tub.

Camilio swallowed thickly as he felt the guard's eyes upon him.

"Camilio," the young king sighed, tongue rolling thickly over the syllables. "I've had so much to think about-- many things--" A laugh. "But I remembered I wanted to tell you something-- always so good to the family-- Camilio."

Camilio bowed. "I am honored to be thought of at all, Your Majesty."

"Hhn, quite," His Majesty purred. "With your father away for me-- you are the head of your family-- such a distinguished family." A pause. "He is doing well. The boy, too-- playing games with the little devil of a princess-- Can you imagine?" Water lapped over the edge of the tub as he turned. "You will be moved. There is a new house open in the central ring."

Camilio was shocked. The last thing he had expected was to be rewarded-- and by His Majesty himself no less. "Thank you-- Thank you-- Your Majesty, I--"

"Enough," the young king snapped. "You have four children now-- DeLaRosa."

"Yes," Camilio answered quickly, licking his lips. He had been so lucky-- His wife was so beautiful-- Camilio had never hoped to find a love so great.

"I expect you to double that number within the year."

Camilio blinked.

"Three new blushing brides-- one freshly flowered, I'm told. Your family has done well for me, Camilio." A chuckle. "The pure world rises so very soon-- It will do well with more of your stock." Again, the sound of water shifting in the tub. "That is all."

And with a flick of a wrist Camilio was being led from the room.

********
********
Earth
Tokyo, Japan
********

The next time Yuuri woke it was to the sound of crows outside his bedroom window. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock. It was still early, but he could hear the sounds of voices in the kitchen downstairs. Yuuri's stomach growled. A sigh.

He would have to go down eventually.

Yuuri stood with a stretch and went to pull a change of clothes from his dresser. A new set of
boxers felt strange and loose against his skin, but even more surprising was the roughness of his jeans. Yuuri took a moment to bend his knees, feeling the stiff cloth pull against his thighs, before pulling the zipper up. Had he really been gone for so long?

He looked at his reflection in the mirror hanging against the back of his door. His pants still seemed to fit the same-- and Yuuri couldn't remember the last time he had noticed a change in his features.

What did Wolfram ever see in him?

Yuuri was just so average-- his hair sticking up after sleeping on it wet, and lines from the sheets still dark in places on his skin. He wasn't particularly muscular, but his jeans were low on his hips and his mother had bought them "to show off his behind". Yuuri wondered if Wolfram would like him better in jeans.

Once the thought registered Yuuri turned red and rushed to put on a shirt. He couldn't think about things like that-- especially before he had to go downstairs and look his family in the eye.

Yuuri was halfway down the stairs before he could make out exactly who was awake. A grimace. Mother, Father, Shouri. His entire family was in the kitchen. Shouldn't his father have already left for work? Yuuri took a deep breath to prepare himself for the onslaught before turning the corner.

"Yuu-chan!" His mother saw him at once, abandoning the stove to race around the table and hug him. Both his father and Shouri weren't far behind.

"It's alright. I'm fine." Yuuri tried to assure them all as his mother began to sob against his shoulder.

"Ohh, Yuu-chan we were so worried! It's been so long we didn't know what had happened! Mama has kept your room exactly the same, and your birthday presents are in the den."

"Let the boy have some air, Jennifer." His father tried to help.

But the moment his mother let go, Shouri attacked him with tears of his own.

Yuuri grimaced. "Shouri-- I'm fine. I'm sorry I worried you. You can let go."

"My little Yuu-chan." Shouri's fingers dug into his back.

It took half an hour for everyone to settle down. Mother had to throw out the eggs she had left on the stove and start over again. The smell of smoke lingered in the air.

Once they were all seated at the table, Yuuri was shocked to hear that he had been gone for almost a year, missing his seventeenth birthday completely. Yuuri wondered, with how many extra days he had lived in Shin Makoku, if he would ever really be sure of his age again.

The night he and Murata had arrived in the bathtub, Murata had only stayed long enough to take a short rest and assure Yuuri's mother that Yuuri was fine before he had rushed off to see Bob. According to his mother, Murata planned to return in time for dinner this evening.

Yuuri had been asleep for five days this time. His father had taken time off work and Shouri had flown back from Switzerland just to see him. Yuuri felt completely wretched for worrying them all so much.

Mother talked almost constantly-- and Yuuri was relieved because he had no idea what he was supposed to say. He had put them all through so much trouble. His parents had had to pull him out
of school and tell everyone he was studying abroad in Switzerland. Shouri had even photoshopped his picture to help convince nosy acquaintances.

While Yuuri sat and listened to the rushed sounds of his mother's voice he tried to convince himself that the lines around her eyes had always been there, and that his father's hair had always had that streak of gray. His father sat beside his mother and smiled, so happy just to have him home, while Shouri brooded at him from across the table. Yuuri tried to cover his silence with eating-- which for a while was easy considering how hungry he was. But eventually his mother's monologue turned into questions.

"But Yuu-chan, you have to tell us everything about your adventures!" She clapped her hands together in excitement. "How is everyone? Have you and Wolf-chan gotten--"

"Mother!" Shouri interrupted.

Yuuri offered a nervous laugh. "Everyone is fine."

*Now.*

Yuuri swallowed thickly. It had come much too close to Not Fine. "We had some excitement for a while, but-- well, Murata is close to solving everything, which is why we--"

"You shouldn't put too much trust in him," Shouri grumbled, putting down his fork.

"Shou-chan, don't be awful!" Mother snapped. "Ken-chan is a wonderful young man." Then she seemed to think of something. "Papa! Ken-chan is coming for dinner and I haven't gone shopping! I need another pound of potatoes if I'm going to make enough of my special curry--"

"Don't worry." Father stood and smiled. "I'll take care of it. Don't exhaust the boy too much while I'm gone." His father walked around the table and held Yuuri's shoulder for a moment before he left.

"Yuuri," Shouri began, "I know it must be fun for you in the other world, but you have to think of your responsibilities here too."

Yuuri lowered his head. "I'm sorry I worried you. I didn't realize how long I had been away."

"It's alright, Yuu-chan," his mother soothed. "I just wish you would let us visit the other world every once and a while." Her voice rose along with her excitement. "I can only imagine all the parties-- the dresses-- Ohh that reminds me!" She stood and rushed toward the den. "I bought a bunch of new dresses for Greta-- Ohh and some yarn for Gwendal..." Her voice faded into the other end of the house.

"Yuuri." Shouri's voice was stern. "What are you going to do about your exams? No college will accept--"

"College?" Yuuri sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

Shouri's eyes hardened. "Don't tell me you planned to play in the other world forever. You have responsibilities here too--"

Yuuri could feel the anger rising in his gut. "Play?! Is that what you think it is? Another one of your-- games. I'm King. I have responsibilities--"

"And one of those responsibilities is being properly educated. I've already started my dissertation
"But that's here, Shouri." Yuuri growled. "It makes sense on Earth-- but what could I learn here that I couldn't learn in Shin Makoku? There are things I need to know that I couldn't possibly--"

"Then what about this so-called 'excitement'? That 'friend' of yours had to come here to solve it--"

"That was an EXCEPTION!"

"Boys!" Mother shouted.

Yuuri took a second to catch his breath. His hands were shaking in fists and he was sure his face was red.

"I will not have the two of you fighting!" Mother's arms were crossed. "Of course Yuu-chan isn't going to college! Papa and I never thought he would. We expected him to spend his adulthood in the other world all along."

Yuuri smirked at Shouri.

"And Yuu-chan," Mother's attention was now focused on him. "Shou-chan is right about education being important. You shouldn't ignore things this world has to offer-- but you don't have to spend time in college to do it. There are lots of ways to--"

"But Mother--" Shouri started.

"It's Mama--"

"Yuu-chan needs to spend time on Earth. Without college he'll never be able to get a proper job--"

"A job?!" Yuuri stood, chair scraping against the kitchen floor. "Shouri, Shin Makoku is my kingdom--"

"So you just plan to abandon us? What about--"

"Of course I'll visit-- but Shin Makoku is my home now, Shouri." Yuuri was prevented from saying more as his mother trapped him in her arms.

"Ohh, Yuu-chan," she whispered. "You've grown up so much. You look the same but-- Ohh I'm so proud of you..."

"I can't believe it." Shouri's voice was numb. "My precious little brother... Mother, I can't believe you're encouraging..." He stood and walked from the kitchen, footsteps slow and heavy on the stairs.

"Shin Makoku is my home."

Yuuri hadn't known how true it was until the words came past his lips.

"You have to forgive Shou-chan, Yuu-chan." Mother pulled back, but cupped Yuuri's face with both hands. "He just doesn't want to lose you."

"I'll come back," Yuuri croaked, emotion stuck in his throat. "I'll always come back."

"I fully expect you to." She rested her forehead against his. "You have to keep coming back for him too-- even after Papa and I are gone."
Yuuri nearly choked on his breath. "Don't say things like that!"

His mother smiled. "I'm sorry, Yuu-chan, but Mama has to think about things like this." She sighed. "You're such a grown up young man now-- and so pretty. Has Wolf-chan been taking good care of you? You can't imagine how sad Mama would be if she didn't get to go to her Yuu-chan's wedding."

Yuuri blushed as his mother let go of his face. "No. No wedding yet."

His mother squealed in delight. "Ohh, Yuu-chan, you're finally-- Wolf-chan was so smitten-- I'm so happy for you--"

"Wha--" Yuuri was nearly squeezed to death.

"You said 'yet', Yuu-chan. You were so against it before! What happened? You must tell Mama every detail."

Yuuri blanched and pulled away. "It's not like that! It's not--" He didn't even know if it was a lie-- but Yuuri-- how could he not deny something like that? "It's..." A sigh as he sat back down. "...complicated."

His mother sat beside him. "What happened, Yuu-chan? You've been so quiet-- so sad even though I know you're happy to see us."

Yuuri gripped his knees, knuckles white against denim. It was so weird to be talking to his mother about this of all things. "I..." A swallow. "Wolfram almost died." Yuuri did his best to continue through his Mother's gasp. "We got there just in time-- but Wolfram went through so much, and for most of it I didn't even know it was happening. And now-- I haven't even really talked to him since-- I finally got to see him again and I had to go and--" Yuuri bit his lip. It felt wrong to admit his guilt at being here, where he had once thought was home. But now... he was sure that his home could only be in Shin Makoku. With everyone. With Wolfram.

"Ohh, Yuu-chan, I'm sure you did everything you could--"

"He almost died-- and now he thinks I just left him there. Right when he... When I..." Yuuri's face was red and he refused to look up.

His mother stood. "Well I'm glad Ken-chan is coming tonight. The two of you can leave right after dinner."

Yuuri's eyes snapped up. "What?" He had expected his family to try to keep him here as long as they could.

His mother didn't seem to be listening. "I'll have to make sure all of the presents are sealed-- Ohh and Yuu-chan, you should pack-- go through your room to see if there's anything you might need-- Papa and I were thinking your room could be--" A pause. "And try to get some rest. I'm sure everyone in the other world is missing you-- You shouldn't keep them waiting."

Yuuri could only nod as his mother left for the den. The kitchen seemed so empty-- strange.

Everything seemed out of place.

* * *

Yuuri could hardly remember what it was like to be normal. To get up and go to school. Do
homework. To worry so much about mundane things. Things that couldn't be compared to a plague killing thousands, constant worries about politics-- To having so many people -- a kingdom-- depending on him.

But somehow Yuuri couldn't make himself feel the loss. Shin Makoku-- the experiences he had had in the other world-- it was worth everything.

His room felt so different now. All the posters and things filling the shelves. Yuuri knew that they used to mean something, but now it all just seemed like... *stuff*. Yuuri wondered if now his room would be converted into storage or made into a crafts room for his mother.

At least his once precious room still served as a sanctuary from Shouri's accusations. Yuuri had no desire to continue their conversation from this morning.

His mother had kept everything so clean. The smell of detergent and the shining metal of his shelves and computer made it impossible to think of it as anything but another world. A place he no longer belonged. As his eyes trailed from one surface to the next, Yuuri couldn't think of anything he would need to bring back with him to Shin Makoku. His mother was probably plastic-wrapping a mountain of presents this very second.

Yuuri sighed and sat heavily on his bed. Maybe he should try to think of presents for everyone too. It was still early, plenty of time to take his bike down to the department store by the station. But that would take energy... And once Yuuri started buying presents it felt like he couldn't stop until he had something for every servant and cleaning maid.

It seemed so pointless now... Especially when he had a history of forgetting people that really mattered.

It all came back to Wolfram. Every thought. Every glimpse of something familiar to a memory.

A poster on the wall above his bed made Yuuri cringe, remembering the time he had come back to earth with a poster for Conrad... and nothing for Wolfram. His mother had sent a letter but...

Yuuri groaned.

And then Shouri's ridiculous magazines had managed to make everything worse. Yuuri had never even liked that kind of thing--

A blink.

His room. After he left-- what if his mother went through everything. *Reorganized*. Yuuri had never had much on his computer-- Shouri had more than should have been possible on his external hard drive-- not that Yuuri had taken it more than once or twice. But Yuuri was sure there was an old magazine or two from middle school hidden somewhere in his room.

Yuuri hurried onto the floor, turning so he could pull out the drawers beneath his bed. For the most part they were filled with boxes of old baseball cards and notes from classes he had been convinced he would need again. Yuuri shoved aside the stacks of paper and old baseball memorabilia, movements more and more frantic as he failed to find what he was looking for. Had his mother already found them? Saved them to confront him later-- this was the same place that he had tried to hide his Shin Makoku underwear the first time... Yuuri could feel his face go hot with shame.

And then his fingers touched smooth plastic.

The magazine wasn't as explicit as he'd remembered. It had seemed so scandalous when he had
gotten it. But then again, at that age most things had. Just thinking back on those years of his life made Yuuri cringe. The time when his own body seemed to conspire against him at all the wrong moments. For all the wrong reasons. Yuuri knew that all boys had the same problems around that age-- but it was something so much different to have to live through. It had been so terrible. And the only way to stop it-- if only for a while-- was to do something that still seemed to Yuuri to be the embodiment of shame.

Yuuri pulled the magazine out of the drawer and sighed. A European boy had brought it with him after his father had moved to Japan for business. Yuuri still couldn't recognize the foreign letters filling the columns of articles every few pages. The magazine had gotten a lot of attention when it was first brought to school-- but eventually Yuuri had found the courage to ask to see it-- and since by then the popularity had died down, the boy had told Yuuri just to keep it.

Yuuri flipped through the pages absently, noticing how different it was from the things he saw so often on convenience store shelves. The women weren't crying or covered in fluid, and most noticeably-- there were men in the pictures as well. Not exclusively-- but every now and then a woman's face could be seen over a man's broad shoulders, her legs wrapped tightly around his hips- - over the man's slightly muscled--

Yuuri snapped the magazine shut and tossed it across the room in frustration.

This was all so wrong.

Like all the times he got hard in the shower after baseball practice-- the way only his eyes seemed to want to linger on his teammates. The way riding on a horse with Conrad when he had first arrived in Shin Makoku had been almost unbearable.

This was all so wrong.

* * *

By two o' clock Yuuri was starting to go crazy waiting for Murata to arrive. His room had begun to feel like less than a sanctuary now that it had become yet another source of Things That Made Him Ask Questions He Was Afraid To Answer. Once Yuuri had purged his room of said materials he decided to take his chances with his mother in the den.

Yuuri's earlier thoughts about a mountain of gifts turned out to be true. His mother was just finishing up when he arrived.

"Yuu-chan!" she squealed and hugged him. "You don't think it's too much do you? I wanted to make sure not to forget anyone--"

"It is a lot..." Yuuri managed as he pulled himself from his mother's arms. "We might not be able to take everything at once."

Mother rushed back over to the pile of boxes. "Ohh, I know you're tired, Yuu-chan. I don't know what I was thinking. Mama is just so excited to see you--"

"Don't worry." Yuuri sat on the sofa. "I'm sure everyone will love their gifts..." Yuuri's mind couldn't help but wander-- looking at all the gifts. "I was thinking-- I mean-- What did you-- Is there anything for Wolfra--"

His mother squealed. "Ohh Yuu-chan what a wonderful idea! Mama has some beautiful rings--"

Yuuri went crimson. "No, no. Not like that-- Just something he might like. That would make him
Ohh, Yuu-chan, I'm sure Wolf-chan will be happy just to know you're thinking of him."

Yuuri sighed. "Still-- I would feel better not going back empty-handed."

"Well I'm sure he'll be happy with whatever you decide to give him." His mother sat on the sofa beside him.

It was quiet for a while. Yuuri knew Wolfram hadn't exactly been fond of Earth when he had come. It made Yuuri feel terrible all over again to remember how little he still knew about Wolfram.

Wolfram liked... proper things? He was good at a lot... fighting, dancing. He was so brilliant with his fire--

What if Wolfram never--

Not now. Yuuri couldn't let his mind go down that path. If he did he might never come back.


Greta. Wolfram didn't look at anyone else the way he looked at Greta. Maybe he could get Wolfram something they could do together? Maybe a book for Wolfram to read to her that Anissina hadn't written-- but then Wolfram wouldn't be able to read it. If it came from Earth...

Still, Yuuri decided it wouldn't be the worst thing if he had to read it to the both of them. In fact it would probably be better. Something they could all do together... as a family.

So that was one thing. A book appropriate for Greta. Probably a collection of fables or faery tales. His mother had more than plenty and wouldn't mind, but Yuuri still wasn't satisfied. He wanted to get something just for Wolfram.

But what would Wolfram want?

For a while- Yuuri had done his best to ignore how much Wolfram seemed to want him. Attention. Anything. But now-- after all that had happened-- would Wolfram even want him anymore?

Yuuri had ruined everything. He was so pathetic. And now he wanted to get Wolfram a gift so he would forgive him-- like him again-- when Yuuri wasn't even sure he deserved that kind of attention. He really was hopeless.

Terrible.

And still-- Yuuri didn't think he would be able to return in good conscience without getting Wolfram anything. It was so-- so-- confusing. Like it wasn't even him in his own body. Yuuri wasn't even sure what he felt-- just that it was too much for anyone to possibly deal with--

His mother put a hand on his back, but it only made Yuuri's muscles tense. He wouldn't be able to stand it if she asked him-- anything. Yuuri couldn't breathe.

Thankfully, his mother seemed to sense his discomfort and took her hand away. Then she stood and walked to the bookshelf across the room. "Wolf-chan seemed very fond of pictures when he was here. Why don't you pick one out and I'll find you a nice frame." She pulled a large album from the shelf and brought it over to him. "Mama took a lot of pictures when he was here-- you
could even find one with both of you. I'm sure Wolf-chan would like one with my handsome Yuu-chan in it best." She smiled and pinched his cheek.

Yuuri was numb-- amazed she wasn't trying to wheedle out the reason for his obvious distress. He thanked his mother and took the book, holding it with sweaty hands as his mother excused herself to the kitchen.

His mother's idea really did seem like the best one. Especially as Yuuri remembered the pictures of himself he had found stashed in Wolfram's bottom drawer.

The first few pages of pictures were all ones Yuuri had seen before, but soon enough he got into the ones that had been taken during Wolfram's visit to Earth. There were so many pictures-- most Yuuri hadn't even noticed his mother taking. Conrad sitting at the living room table with a familiar smile. Gwendal trying not to look at the line of stuffed animals his mother kept in the window above the kitchen sink. As he looked at them Yuuri couldn't help but smile. It all seemed so long ago. The search for the boxes, the trip to Switzerland and meeting Bob. So much time had passed.

There were hundreds of pictures inside the album, most of them taken at an odd angle or when no one was watching, but Yuuri's eyes seemed to linger on blond. He nearly groaned aloud. It just wasn't fair. No one should ever be that attractive. Wolfram shone, standing out even in the background of shots. And the weirdest thing-- Yuuri had been there then-- how had he not been absolutely blown away? Wolfram wearing his clothes-- jeans-- shirts that revealed the hollow of his throat.

Yuuri looked at himself in the pictures too, frowning at the way he always seemed annoyed or overwhelmed. He tried to focus on ones that had both him and Wolfram, but that only led to more depressing thoughts. Wolfram seemed to always be looking at him.

But Yuuri was never looking back.

Yuuri flipped through the pages, desperate to find at least one where he wasn't ignoring Wolfram, or even just paying attention to something else. It took him far too long to find just one-- and it was still far from perfect. Wolfram had been looking at the photo album and Yuuri had tried to take it back-- almost climbing over Wolfram in an attempt to save himself the embarrassment of his childhood photos. At least in this picture they were looking at each other.

In the end it was the only picture Yuuri wasn't completely ashamed of. It was actually cute the more he looked at it. And besides, they were touching. It was better than any of the others. Yuuri also took one of only Wolfram-- standing tall like he was having a proper portrait done, not a snapshot outside of Yuuri's bedroom door. Yuuri decided it was only fair that he get to keep a picture of Wolfram since Wolfram had so many of him already.

Yuuri bit his lip as he looked at the picture of Wolfram in his hands. He had to get back.

When the doorbell finally rang, Yuuri couldn't decide if he wanted to smile in relief or scream at Murata for his part in this whole tedious situation.

"Hello, Shibuya." Murata smiled as Yuuri opened the door. "You're looking better."

Yuuri clenched the doorknob in frustration. "Murata--"

"Ken-chan!" his mother interrupted, barreling past. "I'm so glad you could make it-- come inside!"
"My pleasure, Mrs. Shibuya." Murata linked his arm with hers and grinned. "Your curry smells wonderful as always."

"Ohh Ken-chan, you're such a lovely young man," Mother squealed, pulling him inside.

Yuuri could only follow in silence as his mother dragged Murata into the kitchen. His father and Shouri were already seated at the table and Yuuri could already tell this wasn't going to be a relaxing meal.

"It's good to see you again." Murata smiled, the light catching his glasses. "Brother of my friend."

Shouri's jaw was tight. "I wish I could say the same, friend of my brother."

"Shou-chan," Mother frowned. "This is going to be a happy farewell dinner for the boys. Don't make a fuss or Mama will have to send you to bed without supper."

Shouri lowered his eyes.

"Now then." His father smiled, breaking the tension in the room. "Sit down so we can start eating."

"With pleasure." Murata's smile never faltered as he sat.

Yuuri silently followed suit, face aching with the pain of false emotion.

Dinner started peacefully, with Murata complimenting his mother's food enough for all of them. But as expected, Shouri couldn't hold his tongue forever.

"So tell us, friend of my brother, what you had to come all this way for."

Murata put down his spoon. "Well, without going into too many details, I came to acquire materials for research."

"And did you find everything you needed?" Yuuri heard himself ask.

Murata nodded. "Yes, and without it I wouldn't have been able to supply Gwendal and Gisela with the information necessary to handle the situation. I know you're not happy about the abruptness of our departure. I took advantage of the situation, but you'll come to realize its necessity soon enough."

Yuuri frowned. Murata was treating him like a child. "And you thought that tricking me was the only way? That I wouldn't have come if you had only asked-- only explained?" Yuuri's fingers clenched into fists. "I could have at least said goodbye."

Murata sighed. "I'm glad to hear you think so, but at the time I couldn't take that risk."

Yuuri gritted his teeth. Shouri was doing nothing to hide his content at his argument with Murata. Yuuri took a breath. "Fine. Just never do it again."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Murata bowed his head.

Silence stretched after that. Nothing but the sound of silverware on plates.

"Ken-chan," his mother began, eyes practically sparkling. "Do you think we could all come and visit the other world-- Not this time of course, but when Yuu-chan and Wolf-chan get married Mama wants to--"
Shouri’s fist crashed against the table. "Mother! How could you even suggest--!"

"It's Mama, Shou-chan--!"

"-- Yuu-chan is-- He can't marry a-- a-- another man!"

"In Shin Makoku there are no such restrictions." Murata said calmly, taking a sip of his tea.

"That doesn't matter!" Shouri practically roared. "My little Yuu-chan is-- is--" A breath. "He is king of Shin Makoku. Shinou was defeated, which means now Yuuri's descendents will be relied upon for the future of the kingdom." Shouri's eyes were sharp. "The obvious aside, Yuuri will need to have children of his own blood. Am I not right, friend of my brother?"

Yuuri blinked. He had never thought of needing children-- besides Greta. No one had ever told him he would have to--

"No." Murata answered simply.

"But what about--" Shouri began.

"If that had been the case, Shibuya's engagement to Sir Belefield would have never been allowed to stand--"

"But Shinou is gone now," Shouri continued.

"That doesn't matter!" Murata snapped. "You of all people should know that Shibuya will never be able to have children of his own even if he did marry a woman."

*What?*

"W-What?" Shouri stammered.

"I'm sorry." Yuuri's father spoke. "It's my fault--"

"Don't say that, Papa!" Mother reached across the table to take his hand. "We were meant for each other--"

"What is everyone talking about?" Shouri interrupted.

"You and Shibuya are half." Murata answered. "You will never be able to have children of your own. It's impossible."

"What?" Yuuri breathed, turning to Murata.

"I'm sorry, Shibuya-- but half-bloods have never been able to breed. If they had, the divide between humans and demons would never have stayed so great. It's just the way things have always been."

Yuuri couldn't believe it. No one had ever told him. He had always assumed-- but-- the more he thought about it-- people were always half or whole. Yuuri had never met anyone a quarter demon. But that meant he could never-- Conrad could never--

"We're sorry we never told you--" His father continued. "We thought we would wait until you had to know-- that it might save you some pain."

Shouri sputtered across the table. "We'll never-- what--?"
"You can always adopt," Mother offered. "Greta seems like just the perfect addition to Yuu-chan's family in the other world."

Shouri's voice still rang in his ears, but for a moment Yuuri was able to disappear inside his thoughts. As strange as it was, it all made so much sense. But it meant... that if Wolfram was with him he couldn't have children either. And Conrad-- Conrad would make a wonderful father, he was practically Yuuri's second father in some ways... It was such a tragedy.

But it answered another question. One that had tickled the back of Yuuri's mind since he had learned of Conrad's history with Julia, and her choice of Adelbert over him. It had never made sense before-- that as good a man as Adelbert was-- that Julia would have chosen him over Conrad. But if Adelbert could give her children...

It all made so much sense.

"Well that-- I don't care!" Shouri's protests finally cut their way into Yuuri's thoughts. "I won't allow my little Yuu-chan to marry that-- that--"

"That what?"

Silence.

Had Yuuri just said that out loud? Everyone's eyes were on him. He swallowed. "Wolfram is..." Another breath-- courage-- "Wolfram is nothing to be ashamed of."

"But he's a-- Don't tell me my precious little-- You've been corrupted-- That Wolfram has-- You're sick. You can't go back to that world until--"

"Shou-chan!" Mother snapped. "Enough!"

The table was quiet.

"There now," Mother continued. "Shouri, Mama and Papa can only hope that one day you'll find someone who loves you as much as Wolf-chan loves Yuu-chan."

"Mother!" Yuuri squeaked, already red.

"You're so young, Yuu-chan." His mother smiled. "But you've grown up so much. Mama will try not to embarrass you-- I know you and Wolf-chan still haven't figured everything out yet. And as much as Mama would love such a pretty son-in-law you have to know that no matter what Mama and Papa are proud of you."

Yuuri could only nod.

"If he touches you..." Shouri almost whispered, standing to tower over them. "Your big brother will have to deal with him--"

"Shou-chan!"

"I'm going," he growled, and stormed up the stairs.

Yuuri sighed. His head was pounding.

He couldn't wait to go home.

*******
Yuuri was back. The way was so clear. Clear water. Cold marble against his fingernails-- drawing closer-- replacing the overly smooth porcelain of their small tub on Earth. Sun through the water. Patterns rippling on the surface-- closer.


They were in the temple courtyard. The sun was bright in a clear blue sky and Yuuri was home.

Another splash behind him, sputtering for air. "In a bit of a hurry, Shibuya?" Murata's hair was stuck to his glasses. He struggled to stand with all of the bags mother had insisted they bring in addition to his own research materials. "You could have killed us-- going so fast-- of all the reckless--"

"Don't start-- We got here, didn't we?" Yuuri's face was already stuck in a grin. His his heart was racing. He was back.

Of course, Wolfram might be mad-- might not be so excited to see him at first. Wolfram had a right to be mad-- but even if he was-- Yuuri was back. He would get to see Wolfram-- finally try to do something right.

"Your Majesty!" Ulrike's flustered voice as she rushed to greet them, followed by a small entourage of female guards. "You're earlier than expected-- The others should be arriving shortly-- You must accept our apologies for not being able to prepare a proper greeting."

"Don't be silly, Ulrike." Yuuri smiled. "I'm just glad to be back."

Ulrike did her best to return his smile, but worry lingered around her eyes. "Gracious as always, Your Majesty."

"And what about your favorite Sage?" Murata bowed and flashed a grin to one of the guards. "Everyone is as beautiful as ever, I see."

The small woman crossed her arms and huffed. "This afternoon. Your message came not an hour ago saying His Majesty would be arriving this afternoon."

Murata grimaced. "I didn't quite anticipate Shibuya's... enthusiasm."

Ulrike sighed. "Well come inside then, both of you. The exhaustion will be coming soon, but some time beneath the falls should lessen it. I have a feeling His Majesty will be wanting all his strength." She turned. "There is much to be discussed."

Yuuri stepped out of the fountain, pausing to pick up his own small load of plastic-wrapped boxes and place them on dry ground.
"How have things been progressing?" Murata began. "Has--"

"How long were we gone?" Yuuri interrupted, earning himself a glare from Murata.

"Two months," Ulrike answered simply, her back still facing them as she led them through them temple's cavernous halls toward the main chamber.

Two months.

How could just a few days on Earth-- Two months...

Wolfram must be furious-- and Yuuri-- he should have been here. Helping Wolfram in any way he could... not running away... such a wimp... How would he ever be able to make things right?

Yuuri could hear their footsteps on the marble-- feel the occasional splash of sunlight against his face from the high windows. Murata and Ulrike were talking. Their voices mixing in echoes. It was so dark all of the sudden. Or had he just closed his eyes...

* * *

Yuuri woke wet with the sound of water crashing in his ears-- echoing off the high ceilings of the main chamber of Shinou's Temple. It was cold. Yuuri shivered and struggled to stand against the weight of soaked clothes and the steady stream of water pushing against his shoulders.

A hand on his arm. "Easy, Shibuya." Murata was sitting beside him-- leaning against the wall behind the thin rush of the falls. "Just a bit longer."

Yuuri groaned. He had wasted more time. "How long?"

"You've been out for less than an hour. Ulrike left a few minutes ago to escort the others. They've just arrived."

Wolfram.

Yuuri was soaking wet-- must look awful-- but Wolfram was coming--

"I have a feeling Lord Voltaire will have a lot to talk to us about. I hope they managed to make some use of my advice about our so-called plague." Murata was talking to himself, water running over his cheeks as his eyes narrowed in thought.

His words pulled Yuuri from his own selfish thoughts.

Oh.

Yuuri had forgotten again. Somehow with all Murata's talk of having found the solution Yuuri had forgotten to really worry about the plague. About all the innocent people who had been dying for months and months. A city close to panic. All he had been able to think about was Wolfram--

And if Wolfram ever knew-- Another instance of his failure.

Yuuri was sure he would have time alone with Wolfram later. Soon. Now that he wasn't engaged to Sara, he and Wolfram could go back to sleeping in the same room. Everything would be normal-- good-- again. Yuuri would have time to really talk to Wolfram then. Tonight he would be able to talk to him and find out the things Yuuri wasn't sure he wanted to know about Wolfram's terrible journey. But he needed to know. Yuuri needed to try to make things better. But before all of that-- Yuuri had to not be a wimp.
Yuuri had to be a good king now. Make Wolfram proud. He would listen to what was going on with the plague-- Do what he could to help his kingdom. And if he thought about his impending Time Alone with Wolfram before that-- Well, he would probably only humiliate himself by starting to cry with relief or, worse, having any number of embarrassing physical reactions being so close to Wolfram before that...

Wolfram would know what to do. Wolfram would make everything better once they had time to talk. Yuuri just had to be patient first.

Be a good king and make Wolfram proud.

Yuuri could feel his body temperature rise. Time Alone. In a room with a Wolfram who would be so proud of him. Memories of an embarrassing-- exciting-- system of rewards. Kissing.

Yuuri was suddenly glad the water was so cold.

The door across the chamber opened.

Yuuri would have stood if Murata's grip on his arm hadn't tightened. But-- even from so far away-- Wolfram wasn't there.

Conrad and Gwendal-- and almost hidden behind the taller man was Greta. But no Wolfram.

"What?" Yuuri breathed. Had something terrible-- Had Wolfram gotten sick-- Not recovered-- Was he-- Was he...

No.

This couldn't be happening. Yuuri couldn't move-- could hardly breathe.

Just a few seconds-- The others came closer-- Close enough that Yuuri could see how deep the lines in Gwendal's forehead had become. See his daughters misery.

But Conrad smiled.

The smile held hesitancy and exhaustion, a touch of sadness. But-- But if anything-- If Wolfram wasn't alright Conrad could never have smiled. Wolfram wasn't--

A breath of relief.

Yuuri gave Conrad a small smile in return.

Greta's grip on Gwendal's sleeve tightened as the three came to a stop before the falls.

"Welcome home, Your Majesty," Conrad spoke, voice large in echoes against the roaring water in Yuuri's ears.

"I'm glad to be back-- I'm sorry I was gone for so long." Yuuri couldn't wait any longer. "Greta?"

His daughter stiffened against his gaze-- shifted closer to Gwendal. She kept her eyes to the floor.


Conrad's small smile faltered.
Greta's face went red. "Not here."

Quiet. Tears sliding down red cheeks.

Yuuri all but leapt from the fountain-- stepped forward-- knelt before Greta to take her in his arms. She was taller.

Greta flinched-- but didn't try to run away. Yuuri squeezed her tight-- his daughter's hot tears on his neck.

"I can't believe you. You just left-- You left again-- You left." Choked whispers. Her arms still didn't come up to hold him. Fists at her sides. "I'm so--" She moved away-- glaring at the space between them. "I'm so mad at you, Yuuri."

Yuuri was almost in tears himself. That familiar ache in his chest coming up to drown him. "I'm so sorry, Greta-- I didn't want-- I didn't mean to be gone for so long."

Greta humphed and wiped her tears against the back of a wrist, recomposing herself in a way that could only have been Wolfram's influence. "Wimp," she huffed.

"Wolfram is in Caloria," Conrad finally answered softly. "He hasn't returned since..." his voice trailed away.

Yuuri couldn't take his eyes from Greta's face. She must have been so lonely-- without either of them. Just another way in which he was a disappointment.

"Caloria," Yuuri echoed, trying to make sense of it all. "But why?"

Gwendal made a noise of irritation. "Wolfram is doing what he needs to." His hand moved to rest on the top of Greta's head.

"But--" Why wouldn't anyone just explain what was going on? "But is Wolfram alright? What about his magic? Is he going to recover? Has he? Why does he need to be in Caloria? What about..."

What about us?

Conrad stepped forward to put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "You're soaked. We'll spend all night catching you up on things if necessary-- but you shouldn't stand here in wet clothes. We'll talk more on the way back to the castle. Alright, Yuuri?"

Yuuri frowned. Everything was taking so long. Everyone was still treating him-- like a child. As if he wasn't king. But... What Conrad said was true. Yuuri was cold and wet-- The front of Greta's dress was dark in places from their short contact.

"Some dry clothes sound wonderful, Sir Weller." Murata's cheerful voice came from behind.

It was all Yuuri could do not to turn and glare. How could Murata be feeling anything but miserable? And-- so much of this was Murata's fault. For not trusting him-- not letting Yuuri say goodbye.

Yuuri's hands drew into fists. Now wasn't the time. Complaining would only make everything take that much longer. Yuuri would wait. But once he knew what was going on-- why Wolfram was in Caloria-- As soon as Yuuri was on the way to bring Wolfram back and put their lives together again-- Then he could set things straight with everyone.
A nod.

There was no time to waste. Yuuri had already spent far too long wasting time.

* * *

The ride back to Blood Pledge Castle was one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences of Yuuri's life.

He had decided to ride back in a carriage alone with Greta. After two months Yuuri felt like he owed it to her. But no matter how hard he tried to get her to talk to him-- look at him--

Yuuri didn't think Greta had ever been this upset with him before.

It was hot inside the carriage-- sun tinted blue from the thin curtains over the windows. The fabric kept away the glare, but made the wooden compartment stuffy. Hard to breathe.

The carriage rocked uncomfortably along the well-traveled grooves in the dirt road. Yuuri could never get used to it. It seemed so much less comfortable than riding outside. The wheels squeaked. The sounds of bugs and birds and hoofs beating against ground trickled in.

Greta was silent. Wouldn't speak to him. But there was a soft clicking.

Greta's fingers played with a bracelet on her left wrist. Beads colliding as she spun it. Round and round.

"It's a pretty bracelet," Yuuri tried. "Is it new?"

Greta's fingers stopped-- pressing one of the smooth stones against her wrist. Denting skin.

Yuuri reached across to stop her-- hold her hand.

"Wolfram sent it to me." Her voice was just above a whisper. "For my birthday."

Her birthday.

It must be mid-summer now. Greta's birthday was on the cusp of spring and summer. Yuuri opened his mouth to apologize.

Greta continued. "He wouldn't even come back for my birthday. I asked..." She closed her eyes. "I asked so many times. But he wouldn't-- He won't come back." When she opened her eyes they were full of tears but she wouldn't let them fall. She tried to blink-- look away.

Yuuri couldn't take it. He pulled her forward-- against him. And once again she was in his arms. His little Greta. They shifted until she was in his lap. "I'm sorry." It was the only thing he could say. "I'm sorry." Whispered against wet cheeks and brown curls. Silent tears. But as much as his heart broke to see her like this-- she had been acting so cold-- made him feel like she didn't really need him anymore-- it felt good to hold her-- wipe her tears-- know she needed him.

But still.

It didn't seem right. Wolfram adored Greta. She was more Wolfram's daughter now than she was his in ways. Wolfram had never been able to deny Greta anything. Why hadn't Wolfram come back? What was he doing in Caloria that was important enough to put their daughter through so much pain?
Yuuri held her tighter. "I'll bring him back. I promise. I promise I'll bring him home."

Greta only nodded.

Yuuri looked down at the stone bracelet around his daughter's fragile wrist. It was a collection of stone beads, none the same or perfectly round, but all dark-- all smooth. Tossed by water. Yuuri moved to run his fingers over the stones, warm from Greta's skin.

"They're from everywhere." Greta touched the bracelet with him, lingering on one stone after the next. "Even the human countries... Suberela," she said, focusing on a reddish stone. "Shin Makoku, Karbelnikoff, Gael... Belefield."

Yuuri wasn't surprised that the green stone was from Belefield. Wolfram's eyes.

"He had it made... asked other royal families... sent his scouts to Shimeron's coasts at night--Wolfram felt bad for not coming. He wanted me to know that no matter what-- no matter where--he's still..."

Yuuri squeezes her close. "You know Wolfram loves you, Greta. He loves you so much."

Once again, his daughter only nodded.

Yuuri spun the polished stones around his daughter's wrist as he tried to think of what to say. He wanted desperately to know everything he could about Wolfram, but Greta was upset enough already. Yuuri didn't want her to feel interrogated.

"Where is this one from?" Yuuri asked instead, his thumb stopping on the darkest stone.

"Lesser Gael," Greta answered softly. "He hasn't-- he hasn't gone yet-- to try and get his magic back. He says he has other things to do but..." Greta looked up at him. "I think he's scared... If it doesn't work..." Greta looked down again. "Then it's like there's nothing left to hope for."

Yuuri blinked. When had his daughter gotten so perceptive? "Did Gwendal tell you that?"

Greta shook her head. "And don't you tell Gwendal either, Yuuri." For a second she bit her lip. "It must have been bad-- I remember what they did to Hube... But whatever happened to Wolfram-- no one tells me-- Wolfram won't even say anything."

Yuuri furrowed his brows. "But how... how are you talking to him?" It wasn't as if Shin Makoku had cell phones.

"He writes every day." Greta answered simply. "Sometimes the birds take a while, but he sends one every day."

"Greta..." Yuuri started, not knowing how to ask. If he could read what Wolfram wrote-- know how he was-- what he was doing-- Yuuri was sure he would be able to learn more than what the others were telling him--

"I won't let you read them, so don't ask," Greta snapped. "Wolfram made me promise."

_Oh._

Yuuri felt at a loss. "Does he-- write to everyone?"

"Only me." Greta paused. "Well hardly to anyone else, anyway. I think he talks to Gwendal about things sometimes. But only when he has to."
The carriage shifted a bit, signaling the final hill up to the castle.

"Anyway," Greta continued. "When we go and bring Wolfram back I'm sure he'll be glad to see me." She looked up at Yuuri with a grin.

Greta? Coming with him to get Wolfram? "Greta..." Yuuri started. "It's dangerous..."

"But I'll have you to protect me, Papa Wimp." Greta scooted closer, using her big eyes against him. "Wolfram's mad at everyone else, but he never says no to me-- not when I'm there, anyway. I'll make sure he comes back!"

"Greta..." Yuuri tried again. He just-- couldn't imagine doing what he needed to in order to bring Wolfram back and having to worry about Greta at the same time. "I don't think it's a good idea..."

"Why not?" Greta pouted. "You can't keep me locked up in the castle forever, Yuuri."

"I'm not trying to lock you up, Greta. It's just that now isn't the best time for you to be traveling--"

The carriage stopped.

"But I have to go, Yuuri! It's not fair--!" Greta moved away from him-- yelling. "You can't just leave me all the time! It's your fault I'm here! You're the one who wanted me!" Greta sat across from him again-- fists tight on the cushion beneath her. "You can't just dump me on other people-- If you don't want me you should just say so--!"

"Greta, stop it! That's not it at all--!"

"Then let me go! Let me go with you!"

"Greta..." It was so hard to say no to her.

Conrad opened the door. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Your Majesty, but--"

"You weren't interrupting ANYTHING!" Greta screamed, tears welling in her eyes. "I already knew what he would say." And with that she jumped from the carriage-- ignoring Conrad's helping hand and running up the castle steps at breakneck speed.

Yuuri swallowed thickly. It had all happened so fast... Greta...

"She's getting to a difficult age, Your Majesty," Conrad offered. "It's hard to--"

"It's Yuuri, Conrad." Yuuri nearly snapped himself. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Yuuri..." Conrad's voice was strained.

"I'm sorry... Let's just go." Yuuri let Conrad help him to the ground.

Conrad nodded, and squeezed Yuuri's hand before letting go, trying to reassure him. Normally something like that would have made Yuuri feel better, but for some reason it only added to the ball of anxiety growing in his gut.

"Gunter is preparing the conference room, as well as a small welcome dinner. Things have been a bit hectic so the spring tapestries were still up. Gunter is--"

"Being Gunter." Yuuri sighed. "When will he learn I could care less about the tapestries?"
"You are kind to indulge him, Yuuri." Conrad smiled.

"Where did Gwendal go?" Yuuri wondered aloud.

"He and the sage went to continue their talk in his office before the formal meeting begins. They want to be sure to tell you all you need to know as quickly as possible." Conrad fell into step behind him as they walked down the main hallway.

"I'm sure," Yuuri huffed. It was more likely they were deciding what not to tell him. Yuuri's hands tightened into fists. Later. First he would find out-- "Conrad. Tell me what's going on with Wolfram. Tell me everything-- I'll order you if I have to! Just tell me what's going on!" Yuuri was out of breath.

Conrad's face had hardened. "Alright."

********

********

Greta had known all along that Yuuri would say no. No matter how many ways-- how many times she ran the conversation through her head. It always ended up the same.

And she had been right.

Yuuri had said no. Only it was worse than that-- She could tell he didn't want her to come with him. Yuuri didn't want her.

Greta reached her room out of breath and sticky with tears. Wolri jumped from the bed as she slammed the door shut behind her, scampering under the bureau at the sudden noise. She was so-- She hadn't meant to cry-- to let Yuuri see. Greta threw herself on the duvet with a huff-- face buried in blankets-- breathing in hot air until exhaustion overcame the need for tears and she had to turn her face to the side to breathe. Cool air.

Wolri jumped back onto the bed. The black kitten walked tentatively around her for a moment before pawing at the lacy ribbons that held up her socks below the knee.

Greta sighed. She didn't know how she would have made it these past few weeks without Wolri. Her little friend-- her family. She shifted, reaching down to pull Wolri into her lap. His fur had gotten so soft. The maids always complained-- fussing that it got everywhere, especially her clothes, but Greta hardly cared. It was worth it to have something soft and warm to hold. Something that loved her-- needed her.

Greta hated how lonely she felt-- how dependent on other people she had become. There was a time-- so long ago now-- that she hadn't needed anyone. She used to know how to survive alone. But then had come Hube. Yuuri-- Wolfram. They had made her weak and sad and alone.

Wolfram wouldn't come back. Not even for her. It wasn't fair that he had made her love him so much more than he loved her! There was nowhere Greta wouldn't have gone for Wolfram.

She had even tried. But Greta hadn't even made it past the final castle gate before she had been caught. It had been one of Wolfram's guards too-- familiar uniform. She had been so angry! Didn't this soldier know that Wolfram needed her? If she could only get to Caloria...

But Wolfram wouldn't come back.

And his letters-- Not one of them had ever really said why. She could guess of course-- reading
them over and over-- listening to Gwendal talk with the others-- but they were only guesses.

She just wanted-- Greta just wanted him back.

Greta let go of Wolri and moved to the floor beside her bed. She crawled underneath-- something that was getting harder to do now, but she could still fit. Her sword was still here-- handle where she could reach from the bed-- but farther underneath Greta had cut a small slit in her mattress. A little hiding place. Her secret. Greta reached in, pulling out the stack of letters before returning to her place on the bed.

All of the letters had been kept in order-- nearly sixty of them-- sixty-three today. The birds usually come late though, not for another few hours at least.

With all the excitement of Yuuri's return she hadn't had time to write a new letter yet. It was most efficient if she could just trade letters when the bird came.

Greta squeezed the pile of letters in her hands for a moment, feeling their weight, the way the air moved away and only paper remained between her fingers. There was so much paper, so many feelings.

But so few words.

Wolfram was keeping himself busy. In the beginning-- In the beginning he had written more. The letter he and Yuuri sent at the same time-- reassurances. But now... Even when he did write, Wolfram seemed to avoid everything. All her questions, pleas for his return. Her angry-- scribbled- long letters that sometimes held too much.

Wolfram's letters were always clean, neat, and reasonable.

*Love, Papa Wolf*

Always.

Always the same. He said he loved her-- but he still treated her like a child-- He didn't understand how much she thought-- needed-- hurt.

Greta scooted up the bed to lean against the headboard while she wrote. One of the political tomes resting on her bedside table made a sturdy backing for the flimsy paper. And then everything was set. Book nestled in her lap, quill in hand. All that was left was writing.

Wolfram would have insisted she use her desk-- do things properly. But Wolfram wasn't here. He should be happy she had been bored enough to keep up with the readings he assigned her.

Greta sighed at the blank page in front of her and dipped her quill into the pot of ink resting beside her bed. At least Wolri had learned by now that the quill wasn't a toy... He had ruined so many of her letters by being playful.

She closed her eyes, replaying Wolfram's last letter in her mind.

It was hot in Caloria now, and even though the plague had been slowing thanks to Gisela and the advice the sage had left, Flurin was grateful for the help. Wolfram had gone to the capital for a few days, and said hello to Beatrice and her father when they had come to visit Flurin. Wolfram had promised that once he came back Beatrice could come visit her as well. The letter had been short-- He was getting ready to return to his encampment in the east.
Greta missed being able to spend time with Beatrice, but now all she could think about was how much she missed Wolfram. And if Beatrice came... Beatrice was so pretty-- older-- and Wilfrido...

Greta shook her head. No point. Wilfrido was only interested in horses and being impossible-- and besides...

She was writing a letter.

Wolfram, she began. Her letters had been getting more casual-- Wolfram would just have to come home and remind her how to be more proper if it bothered him.

She continued, Yuuri came back today. Wimpy as ever. He only wants to talk about you.

Greta paused. Should she tell Wolfram that Yuuri was coming after him-- doing what she should do... But Wolfram was being so stubborn-- If he knew Yuuri was coming, he might think of ways to say 'no'. But Wolfram could never say no to Yuuri. Because... Because he was Wolfram and Yuuri was Yuuri and Wolfram-- maybe Wolfram loved him too much to say no.

And of course, Yuuri was king. If he ordered Wolfram to come home he would have no choice. But... If Yuuri was just going to do that, then he could just send a letter. He didn't have to go and get Wolfram in person. Yuuri must have something else in mind-- something he didn't want Greta there to see.

Ever since Greta had begun to understand the imbalances in Wolfram and Yuuri's relationship, she had always hoped that Yuuri would start to love Wolfram back the same way Wolfram loved him. Wolfram was always-- always sad-- somewhere inside. Greta supposed it was because she had always been so alone when she was younger, that she was able to recognize that same feeling in her father.

And that's part of why she felt so close to Wolfram-- closer to him now than Yuuri. Yuuri loved her-- but-- Yuuri loved everyone else, too. Wolfram... Wolfram only loved a few people. It made her feel more special to be one of them.

Yuuri seemed to have always been loved-- always been wanted. But Greta and Wolfram-- They knew what it was like to be overlooked.

Fresh tears started down Greta's cheeks. Yuuri didn't understand. Wolfram needed her. She should be with Yuuri to go after Wolfram. It wasn't fair!

Yuuri would just-- What if he ruined everything? What if he still didn't love Wolfram right-- drove him further away!? Greta wanted to believe that Yuuri would go and tell Wolfram he finally loved him-- make them all a family again.

But...

With Yuuri... Things with Wolfram were never that easy.

Greta wiped her cheeks and took a deep breath. She didn't know what to tell Wolfram about Yuuri... And who even knew-- if Yuuri used one of Anissina's inventions he might arrive before her letter.

Another sigh.

Wolfram,
Yuuri came back today. Wimpy as ever. He only wants to talk about you.

It was short. Her shortest yet. But... Greta didn't know what to say. And so she ended the letter the way she always did.

Please come home soon. I need you.

Love,

Greta

Greta folded the letter and moved to lie on the bed next to Wolri.

The little cat began to rumble as she petted him.

"Meh," Greta prompted before Wolri made a little noise of his own, rolling over on his back to let her stroke his stomach.

Greta smiled and scratched behind his ears.

* * *

Yuuri didn't come to apologize.

It had been almost an hour. Normally whenever they fought-- even over something stupid-- Yuuri would always come to try to make her feel better... make himself feel better.

But Yuuri didn't come.

It made sense if she thought about Yuuri as king, as a person who had responsibilities beyond just being her father. But Yuuri had always put her above his political responsibilities when he was in Shin Makoku... Planning picnics with her and Wolfram... baseball with Conrad.

Yuuri must be getting ready to bring Wolfram home. It was the only thing that made sense but...

Greta wasn't going to wait for him any longer.

By now there was sure to be a guard outside her door, but Greta had figured out that if she climbed out her bedroom window it would take them up to a few hours to notice she was missing. And besides, it wasn't as if she was going far. They always knew where to find her this time of day.

In the early afternoons Wilfrido's father would be busy away from the royal stables, overseeing the soldier's horses a half mile away from the central palace. Wilfrido would be in charge of feeding Ao and the others while he was away. After weeks of persistence on her part, Greta had finally managed to convince him that with her help his chores could be done in almost half the time, giving them time left over to play.

Wilfrido... It had taken Greta so long to even come close to understanding him. He could be so nice to her at times. She could spend the afternoon just laughing with him over silly things... But sometimes he would yell at her. Be almost intolerable. Sometimes it was like he was two different people entirely.

But even on the bad days, when he acted like he didn't want her there, Greta could catch him smiling when he thought she wasn't looking. And so it wasn't really a suprise that slowly Wilfrido had become her best friend.

No matter how annoying he could be at times, Greta always found herself thinking of him. His
guarded smile. She was glad he wasn't popular with the servant children-- that he never played with anyone else. Wilfrido was hers.

But today... today when Greta went to the stables Wilfrido seemed to be more annoyed than usual.

"What's wrong?" Greta asked as Wilfrido took out his aggression on a pile of hay, moving it into the feeding trough with a growl.

Wilfrido scoffed. "Did you tell anyone where you went, Princess? Do your father's soldiers know where you are?"

Greta blinked. "No, I--"

Wilfrido came over-- so much closer than he usually ever got-- hands on her shoulders. Shaking her. "Are you trying to get me in trouble? Are you really that stupid--"

Greta backed out of his grasp-- blood rushing to her face at the same time anxiety gathered in her gut. "What are you talking about? I don't tell them so you won't--"

"--look like I'm getting you into... into trouble!" Wilfrido's hair was wild-- bits of hay stuck in his braid-- dark circles beneath his eyes. "I have enough to worry about without you making things worse." He moved to slide down the wall until he was sitting, face in his hands. "Just leave me alone."

Greta didn't move. Feet stuck in place. "Is that really what you want?" A whisper. "I'm not trying to--"

"I know," Wilfrido groaned, still not looking up at her. "I know."

Greta moved slowly to sit beside him. Their shoulders were nearly touching-- She could feel his heat.

Wilfrido was the one who shifted. Shoulder to shoulder. "I'm sorry, I'm just... sorry."

Greta's heart was almost racing out of her chest. Wilfrido smelled like outside and dirt. She wanted to lean her head against him. "I wish you'd let me help. I want to help, not make things worse."

Wilfrido never told her what was really going on. Greta had always suspected his father might be doing something... She knew about other children who got hit by their parents. Wilfrido had had more injuries when he'd first arrived, though... But maybe she just wanted an excuse to tell someone something... get Wilfrido taken away... make things better for him. But Wilfrido loved his father-- kept his hair the same. Greta didn't want to do anything that might make Wilfrido upset with her.

"I know," Wilfrido sighed and bumped her with his shoulder. "Thank you."

Greta leaned forward to hide her grin in her knees. Her skirt had slipped down to bunch above her waist, Greta was sure even the back of her underskirts would be brown with the dust of the stable floors. The scolding she would get from the maids later hardly mattered now. Her stockings were rough against her cheek as she smiled. "We're friends, right?" Greta mumbled, somehow afraid to look at him. "I mean-- neither one of us has anyone else-- and I'm good at helping you here." She paused, drawing courage. "I just don't understand why you never tell me anything."

An arm wrapped around her shoulder-- breath against her ear. "You're father's men warn me to stay away, you know. My father could lose his position here. He would be-- upset. And I would have to
leave too. I-- I don't want to have to leave."

Greta could hardly breathe. Wilfrido had never been this open... this close...

"I don't want you to leave either," Greta whispered back.

Wilfrido's palm was pressed against her arm. Greta could feel it sweating. "I know." Then he moved away-- returning to his original position against the wall beside her. "You'll be the death of me."

Greta looked up at him and smiled. "Don't be so dramatic. I'll talk to Yuuri. I'll make sure he--"

Wilfrido laughed-- a high, panicked sound. "His Majesty?! You should know better than that, Greta."

She blinked. "But Wolfram's in Caloria."

"And at least some of his men are here-- Following you and giving me threatening messages."

Greta crinkled her nose. "Well, I'll talk to him, then. He's being silly anyway. Wolfram only wants me to be happy-- not lonely. You're my best friend. There's nothing for him to worry about. Especially since I'm keeping up with my studies."

Wilfrido sighed.

She smiled. "See, nothing to worry about."

Wilfrido only nodded.

Greta stood, shaking the dust from her dress before turning to look down at Wilfrido. "So, shall we get started?" If they didn't get Wilfrido's chores done soon, he was sure to get in trouble when his father returned.

Wilfrido hugged his knees-- cheeks red. "In a bit."

Greta put her hands on her hips. "Well then, what do you want to do?" Lately they had been using sticks to practice fencing when they had any time to spare. Wilfrido had learned some when he was younger, but he still couldn't compare to her, even if he was three years older-- or rather, two, now that she had had her birthday.

Wilfrido stayed where he was.

Greta leaned forward to frown. "Then what--"

"Don't do that!" Wilfrido snapped, making Greta jerk up in surprise. "It's not-- helping."

Greta pursed her lips. "Not helping what?"

"Nothing," Wilfrido groaned. "Look, Greta, can we do this tomorrow? Now... well can you do me the favor of writing that over-protective father of yours a letter? Let him know I'm not up to anything indecent with his little princess."

Greta bit her lip. She had come here to get away from thoughts of fathers. To not be miserable for a few precious moments. But-- But Wilfrido had been so wonderful-- finally opening up to her a bit. She supposed it wouldn't be fair to hope for much more in one day. "Alright." She nodded. "But... see you tomorrow, okay?"
Wilfrido smiled up at her, cheeks still slightly pink. "I'll be waiting."

********

********

The conference room seemed vast—empty—even though all those required had arrived. It made Murata miss the more intimate setting of Gwendal's office. Fewer places for the ones he couldn't see to hide.

It was hard to remember that no one was watching him anymore.

Well, no one from the other realm, at least. Here all eyes were on him.

"Alright." Murata stood. Those assembled—even Lady Karbelnikoff—were not doctors. And even Shibuya was hardly acquainted with the more complex biological theories of Earth. This was not going to be the easiest of explanations. "The plague," he continued. "Is not, in fact, a plague."

Sir Voltaire nodded almost imperceptively. That much Murata had managed to explain before he left.

Shibuya's fists clenched on the table. "Yes, you said." He was trying to keep his voice in check. "But what exactly is it then?"

Lady Karbelnikoff leaned back in her seat. "You said it was the bread. A rye fungus ground into flour that caused plague-like symptoms."

It was Murata's turn to nod. "Neatly packaged all the way from Shou Shimeron."

"We can't be sure!" Shibuya nearly growled.

"I can assure you, Your Majesty, that the evidence leaves very little doubt as to the origin of the sickness," Sir Voltaire answered.

"But--" Shibuya licked his lips. "Shouldn't we be worried about helping them, then? If the plague—or Not Plague—started in Shou Shimeron... Then a lot of people there must be suffering."

"If that was the case, then why would Shou Shimeron have made that very bread its main export?" Murata sighed.

Shibuya narrowed his eyes. "What if they didn't know? It took you a while to figure it out too, and you have several centuries of experience on all of us. And you had to go to Earth to get materials about it... It doesn't make sense that it's something Shou Shimeron could have done on purpose!" He paused to take a breath. "I know how quick you all are to want to-- to blame-- to take military action. But shouldn't our first concern be helping the ones who suffered?"

"No one is suggesting war, Your Majesty," Sir Voltaire answered plainly. "But the question of action still remains. Things are not nearly so simple. During your absence we have made progress in slowing the sickness. The Demon Kingdom and our allied human nations were quick to place a ban on all exports from Shou Shimeron and inspect their own crops. But not all countries were as eager to listen to our warnings. There is talk of conspiracy to the south. Claims that the whole pandemic was merely a demon plot to lessen their numbers. An attempt to make them more dependent on our aid."
"But that's ridiculous!" Shibuya countered. "We're only trying to help! Can't they see that they get better when they stop eating the contaminated bread? It's just that simple, right?"

"Not quite, Your Majesty." Sir Christ bowed slightly in his seat. "It is easier for the humans to blame us, rather than Shou Shimeron. We, after all, have more military power. They have little reason to want to believe us, given our mutual history before the arrival of Your Most Esteemed Majesty. In years past Shou Shimeron has done its best to stay out of the affairs of other nations, winning itself many allies in its compliance. It is not-- easy-- for other human nations to think ill of them."

Shibuya groaned. "Fine. So they think it's our fault. But if they're going to think that no matter what we do-- Does it matter right now? The Not Plague was a problem... but now we know how to help people-- keep them from getting sick. Shouldn't there be some sense of crisis averted?"

Shibuya nearly yelled.

Sir Weller put a hand on his king's shoulder.

"Sorry," Shibuya sighed. "I just... there's a lot..."

Murata sat. "I know." He looked across the table at Shibuya until the other boy met his eyes. "And all of it's connected." Murata licked his lips, trying to put it as delicately as he could. "The unfortunate events surrounding Sir Belefield's capture only serve as more evidence against Shou Shimeron."

"What?!" Shibuya sputtered. "That's not--"

"I don't think even you, Shibuya, would let that go unpunished-- Not to mention thousands of lives lost throughout the countryside." Murata's gaze traveled from one face to the next. "It is my firm belief that this world's suffering was no accident."

"That's not-- That's not fair," Shibuya answered. "What happened to Wolfram... The ones who did it are dead. It's not Shou Shimeron's fault-- You can't blame an entire country based on the mistakes of a few people!"

Murata closed his eyes. "Are you suggesting we do nothing, Your Majesty?"

Shibuya's voice was firm. "There is a difference between nothing and... plain punishment. Punishment can't change the past."

"How many times?" Sir Voltaire. "How many times do you intend on allowing them to--"

"Gwendal!" Yuuri snapped. "We didn't allow anything." A sigh. "Look-- You-- You said you weren't considering war... What are our options?"

"Occupation," Sir Voltaire answered. "We can complete a thorough investigation of their political system... Find the root of this whole ordeal."

"Shou Shimeron has been hiding its internal affairs for centuries, Your Majesty," Sir Christ continued. "Our scouts only continue to disappear. Any information we have about what could have--"

"Sara!" Yuuri interrupted. "Sara is on our side! If we can find him... Now that Reyes is gone we can just ask Sara! I'm sure he trusts me! If we can just talk to him--"

"King Saralegui has returned to his kingdom," Sir Voltaire nearly spat.
"Okay." Shibuya furrowed his brows. "So we know where he is... I can just write him a letter or... or something? I don't see why you're all acting like this is a bad thing."

Sir Voltaire's fist clenched dangerously on the table, but he remained silent.

"They wanted the code, Shibuya." Murata tried to speak as calmly as he could. "The ones who took Sir Belefield wanted him because they thought he would know the code that we started using in light of the strange numbers that began trickling out of Shou Shimeron around the time this whole thing started."

"But..." Shibuya started, face pale. "That doesn't mean--"

"An independent group, then?" Murata suggested, voice cold. "Someone starting on conspiracy to infect this world with poisoned bread and that nation's ruler knows nothing about it?"

Shibuya lowered his eyes.

"It wasn't only physical-- what they did to him." Sir Voltaire's voice was rough. "Physical torture... Everyone breaks. Soldiers are expected-- trained-- that the only thing they can save by their silence is time. There wouldn't... There is no need for something to affect the mind... Something to add a variable of madness to any information they hoped to gain... For them to have such control over what they were doing--"

"Wolfram told you!?” Shibuya blurted. "Conrad said-- I thought no one knew what happened!"

"We cannot be certain, Your Majesty," Sir Christ spoke softly. "Sir Belefield has said little about his encounter, this much is true; however, Gisela is with him. Given her observations... certain theories have been produced."

"Wolfram wouldn't have made it," Lady Karblenikoff continued. "If they didn't know what they were doing to him. At least enough to control the dosage." She crossed her arms.

"So..." Shibuya's voice was soft, broken. "Wolfram had the... the Not Plague while he was..."

For a while the room was silent. The comforting hand on Shibuya's shoulder traveled to his back.

Murata broke the silence. "From what I've managed to learn-- from Lady Gisela's accounts and Earth's history with the fungus... I suspect the only symptom they intended for Sir Belefield was the madness-- the mental affects. They must not have wanted him to die too soon-- before he could answer their questions. Of course, we cannot be sure of what they hoped to gain-- Perhaps when physical torture was ineffective they hoped that playing with his mind would be--""

"But why?" Shibuya choked-- nearly a sob.

Murata shook his head. "I don't know. Using Tooth of the Wolf in this way... Even on Earth governments have used its derivatives for mental experimentation-- torture."

Lady Karbelnikoff leaned forward. "Not our 'plague' then? A derivative? Something that removed other effects... They were able to change its... its structure-- alter it-- but that's only theoretical, even I--"


"There are areas in which Earth has... advanced," Murata answered softly. "In this case, Tooth of the Wolf was altered so that the gangrene-- the more physical effects-- were lessened. Leaving
something that predominantly affects the mind."

"But-- Wolfram's okay now?" Shibuya had leaned forward to support himself by pressing both palms against his forehead. "I mean-- when you say mental-- psychological effects-- He's-- He's recovered now, right?"

"I don't think... given that in this world Tooth of the Wolf remains in its raw form... that any damage would be irreparable," Murata answered. It was the best he could offer, without seeing Sir Belefield himself. Still, it wouldn't benefit anyone to have Shibuya worrying any more than he already was. "The point remains," he continued, "that it is all connected. The ones who took Sir Belefield came from Shou Shimeron-- the place where the infection originated. What was done to Sir Belefield is only further evidence of this connection-- as well as proof that those behind the spread are by no means ignorant to its cause. It's all connected. It all leads back to Shou Shimeron--"

"But Sara--"

"Why did he even come, Shibuya? Why did he propose-- seek you out-- only to run when the opportunity presented itself? It's all too much-- There is something happening. What if the 'plague'-- what they did to Sir Belefield-- is only the beginning?"

"But we can't be sure--"

"Shibuya!" Murata shouted. "There's nothing that is certain, which is why we need to find out exactly what is going on! You said yourself-- that I'm older than all of you-- I'm your Sage! You're-- You're supposed to listen to my advice!" He was breathing too hard.

Everything had been so much easier when he knew what was going on.

* * *

After Murata's outburst, the meeting hadn't lasted long. A compromise had been met. Shibuya had agreed to give Sir Voltaire and Grier permission to send as many spies across the border as they saw fit, as long as they avoided an official occupation, at least until Shibuya was able to contact Saralegui for answers.

Murata still thought that anything King Saralegui might say on the matter was sure to be lies at best, but at least this way Shibuya wasn't outright preventing any progress in the investigation. It was obvious that some of Shibuya's stubbornness was due to lingering resentment over their recent trip to Earth. Murata was pleasantly surprised that that resentment hadn't completely clouded Shibuya's judgment.

Something had to be done.

The sense of silent determination-- of worry-- lingered as those assembled for the meeting began to disperse. Shibuya lingered, though, excusing even Sir Weller to speak to Murata alone.

The moment the door to the conference room clicked shut Shibuya opened his mouth. "As soon as Anissina's boat is ready-- I'm going to bring Wolfram home."

Murata nodded. "I expected as much." He didn't say anything else, allowing the silence to prompt Shibuya's words.

"I know--" Shibuya began after a moment. "I know you're supposed to advise me, Murata. I just wish you'd stop making my decisions for me-- without even telling me there are decisions to be
"That's not what I'm doing, Shibuya," Murata sighed.

"Isn't it?" Shibuya asked. "Why talk to Gwendal about things before coming to me? Why-- why hide things? Am I doing such a terrible job that you think I--"

"Of course not!" Murata leaned forward in his seat. "You've done so much--"

"Then what is it?!" Shibuya finally raised his voice. "I'm so tired of this-- It always happens-- Over and over no matter who I ask-- No matter who promises me things will change-- Am I king or aren't I? Do you just keep me around because of him? Because of his power--"

"Don't be stupid!" Murata snapped. "Now you're just blowing things out of proportion. You're still young, Shibuya. Sir Voltaire and the others have experience that you shouldn't be so quick to ignore."

Shibuya glared.

"And besides." Murata removed his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. "You ask me to consult you first for things, while at the same time you complain about your lessons with Sir Christ taking up too much of your time. Do you know how much time in endless meetings we all save by waiting until our suspicions are valid before bringing them to you?"

"I haven't complained about Gunter's lessons in ages," Shibuya sulked.

Murata sighed. "Not that you've had many of late... But before you get more upset-- consider this. You are asking me-- asking everyone to take you more seriously as the king while in the same breath you announce that you're running off to bring Sir Belefield home yourself when a simple written order would have sufficed."

Shibuya turned a telling shade of crimson. "That's different."

"I'm sure you think it is." Murata put his glasses back on. "But think about how the people will see it. You leaving after such an extended absence in this time of crisis."

"That absence was not my decision!" Shibuya glared.

"Be that as it may," Murata continued. "It is the way things are. You have to act on the reality of a situation-- whether you like it or not. You have to start putting the kingdom first-- before your own impulsiveness."

Shibuya bit his lip.

"You have done wonders for this world, Shibuya. No one has forgotten that." Murata paused until Shibuya met his gaze. "Everyone is only trying to do what they think is best for Shin Makoku-- for Sir Belefield, too. His brothers want to help him as much as you."

Shibuya looked away. "I guess..."

"We only push to make you stronger... And I suppose getting old mazoku stuck in their ways to change is an exercise in itself. Things won't change overnight."

A nod. "Alright. But... I still-- I still have to go after Wolfram. I have to bring him home."

"I understand." Murata stood, walking up to pretend to examine the large map adorning the wall of
the conference room. "I'll accompany you-- along with Sir Weller. There may be some benefit to your impulsiveness after all." Murata raised his hand, fingers brushing the browning canvas. "But I have to caution you, as your adviser, to be careful with Sir Belefield. To leave in your position as the king-- to personally escort him back to the capital... You must remember that he is no longer your fiancé." A pause. "People will talk."

For a while there was only silence behind him, then he heard Shibuya move his chair-- standing. "I'll keep that in mind... Thank you." Footsteps headed toward the door.

"Shibuya," Murata called-- still without facing him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I needed to return to Earth. I should have."

A pause. "Thanks." The door opened and shut.

Shibuya still hadn't forgiven him completely, but knowing his friend... Murata knew he wouldn't have to wait long.

*******

********

Men.

Anissina slammed the heavy tome down on her lab table, sending a few glass beakers rolling over the edge, glass shattering on stone. She huffed and blew a strand of lose hair away from her damp forehead.

Gwendal had just returned to his office, leaving the charger for the banana boat whirring noisily with residual maryoku. It would take a few more hours for the absorbed power to be converted into mechanical magic. For now there was nothing left to do but wait.

And fume.

Anissina was sure she would never be able to fully comprehend the logic of men. Sheer stupidity.

His Majesty was usually better than this. Rushing off to return the boy Wolf to his rightful place-- safely ignored at his king's side once the mortal danger had passed. The young king was only thinking of himself.

Typical.

As much as Anissina wished to see Wolfram back safely home-- for Greta's sake more than anyone's-- it sometimes seemed like she was the only one who could see the bigger picture. The potential behind Wolfram's stay in Caloria.

These past two months-- nothing could have been better for Wolfram. Anissina had written him a few times-- unsurprisingly her letters had gone unanswered-- but Gisela had been kind enough to share what she could about Wolfram's life there.

The boy wolf had always been overshadowed by his brothers-- their talents-- reputations. He had never really been allowed to strike out on his own. To make a name for himself beyond his almost impossibly handsome features-- eerily reminiscent of the Original King's. Wolfram had never truly been given a chance to see what he could accomplish on his own.

The boy wolf had always been overshadowed by his brothers-- their talents-- reputations. He had never really been allowed to strike out on his own. To make a name for himself beyond his almost impossibly handsome features-- eerily reminiscent of the Original King's. Wolfram had never truly been given a chance to see what he could accomplish on his own.

In just two months Wolfram had managed to do well for himself in Caloria. While his brothers returned to the capital, Wolfram had remained to the south, setting up a small camp with Sir Grier
and the same soldier who had set off with him to Lesser Gael.

It was true that most human nations denied that humans were the source of the recent deaths throughout the kingdoms, but even in Shimeron-- Suberela-- there were humans who believed the truth. Humans who had had enough. Men and women who had lost children-- families-- to Shou Shimeron's crop. Those who wanted revenge.

Of course, it would hardly be appropriate for Shin Makoku-- any demon nation-- to accept such humans with open arms. But Caloria was Shin Makoku's greatest human ally, and over time it was in the forests of eastern Caloria that they had begun to gather. Mostly men of fighting age-- men who without leadership could easily cause more harm than good.

Sir Grier had remained, at first in search of an escapee, but later as Gwendal's insurance that nothing else could happen to a stubborn little brother who refused to return home. However, a few short weeks saw Yozak and Wolfram as the impromptu leaders of the little human band. Dealing with the seeds of a potential political disaster was a comfortable distraction for Wolfram, and Gwendal allowed him the command out of nepotism and logistical convenience. As it turned out, Yozak's espionage experience combined with Wolfram's focused need for distraction had been the beginnings of the perfect human troops for the upcoming investigation into the inner workings of Shou Shimeron.

According to Gisela's letters, Wolfram had been handling the more basic aspects of training while Sir Grier taught all of them the more specialized skills of his craft. The most interesting detail of recent letters, however, was the boy Wolf and Sir Grier's growing friendship. Apparently it had become a problem in Sir Grier's reports to Gwendal, which had begun to leave out more and more details concerning Wolfram's mental recovery.

Anissina thought it was about time Wolfram had another friend. Someone who wasn't family or an unhealthy romantic fixation. And she was sure Yozak was capable of taking care of him, the same way she was sure that Wolfram loved Greta enough to come home as soon as he was truly able. From all the information she had gathered... The boy Wolf would never do anything to put his precious daughter in danger. Even if it meant staying away.

Yuuri was a fool to rush him home.

Anissina let out another sigh and flipped through some of the large book's dusty pages. The sage's comments about Tooth of the Wolf and its Earth derivatives had gotten her thinking about a whole new branch of magical research. At least tonight she would be able to channel her fury into something productive.

*******

Greta was finally asleep.

Yuuri worried his lip as he looked down at her, brushing a lock of hair off still-flushed cheeks. She had never been so upset with him-- never yelled nearly as much. It wasn't a surprise she had eventually tired herself out. Yuuri let his eyes run over her relaxed features, hair just below her shoulders-- Words in a language he still didn't know were half visible under pale blue sheets. The symbols were already longer, stretched-- changing as she grew. Greta was noticeably taller now, and today she had been wearing a new kind of dress-- laced up the back and entirely too tight around the waist.

When Wolfram came back... Yuuri would bring Wolfram home before he missed any more
changes.

Yuuri sighed and stood. Greta's bedroom was so quiet now, but their argument still echoed in his ears. His own refusal to let Greta accompany him just didn't make sense. Of course it would be dangerous, but Yuuri would be there to protect her and so would Conrad and Wolfram. The plague wasn't really a plague so there was no more danger there... but Yuuri hadn't been able to let himself agree. Not even when he realized that having her there would probably be easier. If Greta came with him Yuuri wouldn't have to really do anything. Greta would use those eyes and Wolfram would crack-- cover his weakness for their adorable daughter by insisting that he had to escort her safely back to the castle himself.

It would be so much easier.

But somewhere deep in his gut Yuuri knew that this wasn't supposed to be easy at all. He didn't deserve for it to be. Yuuri had let Wolfram down so many times before. It was his turn to be strong. His turn to be there for Wolfram...

Even if he still hadn't decided what exactly that meant.

Yuuri held the doorknob still as he pulled Greta's door shut, nodding slightly at the guards positioned on either side. Just a few days on Earth and he was almost back to bowing. He really did have to pay more attention to things.

He brought his hand up to cover a yawn and nearly shouted in surprise when Conrad fell into step a few paces behind him. "Don't--" he began, before sighing. "You scared me, Conrad."

Conrad seemed more upset with himself than normal. "My apologies. It was not my intent--"

"I know," Yuuri interrupted and started walking again. He should have expected it really; he never got to walk the halls alone anymore. "Do you think Gwendal is still awake?" Yuuri hoped the question would help take Conrad's mind off his brooding.

"I'm sure he is, Your--" A breath. "Yuuri. I believe the sage told him of your intent to retrieve Wolfram. There is a lot to prepare."

Yuuri frowned. "I should have told him sooner." Still, maybe if he apologized now he could save the older man a few wrinkles. Decision made, Yuuri started down the hallways that led to Gwendal's office.

Neither of them spoke.

It was strange. Silence with Conrad had always been companionable. Conrad had always-- well, with the exception of the Shimeron Incident-- been a source of comfort. What had changed?

Yuuri paused as the thought struck him. He heard Conrad halt behind him as well. "Conrad... is everything alright?" Things between them had seemed fine this afternoon when Conrad had explained about Wolfram and Yozak's encampment in Caloria.

Conrad merely looked at him, eyes searching over Yuuri's face. For a moment Yuuri thought he saw a blink of sadness-- regret-- and something else, before the feelings were tucked carefully beneath a soldier's mask. "Nothing, Yuuri." Conrad smiled. Then he put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "Wolfram is going to be very happy."

"What-- I--" Yuuri spun around quickly, breaking Conrad's grip. His heartbeat hammered in his cheeks. "What do you mean?"
"That you're coming to take him back." A pause. "Wolfram has always liked having special attention-- Whether he'll ever admit it." A chuckle.

Oh.

Yuuri started walking again-- Anything to keep from facing that terrible pressure. He couldn't. Not yet.

Just put one foot in front of the next.

* * *

The inside of Gwendal's office seemed far too cold for a summer night. Yuuri swallowed hard, for a moment regretting his decision for Conrad to wait outside, before moving to stand in front of Gwendal's imposing wooden desk. "So," he began eloquently, "Murata told you about me going to get Wolfram."

Gwendal nodded slightly, causing the bag of ice balanced on his head to shift marginally to the left. A drop of water slid along his temple.

Yuuri shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He felt more like a child waiting to receive a punishment than a king. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner..."

A bead of water slid down Gwendal's forehead, pausing dangerously on the end of his nose. "Anissina's contraption should be ready by sunrise, should you still insist on using it."

Yuuri sat during the extended silence that followed. "You don't seem excited-- to have Wolfram coming home soon..."

Gwendal removed the icepack from the top of his head and folded his hands neatly on the desk. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but had it occurred to you that a simple letter might suffice?"

Yuuri bit his lip. Charging Anissina's inventions was obviously unpleasant for Gwendal. "Thank you for using your magic for the banana boat... I'm sorry if it gave you a headache."

Gwendal sighed. "That is not the source of my concern, Your Majesty."

Yuuri waited.

Gwendal looked at him hard. "There was a time you asked me to speak to you as a friend, Your Majesty, but I would like permission now to speak to you as Wolfram's brother."

Yuuri blinked. "Of course! You shouldn't have to ask for that, Gwendal."

Gwendal shook his head but didn't argue. "I never knew a time when you did not complain of your past engagement to my brother. You made it quite clear that you viewed it as a mistake."

Yuuri suddenly found it hard to breathe.

Gwendal continued. "Fate saw the end of it, and now both of you are free to pursue your own matters... of the heart. In your case, Your Majesty, this opens many doors for political alliance that were previously closed to us. While for Wolfram there is finally a chance to put an end to his... fixation."

Yuuri tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "What?" he croaked, "What do you mean?"
Gwendal's face had started to turn red, despite the calm evenness of his tone. "Wolfram's feelings were as obvious as they were unreturned. As his brother, I will ask you not to encourage him. A personal escort home will seem-- I know you care for him as a friend. Do not do this to him, Yuuri."

The world spun into a tiny pinprick of light, and beneath his feet Yuuri could feel the ground begin to move.

* * *

Yuuri made his way back to the royal chambers in a daze. He was a coward.

An absolute coward.

He couldn't even remember what exactly he had said to Gwendal. Yuuri had almost thrown up-- panic rose too fast, making his head spin. He had said-- Yuuri had said Wolfram was his friend-- Yuuri would do this for anyone-- What other people thought didn't matter. All half-lies. Desperate words spilling out of him until he all but ran from the room, concerned Conrad on his heels.

Thankfully, Conrad had grasped his need for silence and had followed Yuuri back without asking any questions. Yuuri barely heard his friend's "goodnight" as he closed the double doors behind him, now alone. Trapped in a room that seemed too large. Too full of memories.

Before he really noticed, Yuuri was sitting numbly on the edge of the bed looking down at his feet. He had forgotten to remove his shoes. Yuuri kicked them off, not bothering to undo the laces, and curled up on his side over the duvet.

He was a coward.

He would bring Wolfram home-- at least Yuuri had made it clear to Gwendal that he was still leaving with the sunrise-- but what was he thinking? What was he going to do?

Yuuri was a coward.

Even after all this time, even after all the pain his stubbornness-- his fear-- had caused Wolfram... Why couldn't Yuuri just admit it? Admit it and move forward. He had done it before-- so many times in his mind, but always with an excuse. Hormones-- self-sacrifice-- Why was it so hard to even think it? Something he must have known was inside him-- a snake in the shadows.

And the imagery-- always bad-- so deeply ingrained. Dirty-- Wrong. Disgusting and abnormal. Everything he didn't want to be but was.

It would be so much easier just to admit it. Make Wolfram happy. But if he did that, there was also the chance that Yuuri would give himself a level of happiness he was sure he didn't deserve.

Yuuri rolled onto his back and took a breath. Why was it so hard? Even the word-- Yuuri could hardly even think it.

A deep breath. In, in, out.

Yuuri closed his eyes. He missed Wolfram. He missed his friend. But Yuuri also missed Other Things more than he could properly admit.

Kissing.
Their first real kiss had been on this bed-- similar position. Something almost alive-- born of desperation and denial but so impossibly...

Wolfram had tasted so good. Been so close. Hot and soft. Soap from the bath-- a tickle of blond hair against his cheek. Needing to be closer-- closer-- more than he'd ever imagined.

Yuuri could feel himself reacting to the thoughts-- memories he had tried so hard to hide. But instead of stopping-- instead of hiding-- Yuuri pushed his mind forward-- let a shaking hand slide down his stomach and over a growing heat in his groin. He let out a shuddering breath at the touch. Licked dry lips. This time-- this time he would be brave-- allow the thoughts-- He owed it to Wolfram... to everyone... to prove it to himself beyond any doubt.

His other hand came up to join the first and Yuuri could feel the heat of shame spread across his cheeks as the click of his belt buckle sounded all too loudly in the empty room. Another breath.

Kissing. There had been lots of kissing. Yuuri knew he liked it-- more than liked it. Once they started-- it was always there-- waiting to be thought about-- acted upon. Rewards. So terrifyingly, amazingly good.

Wolfram was almost too good. It had made him so-- jealous-- competitive.

More.

Always, always, more. Wolfram's little room-- studies-- lips and tongues and heat. Yuuri had begged-- Wolfram had kissed him-- made him feel--


Better than anything.

Yuuri was sweating now-- could feel blood pounding in the hard flesh in his hands-- both hands-- stroking-- pulling-- thumb against the head.

Wolfram's hands-- so good-- his lips. Yuuri looked down at his own hands-- could imagine Wolfram's pink lips-- spreading-- wanting-- wanton-- impossibly hot. Fear.

Wolfram had-- with his mouth-- It still seemed like a dream-- so unlike the proper soldier who wouldn't even take off his shirt for a sumo match-- perfect pale chest-- Yuuri had seen it so many times in the bath. Muscles. Pink nipples. Lips-- Wolfram's lips on his cock-- throat-- inside. Inside. Other ways to be inside-- Heat and kissing.

Heat.

Yuuri gasped as his cock throbbed-- orgasm taking him by surprise. Wet-- thick on his fingers. Pulsing. Wolfram had swallowed. Suction and heat-- steady till the end.

Yuuri kept his eyes closed. Breathing. He knew-- He never denied loving Wolfram as a friend-- Wolfram's attractiveness. Now-- Yuuri wouldn't let himself deny it anymore. He wanted Wolfram to do things to him-- to let Yuuri-- He just wanted. In ways he didn't fully understand the logistics of. He had to be brave-- He had to take responsibility.

Even if it meant thinking of himself as gay. As somehow broken. Yuuri couldn't let his fears, what
he knew could only be some sort of prejudice, stand in his way anymore. If he did-- he would ruin everything. Risk losing Wolfram forever.

No. Yuuri wouldn't let that happen. Another deep breath.

He loved Wolfram. Loved him in every way he could. No more pointless denial. Yuuri had to be strong. He owed it to Wolfram-- to everyone. Maybe even to himself.

Yuuri opened his eyes and for the first time in so long the anxiety seemed to be gone-- or at least manageable. He smiled. He had admitted it. That was the first step, right? And Wolfram loved him too-- even Gwendal had said so. As soon as he got to Caloria-- everything would fall into place.

Wolfram would be so happy.

Yuuri shifted to sit up and paused-- grimaced--

Oh.

It had been a while-- too long-- and he had not only covered his hands but his chest-- uniform top-- splattered with drops of incriminating thickness-- already turning white against the air.

Yuuri let himself fall back against the covers with a frustrated groan.

Why couldn't anything ever be easy?

******

******
Central Caloria
Two Days Later

Yuuri's stomach was still tying itself in knots. He didn't understand how Murata could possibly be asleep at a time like this. Even if the Banana Boat hadn't turned his insides into a confused mush, Yuuri didn't think his mind would have let him have a moment's peace. His heart was beating much too fast and his clothes were still damp, sweat adding to the residual seawater that left trails of salt in the drying creases of his uniform.

The midday sun had done little to dry his clothes. They were deep under a canopy of leaves, following a newly made road over animal trails-- riding east toward the scarcely inhabited region of Caloria, near the mountains that shared a border with Calbacade, Suberelia, and Lesser Gael. Riding east toward Wolfram.

They had arrived at Caloria's capital harbor late last night-- maybe even early morning. He had left a message with Flurin's men there. An apology for not taking the time to greet her properly, along with a promise to make it up on their return trip. The Banana Boat should be safe there, though they might not be able to use it for their journey back. Anissina had warned that too long a docking might drain the excess magic she had installed completely. Caloria was still human soil.

The horse-drawn carriage they had purchased to take them their final trek was a far cry from the royal carriages that Yuuri had gotten used to. There were no cushions. Not a single one. Murata was asleep on the floor between the narrow boards that attached to the opposite walls-- seats-- There had been more space to curl up on the floor. Yuuri couldn't imagine sleeping like that, having abandoned the inside of the carriage completely to sit outside on the driving bench with Conrad as his friend steered the two horses along the narrow forest trail. Yuuri's backside was completely numb from sitting so long on the uneven wood and he caught himself looking at the horses' unsaddled backs almost longingly. Even riding bareback had to be better than this.

Yuuri stole a glance at Conrad, who seemed to be completely unbothered by the unpleasantness of their journey. He supposed that by now Conrad must have gotten used to this sort of thing... At the moment, Yuuri couldn't imagine ever getting used to traveling like this. What he wouldn't give for a cushioned seat-- air conditioning.

In JR the seats were even heated in winter and he could watch the same dozen commercials over again on the little monitor above the door.

The corner of Yuuri's mouth twitched as he imagined the anonymous woman's voice. "Central Caloria. This train is humbly heading toward Eastern Caloria. Doors on the right side will open. Please change here for the forest line-- the stream line-- and the rock metro stations. Watch your step as you exit the train. It is dangerous, so please be careful. Central Caloria... Central Caloria." Yuuri snickered.

Then he noticed Conrad was looking at him. "Sorry," he mumbled, and looked away.
He really must be losing it. Yuuri's mind was trying everything it could to avoid thinking about... *that*. Yuuri had run out of ways to play *that* conversation over in his mind. Each time it only ended up sounding more ridiculous.

Yuuri groaned, leaning forward to bury his face in his hands. He was doomed. He was going crazy. Covered in sweat. Smelly, overtired, and doomed.

Conrad put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you alright, Yuuri? You know you can always talk to me about anything."

Yuuri nodded hopelessly into his hands, eyes still closed. "I know." Then he took a deep breath and sat up. For a while he tried to focus on the horses' backs. Looking at the road ahead was easier than looking in his friend's eyes.

Really, when Yuuri thought about it, he should be talking to Conrad about this. Conrad had known Wolfram for longer than Yuuri had been alive. He knew more about Wolfram, more about the-- Yuuri blushed-- courting customs of this world. He really should talk to Conrad, but two things kept him quiet.

First, Conrad was Wolfram's big brother. Conrad loved Wolfram-- protected him even after Wolfram had treated him horribly for years. Yuuri had been awful to Wolfram. He had already made so many mistakes-- What if Conrad didn't think he was good enough-- didn't approve?

The second thing was... well it was just Yuuri being afraid. He had always idolized Conrad. Conrad was the perfect man. Sure, he had been forced to kill people during the war, but Conrad was honorable and strong and handsome. He was also decidedly not gay. Not like Yuuri...

Conrad had loved Susannah Julia. Loved her in spite of her connection to Adelbert-- and as far as Yuuri knew Conrad had always been perfectly admirable about it. Never done anything to threaten Julia's marriage. It was so sad to think about... that Julia had died without ever really loving him back. Conrad was so much of what Yuuri had wanted to grow up to be. Strong. Straight. What if Conrad was disgusted with him?

Yuuri sighed. The only problem with both his fears-- Conrad always surprised him with his kindness, his acceptance. The Shimeron Incident aside, Conrad had never abandoned Yuuri-- never given him a reason to fear he wouldn't support him. No matter what.

And so by not talking to Conrad, Yuuri was simply being a coward all over again. Falling back into his old pattern.

Yuuri clenched his fists into the fabric covering his knees. He wasn't going to be a coward anymore.

"Conrad," he said suddenly, voice seeming altogether too loud against the peaceful background noises of the forest. It was now or never. "I think I'm gay."

Nothing. Conrad didn't say anything. Why wasn't he talking?!

Yuuri opened his mouth-- desperate for anything but-- *this*. "I think I'm gay for Wolfram-- I mean--" Now that he had started, he didn't seem to be able to stop. "Maybe-- I mean-- I could be wrong... I don't think-- I don't think I could be gay for anyone besides Wolfram-- Not that I think it's Wolfram's fault-- Someone can't *make* you gay. I know that's stupid-- But Wolfram is... Wolfram... and... Oh god please don't hate me, Conrad! I'm sorry-- I know everything would be better if I had loved him back sooner-- but I just hate--- I never wanted to be gay." By now Yuuri was shaking,
nearly in tears. "He's your brother-- so I guess it's weird for me to talk to you about this-- This whole thing is so weird... Oh god, Conrad, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" Yuuri curled up and put his head to his knees. Maybe if he closed his eyes tight enough he could make himself disappear all together. Make these terrible words never have happened. He never should have started. Never should have opened his stupid mouth.

Conrad's hand was still on Yuuri's shoulder. Why hadn't he noticed? The hand tightened for a moment-- reassuring. "Don't apologize, Yuuri. It's okay." Another squeeze. "It's okay."

Yuuri didn't trust himself to come out of hiding. He was still mortified-- had to fight the urge to vomit.

Conrad's palm traveled to move against Yuuri's back as he shook, letting out the occasional sob. "Yuuri--" Conrad started, voice strained in a way that Yuuri was too lost in his own misery to try to understand. "That's something... I know your world is different, but here-- gender matters much less than being in love with a half-blood--"

"But I am!" Yuuri managed, a torn whisper. "I'm not good enough for him--"

"Yuuri," Conrad interrupted. "There's no way..." The pause seemed so much longer than it was. "You'll make each other very happy, when all is said and done." The comforting hand fell away from Yuuri's back.

Yuuri felt cold-- alone in a ball of himself. He lifted his head up, watched the horses and the path unfold ahead. 'I don't deserve to be--"

"Yuuri!" Conrad nearly yelled at him, making Yuuri jump a bit in surprise. "Those thoughts-- it is a path I cannot let you go down. There is nothing wrong with loving someone of the same gender. Love is... a complicated thing that I have never..." Another breath, but more words never followed.

"I'm sorry, Conrad." Yuuri kept his gaze elsewhere-- half-pretending he was somewhere else. "I shouldn't have--"

"Thank you, Yuuri. For talking to me. I knew that something was bothering you-- We all feel guilt over Wolfram's capture-- but that is no one's fault. It can be hard to remember at times-- but we cannot change the past. I'm sure-- Your decision will make him glad."

Yuuri couldn't help but smile at the thought of seeing Wolfram happy. "I should have done this sooner... It was an accident at first... but he's..." Yuuri blushed and once more rested his forehead against his knees. He had already said too much... Yuuri was sure he would regret talking to Conrad about Certain Things. Wolfram was still his brother after all. "You're not mad though, about anything?"

"No," Conrad answered quickly. "No."

For a while they both watched the road. Yuuri was glad that if this conversation had to happen it had happened now. This way he really didn't have to look at Conrad.

Eventually though, Yuuri's curiosity broke free. "Is there anything-- I should know... I mean, the left cheek and all... but that might be..." Yuuri didn't think he could handle that sort of pressure-- and now that he had told Conrad-- they would have to get married right away. Yuuri was sure that Murata would have something to say about putting the kingdom first-- They had barely figured out the plague. "Is there anything I should know about-- things to do or-- not to do?"

Yuuri remembered the picture in his jacket pocket. "I brought something-- a present-- but should I
get something else? On Earth presents can be really important for all sorts of things-- It's too complicated sometimes, actually-- but should I-- I mean... What does Wolfram like... for presents?"
Maybe if Yuuri blushed enough now he could save himself some embarrassment later.

Conrad sighed. "Presents and Wolfram can be a tricky business. I think Mother gave him too many, really--"

"But there has to be something he doesn't have!" Yuuri had to do something to impress Wolfram.

Conrad looked at him, face grim, before returning his eyes to the road. "That's not what I meant... I think Wolfram has gotten tired of presents. Mother used them whenever something happened that she couldn't... I don't think Wolfram sees presents as anything more than bribery, of a sort-- at least when it comes to himself."

"Oh," Yuuri managed, once again feeling lost. "But... he got mad when I didn't bring him something from Earth..."

"I don't think it was the lack of a present, Yuuri." Conrad sighed. "I think he just wanted more of your attention-- and now that you're willing to give it that shouldn't be a problem. You don't have to do anything other than tell him what you've already told me."

Yuuri sank farther down onto the bench, back scraping against the carriage as he slumped. "I guess." But if telling Conrad had been this hard-- telling Wolfram... He really wished there was a simple way. A gift that could say everything for him. He brought a hand to his chest, over the pocket that held the picture for Wolfram. It was probably crinkled by now-- not much of a real present, anyway. A pause. The palm of Yuuri's hand was touching one of the buttons on the front of his jacket.

The second button down.

Yuuri felt a little spark of hope rise within him. If there wasn't a present here that would save him words-- maybe one from Earth would do. Of course the second button was juvenile-- something for high school students-- and would in itself require an explanation. But at least it would be a place to start.

That small comfort was enough to let him close his eyes for a moment-- to rest his head on Conrad's shoulder.

* * *

He woke startled and in the dark. On what must have been the floor of the turbulent carriage. Conrad and Murata's voices were muffled somewhere above him. He shifted his head into the small beam of early light that fluttered between the curtains and Yuuri swiped, dazed, at the bugs that hovered over his face. A bundle of cloth had been lodged beneath his head and it took him a moment to recognize it as Conrad's jacket. There was also one of the coarse traveling blankets tangled around his legs.

Yuuri wondered how long he had been asleep. The road was narrow-- They shouldn't have continued traveling all night. He groaned as blood rushed back into his legs and struggled to stick his head out of the carriage window. "Conrad... Murata... What--"

"Good morning, Shibuya," said Murata, all too cheerily for the early hour of dawn. He was sitting on the driving bench next to Conrad. "About time you joined us."

Yuuri crinkled his eyebrows. "How long have I been asleep?"
"Almost a day," Murata answered. "You passed out yesterday afternoon and managed to sleep through camp last night. It was quite impressive, actually, but I'm sure you needed the rest." That unsettling tone of joy had returned to Murata's voice. "It's given Sir Weller and I a chance to catch up."

Yuuri could feel the blush being spreading up his neck. "Oh..."

"There's food in there," Conrad informed him a little too quickly. "You've missed two meals."

Yuuri's stomach growled in answer. "Thanks, Conrad." Then he ducked back inside the carriage, choosing to stay seated on the floor instead of the painfully narrow benches. There was a bag resting on one of them, containing a skin of water and some hard white-bread cakes. The bacon Murata and Conrad must have cooked before starting off this morning was still a bit warm, and the oil had drenched some of the bread, making it soft enough to chew without too much difficulty.

Yuuri wondered how far they still had to go before they reached Wolfram's camp. It couldn't be that much farther now. He took a bite of his breakfast and sighed. Yuuri still hadn't decided on exactly what he was going to say when he finally got to see Wolfram.

He had thought of at least a hundred ways things could go, but the problem was that most of them ended in ways distinctly... physical. The end of the conversation was always the best. The parts with kissing and rubbing and-- just finally getting to be close to Wolfram after what felt like a lifetime apart. Wolfram's soft skin and strong hands. The scent of his hair.

The end of the conversation was easy, but Yuuri was still unsure of how he should start. He wasn't even sure if his arrival would be a surprise or not. Gwendal had said he would send an emergency bird, but even then the letter could take days.

What was he going to do?

What if Wolfram wasn't even happy to see him? Yuuri froze as the thought gripped him. No. Wolfram might pretend to be mad at first, but Wolfram loved him. Didn't he? Even Gwendal had said so-- or at least implied it. And Wolfram had saved his life-- had kissed him like he loved him. Had pushed him against the wall with a thigh between his legs-- just the right angle. Wolfram's hands always seemed to know just where to go-- to touch. Wolfram tasted so good.

Soon. Soon he would get to see Wolfram, talk to him alone. There might be some yelling, and Yuuri planned to grovel-- apologize for so much-- but then Wolfram would kiss him again. Warm lips. Hands.

Touching.

Yuuri blushed and stuffed the rest of his bacon sandwich into his mouth at once in an attempt to swallow an embarrassing moan. He was already hard.

Yuuri almost choked on his sandwich-- startling himself enough to regain some semblance of control on his hormones. Conrad shouted his concern-- stopped the carriage. "I'm fine," Yuuri hacked, struggling for breath. "I'm... I'm fine."

He washed down his coughing fit with a swig of water. Sighed.

No matter how hard things were now-- how hard it might be for him to make Wolfram forgive him-- Yuuri was sure it would turn out alright in the end.

It had to.
Yozak had come to enjoy strapping Wolfram down at night. There was a certain appeal to the way the leather straps cut into the pale skin of his wrists and ankles. Limbs spread across the bed--squirming.

He smirked.

"Stop enjoying this!" Wolfram snapped, cheeks betraying a hint of pink. "It's done. You can go."

Yozak's smirk only widened into a grin. The little ex-prince was still as prim as ever. "Goodnight, Your Highness," Yozak purred. "Sleep tight."

Wolfram humped as Yozak left the room-- pausing to extinguish the oil lamp before closing the door behind him.

As serious as the situation was, Yozak couldn't help but joke. Besides, if he held his tongue completely Wolfram would know. At least Yozak had managed to keep his jokes from becoming too sexual in nature. He didn't want to cause more harm than good.

A sigh. After all Wolfram had been through he deserved better than pity. It was the least Yozak could do to treat the boy to a bit of normalcy.

Yozak nodded in greeting as he passed Lucien in the narrow hallway, both of them having to turn a bit to the side in order to pass. Lucien still took the first third of the night's watch outside of Wolfram's door. He was the only one there who could really be trusted with the task, besides himself and Gisela. But after Wolfram's Waking Dreams had started-- Yozak was surprised the young corporal had stayed with them at all.

Even now the image wouldn't leave him.

Wolfram and Lucien covered in blood.

Lucien hadn't even fought back.

That night had been cool, breeze from the north soothing sweat-coated skin of mid summer. They had only just found the abandoned cottage. The halls were narrow and smelled of rotting wood, but the structure was sound. There was no need to worry about a collapse. The overgrown garden suggested the inhabitants had fled the once-thought plague. Or simply succumb to it.

Wolfram's recovery being on the forefront of everyone's mind, he had been given the cottage's single bedroom. Wolfram's sleeping patterns had become more active, but Yozak could remember it being like that during the few times they had traveled together before and hadn't thought much of it. Anything was better than the cold, still, silence that had held for days after Wolfram's rescue. Besides, Gisela assured them it was a sign that Wolfram was getting better.

But Wolfram's nightmares had taken on a life of their own-- two nights before Yozak had caught Wolfram outside-- escaping dreams but still asleep. Yozak had seen men sleepwalking before, been taught to lead them back to bed. But when he tried to steer Wolfram back toward the camp he had run-- faster than what should have been possible for one asleep-- and when Yozak finally caught
him Wolfram had fought back, scratching at his eyes and squirming like a cat gone wild.

Once Wolfram was finally woken he didn't seem to remember anything peculiar about his dreams. Gisela had checked him over for anything strange. They had hoped it was a fluke.

The worst part was that, besides the dreams, Wolfram had been getting better. It seemed so odd that someone with so much force of will toward his own recovery during the day could react so violently at night. After Wolfram's escape attempt Yozak had been on guard outside his room when Wolfram got up and opened the door. For a moment Yozak had thought he was awake, but Wolfram had been fully dressed-- hours before dawn. Wolfram had brought his sword down so quickly that Yozak was nearly caught off guard, barely catching the blow on the edge of his own half-drawn blade. The crashing metal had served as an alarm, and Lucien and Gisela had come quickly-- pinning Wolfram down until his screaming subsided long enough for Gisela to soothe him into waking.

And so tonight they would take no chances.

A cold wind was blowing from the north, ghosting over too-hot skin as Yozak leaned against the small cottage's only door. Even though it was his time to sleep Yozak knew there was no point in trying. His mind was far too full of thoughts.

There were humans gathering in the woods nearby. Refugees of the would-be-plague and their home country's lies about its origin. At least these humans seemed to mean them no harm. Yozak hadn't thought he'd ever live to see the day humans would take the word of demons over their own kind. Kiddo's rule had really done a number on this world.

But the humans in the woods-- There was an advantage here-- a moment to be seized. He would have to send Gwendal another bird. It would be good, too, for Wolfram. A task to distract his mind from troubled thoughts.

A scream cut through the darkness-- only to be cut off.

Yozak cursed as he jerked open the door and raced through the small entry room-- narrow hall-- The door to Wolfram's room was locked from the inside-- burst from its hinges with a swift kick.

He hadn't expected the blood-- slick beneath his boots. Wolfram's back was to the door-- far side of the room-- crouched over Lucien's still form. Wolfram didn't stop-- small movements-- noises-- Yozak approached slowly-- stepping in blood.

Behind him he heard Gisela's startled gasp. A distant sound-- outside the realm of Yozak's focus. Wolfram was still in his once-white bedclothes-- now stained red-- heavy-- sticking to his skin. Lucien wasn't moving-- propped with his back against the wall-- eyes open-- a blink.

He was still alive.

It was enough to spring Yozak into action. He was close enough now to jerk Wolfram back by his shoulder-- unbalancing him completely from the crouch-- blood fell with him-- flesh-- Lucien's forearm-- Yozak followed Wolfram to the floor, pinning him easily with both hands over slim wrists-- using his weight to still the now howling-- squirming-- demon at the waist.

Demon. The stories they had told him in the camps at night. Demons that ate flesh and were mad with power. A horrible children's tale come to life.

Wolfram growled-- eyes wide and full and nearly black-- bits of Lucien's flesh splattered warmly against Yozak's face. Wolfram's teeth were stained red-- his mouth a pit of crimson-- face and hair
half splattered in congealing blood.

Yozak saw Gisela rush past from the corner of his eye-- tending to Lucien who had yet to make a sound.

Wolfram twisted in his grasp-- making sounds of rage that Yozak hadn't heard outside a battlefield. His efforts were no match for Yozak, who held him easily-- still not really believing what he saw.

Gisela must have finished with Lucien because she came to kneel near Wolfram's head. At first she merely wiped the blood from his face, whispering soft words that Yozak couldn't hear over the pounding of his heart-- the rush of adrenaline-- Wolfram only struggled harder, but soon green light ebbed from the tips of Gisela's fingers.

Wolfram went still.

Yozak kept his place and grip on Wolfram's wrists, but his gaze moved to Gisela's pale face.

The medic licked her lips. "He's sleeping now."

Yozak snorted. "That's no comfort." He twisted until he could see Lucien-- still leaning against the wall. He was panting, pale, and covered in his own blood-- but Gisela had been quick enough. It might not even scar. "What happened?" he barked-- reality of the situation beginning to settle in.

Lucien's focus flashed quickly between Yozak and his pinned Lieutenant. "I don't... I don't know."

"What do you mean--" Yozak stopped his shout to take a slow breath. The corporal was probably in shock.

"You should take some rest, Lucien," Gisela soothed. "You lost a lot of blood."

Lucien tried to laugh, but his voice only cracked. "I noticed." He stood slowly, putting most of his weight to the wall at his back. Then he took a step forward-- fell.

Gisela barely manage to catch him.

"Thank you," Lucien slurred, resting his head on her shoulder.

Gisela helped him stand. "Yozak, I'll take care of Lucien. I won't be long."

Yozak nodded. Now that Wolfram was asleep it was hard to imagine him as the creature he had been only moments before. Wolfram was so small-- pale against the darkening red. His breathing was soft and even. Only sleeping.

Conrad had said-- they had been drunk-- Yozak had thought he was exaggerating. Something like this had happened before-- Before Wolfram started out for Lesser Gael he had attacked Lucien. From Conrad's description it had sounded more about magic. Wolfram had been dying from the overuse of his power and he had taken some of Lucien's-- It had seemed to be about the magic--

But Wolfram had lost his fire-- He had just been-- eating him. Alive.

Wolfram's sleepwalking-- his nightmares over the past two nights-- It was about what had happened to him in that moving prison. It was about trauma and fear and escape. All things that Yozak had seen before-- things that made sense.

This was-- This had to be a part of something different.
Wolfram coughed, eyes blinking open-- green again. He only struggled for a moment-- surprised by Yozak's weight and grip on him-- then froze. "What..." He licked his lips uncertainly and the pallor of his face turned a sickly white-- almost green. "Lucien-- is he-- What did I--"

"He'll be fine," Yozak answered, still keeping his grip on Wolfram's wrists.

Wolfram shivered-- kept shaking. "It's my... It's my fault... What did I-- What have I..." Green eyes fell shut. Wolfram tried to twist away and Yozak let him-- blood smeared hands came up to cover his face. "Gods..." Wolfram's voice was muffled, uncontrolled shaking threatening to turn into sobs.

Yozak stood-- Now free, Wolfram only curled farther into himself-- on his side-- back to Yozak-- on the hard wooden floor. Yozak sighed. "It's okay. Thanks to Gisela... Lucien should be fine by morning."

Wolfram didn't speak. Instead he screamed and punched the floor with a bare fist.

Worse than the sound of bone giving way to wood was the sudden familiarity of the shout.

Lucien had never screamed.

Wolfram whimpered and clutched his now injured fist to his chest. Mumbling to himself too quietly for Yozak to hear.

"It's okay," Yozak tried again, more softly this time. "No use staying on the floor. Why don't you get yourself cleaned up?" He stepped forward to put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder.

Wolfram shifted slowly-- still keeping one arm pressed against his chest as he moved to his knees. His other hand went to the floor in search of support-- instead it found a patch of Lucien's half-congealed blood-- dried layer sliding away to reveal the wetness beneath. He froze.

Yozak brought his other hand down, pulling Wolfram to his feat in one swift jerk. Wolfram winced at the sudden jolt-- cradled his hand-- kept his eyes firmly on the bloodied floor. "I didn't... I didn't... I should be sick-- I should be sick-- I can't..."

"Don't," Yozak snapped-- then spun Wolfram to face him. Pulled his face up with a hand beneath his chin. Fingers cracking dried blood-- slipping where it was still wet. "It happened. What's the next step?"

Wolfram blinked. The wide eyes of a lost child hardened. He took a slow breath. "I'm sorry. I-- I had it under control. I don't know-- I don't know why..."

"But you remember it?"

A nod. "With Shinou... When it was Shinou I couldn't remember... It was-- This time was different. I don't know why I would-- Why of all things..." His eyes went dull-- lost in thoughts.

Yozak shook him, just for a second. "Hey-- Focus."

Wolfram blinked. "I'm sorry. I-- I don't know why I..." He stepped away. "Do you mind if I change-- clean-- It's... I can't think like this."

For a moment Yozak considered insisting he stay-- watch-- "Okay. I'll send Gisela in, though. She'll want to see to your hand."
Wolfram looked down at his hand and bit his lip. "Right."

Yozak paused on his way out to lay a hand on the top of Wolfram's head. Ruffle his hair. "Don't be long."

Wolfram blinked up at him, still too shocked to speak.

Yozak smiled and took his hand away before heading to the doorway. The door was still off its top hinge, lying at a cracked diagonal against the floor. Yozak decided to leave it for now. Some things were better dealt with in the fresh light of day.

Yozak didn't have long to wait before Wolfram stepped into the narrow hall. He had changed into clean clothes, but was holding a bundle of stained red with his good arm. "I want to burn them," he said, without really looking at him. "I can't..." A breath. "I tried to wipe most of it off the floor. These were ruined anyway..."

Yozak nodded. No wonder the wadded pajamas had seemed more stained than before. He clapped his hand on Wolfram's shoulder and gave him another smile. "Magic's not the only way to light a fire you know." Yozak had to let Wolfram go as they started walking. "Let's get that hand taken care of and I'll show you how real men make fire--"

"I know how to make a common fire!" Wolfram snapped. "I've traveled enough in human countries to--"

"Even better!" Yozak interrupted. "You make the fire. I'll watch."

Behind him Wolfram humphed.

It didn't take Gisela long to fix Wolfram's injured hand, though afterwards she was eager for sleep. The ground was clear of hozeki and so close to Lesser Gael her magic was strong. Still, healing Lucien must have taken significant power. Few healers would have been able to render new flesh like that. In fact, Julia was the only other that Yozak had known.

With Gisela and Lucien safely asleep inside the cottage, Yozak sat next to the fire pit and smirked until Wolfram growled at him and set to work. Yozak had half-expected Wolfram not to be able to build a proper campfire, but apparently Kiddo's sense of adventure and his more recent journey toward Lesser Gael with Lucien had done him some good. Wolfram had a good-sized fire going in not much longer than it would have taken Yozak to do it himself. Once the larger wood had caught, Wolfram added his bloodied sleepwear, using a stick to stuff the cloth as far into the center as it would go. Then he took a seat across the fire from Yozak.

The fire crackled between them, heating the already warm air. For a while the excess smoke from the burning cloth obscured Wolfram's face entirely, but once it cleared Yozak focused on Wolfram's pale features. He was staring into the fire-- flames reflecting in his eyes and dancing shadows playing along the curves of his face. Otherwise he was still.

They stayed like that for a while, Yozak only watching as Wolfram stared into the flickering heat. The sky began to change from stars to a pale grey and the birds had started to sing. Yozak's clothes were wet with dew.

He was half-asleep-- senses alert and ready but mind resting. It was a useful trick for nights alone, when rest was necessary but there was no one else to keep watch in dangerous territory.

"I want to kill them."
Wolfram's words snapped Yozak back into the present. Wolfram still hadn't moved, and for a moment Yozak thought it might have been his imagination.

"It's not impossible," Wolfram continued. "Now that we know the cause of the plague... And without my magic-- It won't be impossible to sneak in." He licked his lips, and for the first time looked at Yozak instead of the fire. "You can show me how."

Yozak sighed. "It's not that simple."

"Isn't it, though?" Wolfram's voice had risen, excitement evident. "No one can do what you can. The only reason no spy can make it far enough into Shou Shimeron is that the only ones we can trust besides you are full demons. Now that it's necessary-- Gwendal is sure to send you. You'll be able to figure out who's behind all this! You can teach me-- take me with you--"

"I don't think Gwendal will--"

"It's not his decision!" Wolfram nearly shouted-- standing to pace. "I need to find out... That Prince Pervert is up to something--"

"And of course there's the revenge." Yozak kept his voice cool. "You've never been the best at keeping your temper from affecting your judgment. What you're talking about... Emotions don't have a place in that kind of mission. It's too dangerous."

Wolfram glared down at him. "What am I supposed to feel? After what they did to me."

Yozak sighed. Shook his head. He didn't expect Wolfram to sit beside him.

"Please." Wolfram licked his lips. "I-- I have to. I have to try-- do something. I'll-- I'm afraid I'll lose myself completely if I don't." His voice had trailed to a whisper.

_Damn_. No wonder Wolfram had been spoiled so much as a child.

Yozak shook his head. He must be going soft. "Look, Wolfram." A sigh. "You've given me little reason to believe you're capable of something like this. But... While we're here I'll train you when I can. You'll have to prove--"

"I will!" Wolfram interrupted, breaking into a grin for the first time since his capture. He jumped up and began to pace. "I was thinking about those humans too... They could be useful-- going undercover in Shou Shimeron. If we can organize them--"

"Don't get too ahead of yourself." Yozak stood beside him, looking down into determined eyes. "There's still a long way to go."

Wolfram nodded up at him and smiled.

Looking back, it really was the start of a change in their relationship. Yozak hadn't paid Wolfram much attention before. He was the Captain's younger brother, the spoiled prince, King Kiddo's over-jealous fiancé. But after that night, Wolfram was just Wolfram.

The nightmares had continued-- the Waking Dreams-- but Wolfram never tried to take a chunk out of anyone. After another night or two they had started using the straps, which had made things easier. Even now, almost six weeks later, they were still using them. Lately, though, the Waking Dreams had all but vanished. Yozak allowed Lucien to keep his shift as guard, but had him under strict orders not to enter Wolfram's room unsupervised. Lucien, for his part, seemed to agree that it was best.
Since the humans had first begun gathering in the woods Yozak had sensed an opportunity, and Wolfram's idea to organize and train them had turned out better than Yozak had thought. There must really something to be said about youth and optimism. Although deep down Yozak knew it was still about revenge.

But really, after all he had been through, Yozak had to admit that Wolfram might be owed more than he was asking.

********

********

Eastern Caloria
The Next Day

********

Murata was tired of the carriage.

It was cramped, humid and miserable. And as entertaining as watching Sir Weller punish himself while Shibuya bounced about like an excited puppy had been for the last twenty-four hours-- It had begun to get very, very, old.

Or maybe it was just him.

Sir Weller's self-deprecation aside, had Murata really become so old as to not feel any spark of joy at watching Shibuya's new-found happiness? Some relief that Shibuya had overcome whatever mental block had stood between him seeing Wolfram as another man and simply seeing Wolfram?

Maybe it was just Shibuya's timing that made Murata's head pound. Murata was here to be taking account of the situation at Sir Belefield's camp, not watching an infuriating display of hormones. Apparently, Sir Grier hadn't been providing enough details of late, and Gwendal was growing concerned. And after hearing what he had of the new human troops, Murata had been curious enough to come and take a look for himself.

Murata braced himself as the carriage came to a bumpy halt. They must be close now. The wider path was supposed to end a little over a mile from the camp. Murata stepped from the carriage and helped Shibuya and Sir Weller detach it from the horses and push it far enough from the path to deter anyone who happened by from taking the trouble to steal it.

Since they only had two horses it meant Shibuya would be riding with Sir Weller. Murata maneuvered his horse in front so he didn't have to spend the remainder of their journey watching Sir Weller be As Appropriate As Possible with Shibuya squirming excitedly between his thighs.

Young people could be so tiring.

The forest was calming, at least. Thickly wooded and full of the sounds of nature. His horse had been well trained and it followed the trail with little guidance, allowing Murata's mind to wander.

Murata's thoughts had faded him out of reality almost completely when Yozak and a line of other men came into view. Apparently Gwendal's bird had arrived ahead of them after all.

"Your Majesty." Yozak bowed, lips curved into a smirk. "Your Grace."

Murata tilted his head in greeting as his horse stepped into the clearing. The sun was harsher here, outside the cover of trees, and he had to squint.
"Where's Wolfram?" Shibuya was already dismounting. "You knew we were coming. Where's--"

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Yozak interrupted. "We got Gwendal's bird a few hours ago. Wolfram left at sunrise for a routine mission with the other half of the men. He should be back later this afternoon."

"Oh," Shibuya answered softly. "Well, then." He licked his lips, seeming to remember his new audience. "Thank you for the welcome-- all of you. I'm sorry our visit was so... unexpected."

"Not at all." Yozak grinned, eyes flashing to Sir Weller. "Scouts noticed your carriage miles off. You wouldn't have caught us unaware."

Murata narrowed his eyes. He hadn't noticed anyone watching them. But he had been inside the carriage. Hopefully Sir Weller hadn't been so caught up in his brooding that he wouldn't notice a few-- likely human-- scouts.

A slight widening of Sir Weller's eyes told Murata that he hadn't.

Yozak's smile only widened. "It's a pleasure for us all to have such honored guests." He tilted his head, indicating the line of nearly a dozen men at attention beside him. They varied widely in age, the youngest looking to match the stablekeep's boy and the oldest likely to have children grown. They stood straight-- saluted in greeting-- but their eyes were wide with wonder and a bit of fear. It wasn't often that humans stood before the Maou-- knowing what he was, at least.

Shibuya reddened at the formal greeting. "It's nice to meet you all. I'm happy you believe us about the... the tooth of the wolf. Too many people have suffered already. Thank you."

The men looked at each other, unsure of how to respond.

"Well don't just stand there," Yozak broke in. "Come and take a look around. I'm sure you must have questions."

Murata nodded. "I certainly do." He sighed. "But the journey wasn't exactly comfortable. I'm sure His Majesty would prefer a rest before beginning the tour." Murata doubted Shibuya could last another ten minutes in front of the men before he opened his mouth again and his intentions toward Sir Belefield became obvious to everyone. Murata had a suspicion that Shibuya's plans would not go as smoothly as he hoped. Sir Belefield would not be the same man who threw his reputation away to sneak into his king's bed. They were no longer engaged-- Murata seriously doubted Wolfram would allow any such breach of moral conduct without the title of fiancé.

And more importantly, experiences like the one Sir Belefield had suffered left a man changed in ways even he himself wouldn't understand. Shibuya was going to have some trouble getting what he wanted as quickly as he expected. There was no need for an audience on top of all that.

"Of course," Sir Grier answered. "Come into the cabin and take a rest out of the sun." Then he turned to the men. "Continue as you would."

"Yes, Sir!" They answered in practiced unison, before dispersing.

"The cottage was abandoned when we found it," Yozak explained as they walked toward it, having left the horses with some of the human men. "We've been using it as an officer's barracks and command center..." Murata stopped paying attention to Yozak's voice as he concentrated on taking in his surroundings.

The cottage was a single-story wooden building on the opposite edge of a clearing in the forest.
The trees had probably been cleared from the area by humans looking to farm, but had since been taken over by tall grass and weeds. It wasn't a huge clearing, and there was at least as much space taken up by the cabin and surrounding cluster of tents as there was left clear. Parts of the clear space had been flattened into sparring circles and a few horses grazed in the space left to free grasses.

The mountains separating Caloria from Lesser Gael were visible over the line of trees to the north. The soil on the mountains was dark with the remnants of volcanic ash-- thousands and thousands of years old-- dead before his first life with Shinou.

* * *

Murata had to hold in a sigh of relief when Shibuya left the table. Every moment he had to wait for Sir Belefield seemed to put him further on edge. Eventually Yozak had convinced him to take a bath-- after all, smelling like the road was hardly the best start toward any kind of relations. Murata was sure that the fact that the metal tub had been put into Sir Belefield's room, as it was the nicest and most private space available, didn't hurt matters. Shibuya probably was eager to have a look at Sir Belefield's things. Grier was being oddly tight-lipped about the blond-- and Shibuya was probably desperate for information by now.

When Shibuya left the room Murata did sigh. But the sound was masked by Sir Weller's chair sliding away from the table.

"I should stay close. In case there's trouble."

Yozak sighed loudly-- exhale catching his voice. "Good to know how much you trust the men, Captain. I'm sure kiddo will forget to wash behind his ears without your help."

Sir Weller said nothing, just followed Shibuya from the room.

All the better, Murata decided. Perhaps it wasn't only Shibuya that Sir Grier was so eager to hide information from.

"So," Murata began, tilting his head to catch the light. "Why don't you tell me? Maybe I can help."

"I don't know what you mean, Your Grace." Sir Grier leaned back in his seat. "You can see for yourself how well the men are coming along."

Murata narrowed his eyes. "Fine. We can talk about this first. I don't see anything so special. So you've gathered some loyal humans. What makes this 'operation' of yours so special?"

"The humans." Yozak answered simply. "Revenge can be a powerful thing. Each of them has lost someone to Shou Shimeron's plot."

"So you have a few angry humans." Murata leaned forward. "I'm beginning to fear this whole 'operation' is simply an elaborate, if not over-indulgent, way of keeping Sir Belefield busy."

Sir Grier's glare was sharp. "Don't be stupid. Gwendal would never--"

"Gwendal is his brother--"

"I am not!" Yozak's fist cracked against the table. "Do you think, even if Gwendal allowed it, that I would permit something like that?"

Murata narrowed his eyes. "You tell me."
Yozak let out another sigh. "Look. Sage. Have you ever doubted my abilities? I believe we might be onto something here. Something that would make Kiddo's 'non-hostile' occupation of Shou Shimeron possible."

Murata rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. "Gwendal mentioned that?"

"He suspected it would be the only thing Kiddo would accept long before you two got back." Yozak's eyes regained a bit of their twinkle. "Shou Shimeron has been almost impenetrable by our spies for several reasons. First, the abundance of human stones makes it impossible for any pure-blooded demon to even get near the capital. Second, I'm only one person-- to properly observe so many would be impossible, even for myself. Third," He scooted even closer-- lowered his voice. "The bread-- the fungus-- it's rampant. Those who've returned-- It's nearly impossible not to eat any of the stuff. It's all there is. The people are mad-- a special kind of madness that only this thing can make. To do any sort of work there without being noticed one would have to blend in completely. Live and eat like the people there. They would have to think through the madness--"

"I'm stopping you there." Murata barely managed not to shout. "You can't. We've all seen what this thing can do-- and Sir Belefield-- how can you abuse his capture-- what they did to him-- for some kind of suicide mission--"

"It was Wolfram's idea," Yozak answered calmly. "And I wouldn't let him-- any of the men-- do anything I didn't think they were capable of walking away from."

"You know I have to tell Gwendal about this," Murata said through gritted teeth.

"And why is that?" Yozak met his gaze. "I'm good at what I do, Sage. Do I think that this is dangerous? I must. But, at the same time I think that some risk is necessary for any mission, especially one as important as this. Of course I think it would be easier if we just crushed the lot of them. Let the Captain and I go in there with drawn swords and send them all to death. Simpler, yes. But kiddo would never allow it. We both know it. That little king has got him thinking they're "friends". Kiddo will let him get away with murder so long as the little snake says he's sorry. But sorry isn't good enough for me, and I don't think it is for you or Gwendal either.

"I think this can work. It's dangerous and brilliant and we'll have to be very, very careful. Wolf's talked about what they did-- what he can remember. The way it seems to me, as long as you've only got a small dose you can think your way around it. Take a few bites of your dinner to keep them satisfied but still keep your head. The men out there-- they're loyal-- and more than that-- they want to keep their heads. If they don't, they're dead. That's enough motivation to keep anyone at their best. I can teach them to be quiet, to blend in and remember what they see, even if they don't think it's important at the time. Gisela is working on something to help if they do happen to take in too much. And Wolf," Yozak smiled, "Wolf is proof that if you keep your head you can survive anything." A pause. "He's been training with them, you know. He's their superior but he does every drill beside them. He's come a long way, Sage. My word aside, you should trust him, too."

Murata sighed. There was more going on here than he'd thought. "Fine. I won't tell Gwendal for now." Then he took another hard look at Yozak. "Besides this crazy plan-- there's nothing else that's happened with Sir Belefield? No reason for concern?"

Yozak leaned back into his seat. "Not a one."

********

Yuuri's entire body hummed with energy. He felt like he should scream-- hit something-- do
anything to take away from the feeling that he was going to explode if Wolfram didn't get here soon.

He must be going crazy. Yuuri couldn't even think straight anymore. The whole time he had been in the tub his mind had jumped hopelessly back and forth between fear and detailed scenarios in which Wolfram came back early-- finding Yuuri in his room-- naked.

And then Yuuri had been anxious and confused-- and Inappropriately Aroused in Wolfram's bedroom. He had taken care of it quickly-- It seemed like he had been half-hard for days. Thankfully one of Wolfram's drawers had supplied a clean handkerchief-- now wadded into a ball and stuffed into the right pocket of the only spare uniform pants Yuuri had managed to bring along. Hopefully Wolfram wouldn't notice it was missing.

After all, Wolfram's room didn't have a lot to miss. The only things Yuuri had found besides clothes were blank paper and a pile of letters. Most of them were from Greta-- but Yuuri had tried to keep himself from looking too hard. He had noticed, however, that this time there were no pictures of him.

But that was alright-- it made sense-- It wasn't like Wolfram had gone back to the castle for anything. And something like a picture... Wolfram probably wouldn't risk it in the mail even if he wanted to ask for it. It made sense. But Yuuri was still disappointed not to find any proof that Wolfram was as anxious to see him as Yuuri was to see Wolfram. Yuuri remembered the picture of himself and Wolfram he had brought with him-- safe in his clean jacket pocket.

It didn't help that Yozak was being infuriatingly vague. Yuuri had hoped that after he finished his bath he would have better luck-- especially now that Murata was taking his turn in the bath. Now it was just him and Yozak and Conrad. Yozak and Conrad were good friends-- and he had already told Conrad about his decision to... court... Wolfram. Yuuri hadn't talked to Murata about it yet, mostly because he had seemed to be in such a bad mood for most of the trip. But Yozak didn't seem like he was in a particularly bad mood and now that Murata was gone Yuuri didn't have to work so hard to hide his plans... And Yozak-- Yozak had spent so much time with Wolfram-- If anyone could give him advice now it would be him.

Conrad and Yozak were talking about the human soldiers. Yuuri knew he should listen-- pay attention-- but he just couldn't. He was no good to anyone like this.

"Yozak," Yuuri interrupted, drawing the gaze of both men. "How is Wolfram doing, really? I can't-- You keep avoiding it, which only makes me worry more. He's doing alright, isn't he?"

"He's doing alright, Your Majesty," Yozak answered smoothly. "I've been impressed, actually. Wolf's been less of a brat than I could have thought. He's making the best of a bad bit of luck, and the men probably trust him more than me because of it."

Yuuri blinked. He knew how Wolfram had been before-- with humans. Wolfram had been getting better but... even Yuuri hadn't expected him to get along so well with the human troops... Yuuri hadn't thought much about the operation out here at all, actually. But that wasn't what stuck out to him the most about what Yozak had said. "Wolf?" Yuuri asked. "You call him Wolf..."

Yuuri's mind began to race at full speed. Wolfram had been here... hurting... alone... Yozak had been here... to comfort him when Yuuri hadn't. To be close to Wolfram... do what Yuuri should have done. How close had Wolfram and Yozak become?

Yozak was quiet-- looking at him with a blank face for several terrifying seconds before breaking into a loud guffaw. Conrad gave him a penalizing glance, but had the decency to look relieved
himself.

Eventually Yozak regained control of his laughter, wiping tears from his eyes. "Don't worry, Your Majesty. You don't have any competition from me. Wolf's a fine thing for the eyes, I won't lie about that-- but he's too young for my taste." Twinkling eyes moved to Conrad. "And the Captain would probably skin me alive if I tried anything."

Conrad's smile had a dangerous edge. "You know me too well."

Yozak leaned toward his friend. "And I'd have thought you knew me better too, Captain." A wink.

Yuuri blinked. Were they flirting? He shook his head. Don't be stupid. Yuuri supposed he just had flirting on his mind-- thinking about Wolfram.

"Thanks for that, Yozak," Yuuri continued, "but I don't mean about the the troops... I mean about Wolfram himself... After I left... Does he hate me now?"

"Hate is a strong word, Kiddo," Yozak answered. "He certainly wasn't happy when you left, but he's cooled off since then. Given your track record of winning people over, I'm sure he'll come around. Just don't get carried away." He leaned forward. "But, Kiddo, Gwendal tells me you're here to take him back, and I wouldn't recommend that. Wolf's doing good here-- adjusting. And he's got Greta waiting for him-- he'll go back when he's ready." A pause. "He doesn't hate you."

Yuuri worried his lip. "But... I didn't mean to go-- I wanted to stay with him. And I-- I'm here to prove that-- that I want to stay with Wolfram."

"And I'm sure Wolfram will appreciate that," Yozak soothed. "But maybe after you do that you'll think twice about ordering him out of a place where people respect him, where they see him as a leader rather than a victim. It's why he kicked the Captain and Gwendal out after you left. They kept looking at him like he was broken."

Yuuri looked at Conrad, who had lowered his head.

"Wolf's a tough kid," Yozak continued. "He's holding his own here. Just think about what it's like for him before you drag him anywhere. Remember, if anything throws Wolf off his game it's you, Kiddo."

Yuuri swallowed. Nodded. Yozak really had gotten to know Wolfram. The way he talked about him... Yozak really cared. "I'll do my best... not to do anything wrong. I've made so many mistakes-- I just want to do everything I can to make things up to him."

Yozak narrowed his eyes, but nodded in return.

Conrad smiled at him. "I'm sure you'll do fine, Yuuri."

Yuuri worried his lip again. "How much longer until Wolfram comes back?"

Yozak sighed. "I can't say for sure. Soon, probably."

Yuuri frowned. "He's safe, right? I mean-- with all those men... He has Lucien with him too, right?"

Yozak nodded. "He's perfectly safe, and even if something did happen, Gisela is with them too-- just as a precaution."

"A precaution against what?" Conrad asked. "A simple training exercise wouldn't normally take the
medic from the camp."

Yuuri sat up in his seat.

"Don't worry, Captain," Yozak assured. "It's just because of Gwendal's orders. Wolf's not happy about it, but he's had to suffer a bit of over-caution out here. Thanks, of course, to his loving brothers." Yozak grinned at Conrad.

Conrad shook his head, smile on his lips. "Seems like you're just jealous I have such a cute little brother to look after."

"Wolf has enough brothers." Yozak answered sharply. "Still..." Yozak smiled. "He is very cute."

Conrad glared.

"Good to see you're having fun without me," Murata smirked, entering the room wearing a clean uniform of his own. His hair was still dripping. "No sign of Sir Belefield yet, Shibuya?"

"No." Yuuri groaned, putting his head on the table. "Not yet."

"I wouldn't get too down." Murata's voice held mischief. "I expect he'll be here any moment."

Yozak looked at Murata, then shook his head. "You saw them through the window you sneaky Sage."

Murata pouted. "Must you ruin my fun?"

Meanwhile Yuuri's heart had seemed to stop. Wolfram was here. What was he going to say-- What was he going to do? He needed more time! A hand slapped down on his back.

"Breathe, Kiddo." Yozak's voice seemed far away.

Yuuri nodded. Breathe. Breathing was good. He could do that. "Shouldn't we... Should we go and meet him?" Yuuri stood. "He's outside right? I should go see him."

"Hold on, Kiddo." Yozak's grip on his shoulder tightened. "Take it easy. The boys will tell them you're here--"

"--But," Yuuri interrupted. "Wolfram."

"Don't just jump out at him-- let him have a moment to digest--"

"You mean time to get angry?! Time to leave?!" Yuuri suddenly found himself convinced that if he didn't go out and see Wolfram right now he would miss his chance. That Wolfram would disappear.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty. I'm not going anywhere."

Yuuri froze. Turned. "Wolfram," he breathed. It was hard to believe his eyes.

It was Wolfram. He was dirty-- covered almost head to toe in mud, to be exact-- but it was Wolfram. Gisela and Lucien were standing behind him but it didn't matter. Everything but Wolfram seemed to fade away.

"Wolfram," Yuuri said again, loving the word on his tongue. "Wolfram, I'm so sorry..." His face was wet. When had he started to cry? "Wolfram..."
Fingers on his shoulder tightened. Keeping him in reality. Grounded. "Welcome back, Wolf," Yozak said as if the world wasn't spinning apart. "How'd it go?"

Wolfram stopped looking at him-- he was looking at Yozak instead. Yuuri wanted to scream.

"Great, actually." The edge of Wolfram's lips tilted up with pride. "We'll have quite the feast for our honored guests."

It was only then that Yuuri noticed how dark some of the dirt covering Wolfram's arms really was. Splashes elsewhere. Blood. "What..."

Only Yozak seemed to hear him. "We're a bit far from the nearest market, Your Majesty."

Yuuri nodded dumbly.

"Once I get cleaned up I'll start the reports," Wolfram continued. "Hector told me one of the tubs had been moved in here."

"In your room, actually. His Majesty and the Sage just finished. It should be all clear."

Wolfram nodded and turned toward the hall.

"I want the reports done by dinner. Everyone will be expected to attend."

"I wouldn't miss it." Wolfram answered, and was gone.

No.

This was all wrong.

"What a pleasant surprised, Your Majesty." Gisela smiled at him. "You'll have to forgive the cooking for the evening. Some of these boys had never fed themselves before, and it will take a few of them to get everything ready on time. We normally do a rolling dinner call."

"Don't be so modest, Gisela," Conrad answered. "If memory serves you're quite the blessing to have in the camp even when you can tear yourself away from putting us back together to put something together in the kitchen. I'm looking forward to seeing what these men can do under your charge."

Gisela blushed. "Sir Weller is being overly generous as usual. I'll just go and get started." She bowed slightly and left.

Lucien remained, looking out of place alone and so thoroughly covered in mud. Of the three Gisela seemed to be the only one who hadn't spent the day rolling in a swamp. "I'll just go clean up outside with the rest of them, then." He shifted nervously. "Thank you for coming, Your Majesty. He... Thank you." Then he hurried out.

Yuuri blinked

* * *

The entire room seemed cold. Empty. Even though Yuuri was surrounded by his friends. His body felt numb. The wooden chair was hard beneath him and the grain lines along the tabletop were crooked-- filled with tiny holes.
No one had even said anything.

Wrong. This was-- wrong. Wolfram had just left. He had hardly even looked at him. Hardly said a word.

Yuuri felt invisible. He hadn't done anything-- but it still felt like he had made a mistake. The others were talking. Words that didn't seem to matter. They were acting like nothing had even happened--

But nothing had even happened.

Wolfram had seemed fine. Wolfram didn't need him. It made Yuuri's insides twist and his throat go dry. No. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He needed Wolfram. This was all wrong. Wolfram was supposed to need him too!

Yuuri stood, drawing the attention of the three men sitting at the table. Some time must have past. Wolfram should be done with his bath.

Yuuri had to talk to him.

He took a deep breath. "I'm going to go talk to Wolfram."

Conrad stood. "Yuuri--"

"Don't," Murata interrupted. "Shibuya's made up his mind."

Conrad's hands went into fists at his sides. "Right."

"Right," Yuuri echoed and turned to go. But before he could, Yozak's voice reached his ears.

"Just remember to think, okay Kiddo?"

Yuuri nodded without turning. "I will."

It was only a few seconds until he was standing in front of Wolfram's door. This was it. He was here. Nothing he had planned mattered-- everything reasonable seemed to fly from his mind. Wolfram was on the other side of this door. After so long the moment was finally here. Wolfram would probably let Yuuri touch him-- kiss him-- but first they had to talk. Wolfram had to forgive him . Yuuri would have to have a meaningful and serious conversation-- Which would probably be impossible considering the fact that his body was reacting to the anticipation by creating an obvious tent in the front of his pants. This was all so wrong. Not how he planned it at all.

Yuuri tucked himself up-- less obvious this way-- but still there. He was doomed. There was no way there could be more potential for failure. This was rapidly becoming a hopeless situation-- and he hadn't even knocked yet! What was he going to do when Wolfram answered the door?

This was bad. He was making things worse before he even started. He had to do something!

Yuuri knocked.

And immediately had to devote all his courage and concentration into not running away.

"Come in." Wolfram's voice was clipped. The way it had always been when he was busy, or when he thought that Yuuri was being particularly stupid.

Yuuri reached for the doorknob. It was cold-- turned slowly. Pushed. Wolfram had his back to the
door-- sitting at the small desk. Yuuri stepped inside and closed the door.

"Wolfram..." Even to his own ears Yuuri's voice was soft. A question.

Wolfram's shoulders went tense, but he kept his back to him, kept writing. "My apologies, Your Majesty. Today's reports--"

"Don't," Yuuri snapped, panic cooling his veins. "Don't ever call me that again, Wolfram."

The scratching of Wolfram's quill continued. "Then." The word was ground through teeth. A heavy sigh. Wolfram's voice came back calmer, more even. "I'm busy, Yuuri. I have to finish this."

Yuuri held his ground. "I can wait."

A pause. "Fine." The scratching continued. Wolfram's hair was still wet and his shirt clung to his damp shoulders-- pale grey going transparent against his skin.

Yuuri took a deep breath and licked his lips. Okay. Wolfram was obviously upset with him, but he hadn't thrown him out. That was good at least.

Sounds from outside trickled in through the open windows. Men working. A voice that had to be Gisela's shouting out orders.

The scratching of Wolfram's quill paused-- dipped in new ink-- only to resume again. Scratching on paper.

Maybe when Wolfram finished Yuuri would be allowed to give him a reward. Just like before, only backwards. Wolfram would smile at him-- warm lips--

No. Now wasn't the time. Yuuri had to concentrate! He owed it to Wolfram. This time he couldn't mess up.

He wouldn't.

Wolfram's pen continued for a while longer. Yuuri took deep breaths and tried to be patient, basking in Wolfram's presence in the room. They had been separated for far too long. Yuuri didn't plan on letting Wolfram go away from him ever again.

Finally Wolfram stopped-- put down his pen. But he stayed where he was. Wouldn't look at him. "Yuuri... What are you doing here? Why-- did you come?"

Yuuri moved forward until he was standing just behind Wolfram's chair. Almost touching. "You," Yuuri managed. Licked his lips. "I came to see you-- to make sure you were alright--"

Yuuri was cut off as Wolfram stood abruptly, almost hitting him with the chair.

"Well, I'm fine," Wolfram growled. "You can go now." He tried to walk away-- toward the door--

"Wait. Wolfram, wait," Yuuri pleaded. "I came for you." He reached out to hold Wolfram's arm. Finally touching-- holding him in place. "Don't go."

Wolfram stopped. Facing away-- always avoiding his eyes.

"Wolfram..." Yuuri tried again, keeping a hold of his arm-- slowly walking around-- between Wolfram and the door-- finally facing him. Wolfram kept his eyes forward-- looking through him. "Why?" Yuuri asked, bringing his other hand up to touch Wolfram's cheek-- so soft, smooth--
"Why won't you look at me?"

"I am," Wolfram hissed, voice low. "This is getting inappropriate. You wouldn't want the others to talk."

Yuuri almost stepped back. "Wolfram, you still don't understand-- I don't care what they think! You're-- You're more important to me than what everyone else thinks. I... I'm sorry it took me so long." He tried to smile-- even though he had never been this kind of terrified, Yuuri tried to smile. Searching Wolfram's face for any sign of hope. "Wolfram--"

"Stop it." Wolfram closed his eyes. "Just stop, Yuuri."

"Why?" Yuuri breathed, letting his hand move to Wolfram's hair. They were standing so close. So blissfully close. Almost touching. Everywhere-- almost touching. Yuuri could smell him. He breathed deep-- filling his lungs with Wolfram's smell. That nameless force inside pulled him closer. Foreheads brushed.

Yuuri wanted. He wanted to kiss Wolfram so badly it hurt.

He took a deep breath and pulled away. Not yet. They still had more to talk about. If he let himself fall apart too soon he could ruin everything.

Wolfram had opened his eyes, looking at him. His expression cold-- closed.

Yuuri took his hand from Wolfram's hair-- brought it down to his own chest. And ripped the second button off his uniform. The thread cut into his fingers but the pain seemed far away.

Wolfram watched him with furrowed eyebrows.

"This," Yuuri started slowly, "is for you." He slid his hand down Wolfram's arm and pulled--maneuvering until he could drop the button into Wolfram's upturned palm.

Wolfram's eyes moved down and he closed his fist around the silver button. He was silent.

Yuuri took a shaking breath and continued. "It's a tradition... on Earth. Or really, just in Japan." He blushed. "When boys graduate from high school-- the last time they wear this uniform-- sometimes girls will ask for this." Yuuri watched Wolfram's face-- waiting for a reaction. "The second button is closest to the heart... I know it's not as good as your ring..."Yuuri touched it with his thumb as he spoke. It was safe on his first finger-- covering the scar. "But I just wanted to show you-- that I don't want anyone else to have this-- That it's yours now... My-- my heart." Yuuri's face felt like it was burning. "I guess it's silly-- but-- but it's true... That I-- you..."

Wolfram kept his eyes down-- focusing on his closed fist, but he had started to shake. As if he was suddenly very cold.

"Wolfram..." Yuuri's voice was full of concern. "I'm sorry." He lifted Wolfram's chin with a free hand, desperate to have Wolfram look at him. "Wolfram, I didn't mean to do things so wrong. I never meant to hurt you-- to let anything happen... I'll make it up to you. I promise I'll never-- I'm not going anywhere without you again."

Wolfram's eyes were wide and green-- beautiful and... and scared. "Yuuri... I--" Wolfram bit his lip.

"Don't!" Yuuri moved forward. He couldn't let Wolfram hurt his lip. It was too perfect. Too warm- -sliding against his own.
Wolfram's body was so hot against his. Touching. Touching everywhere at once. Yuuri held him so tight-- whimpered against Wolfram's lips. It had been too long. It was too good. Wolfram's lips moving against his. Hips touching, rubbing. Heat. Closer-- closer--

Yuuri cried out as his back slammed against the wall. Wolfram had him pinned by the shoulders at a distance. "More," Yuuri begged. "Please, Wolfram--"

"Stop it," Wolfram growled, not closer-- still too far away. "Damn it, Yuuri. Just stop it." His eyes had gone hard. "Don't do this again. Not now. Not this time."

"What?" Yuuri tried to catch his breath, blood running back to his confused brain. "What are you talking about?"

"You do this every time!" Wolfram's fingers dug into Yuuri's shoulders-- hurting him. "You left-- You feel guilty-- That's all this is-- It's all this ever is. It's just you feeling like you have to please everyone-- make everyone happy. Well not this time. I won't let you do this to me again--"

"Wolfram, no!" Yuuri gasped. "That's not what this is at all. I really lov--"

"SHUT UP!" Wolfram's eyes went wide-- darted to the window. He let go of Yuuri's shoulders and backed away. "Don't make it worse. I'm fine, Yuuri. I don't need your wimpy guilt making things-- I don't... I don't blame you, alright? I just-- I'm doing alright and you-- As soon as I convince you I'm fine you'll change your mind. Don't-- Just don't."

"Wolfram," Yuuri whimpered. "It's not-- I'm not like that..."

"Don't worry, Wimp." Wolfram made a sound like a chuckle but his face was pained. "I know you don't mean it. I'll be fine-- everything will be okay, just--"

"No!" Yuuri couldn't believe his ears. "You can't... I'm not doing this because I feel guilty, Wolfram! I swear I--"

"Stop it!" Wolfram's voice was raw. Hands coming up to cover his face. "Just go," he whispered. "Get out. I know you don't believe me now but soon..."

"Wolfram..." Yuuri reached for him. It hurt. He hurt and Wolfram hurt and everything had gone wrong. "Wolfram, please--"

"Stop saying my name!" Wolfram charged-- pushing him to the side-- dragging him toward the door. "Get out. Don't do this. Get out!"

The door slammed shut inches from Yuuri's face with Wolfram on the other side of it. Yuuri's head fell forward against hard wood.

Wrong.

How had everything gone so wrong?

*******

Wolfram could hardly breathe. He knew Yuuri hadn't left-- was just on the other side of the door. Wolfram moved back slowly, until his leg hit the edge of the bed. The he sat-- watching the line of light beneath the door-- the line of light interrupted by Yuuri's lingering feet.
Time seemed to stand still until Yuuri finally left-- allowing the tension to escape-- to let out held breath and collapse back onto his bed-- curl onto his side and wait for his pathetic shaking to stop.

Why now?

Wolfram covered his face with his hands. His forehead was wet. He thought it was sweat for a moment before remembering he had just gotten out of the bath. The tub would need to be emptied now. He had been so dirty-- spent the day covered in mud-- hiding his scent-- waiting.

But that didn't matter. It didn't matter how hard he had wanted-- worked-- how much he had gained. How he had convinced himself he could be strong-- learn to depend on himself. Only himself. It didn't matter now-- because just seeing Yuuri had ruined him.

Brought him back into the dark. Shaking-- alone-- weak.

Pathetic.

He had never learned. Life-- fate-- It had tried to show him-- teach him so many times but he had never listened. No matter how much he wanted-- loved anyone they never wanted him back. Never saw him the way he saw them. Over and over again. Mother and her men. Weller and his human father-- Julia and the war. Gwendal and Anissina -- politics. He was never good enough. No matter how many times-- years-- he tried-- that need inside was never returned. A fire that burned in his gut, never fully ash but stubborn, stupid, embers of false hope. Stepped on over and over again. Stubborn but never going out.


Family. They were supposed to love him-- obligation. That's all it ever was. He was their obligation. No matter how hard he tried--

Weak. He should only depend on himself. Don't search for things that never come. Idiot. Idiot.

Years alone. He had come so close to getting used to it. Alone. But then Marques-- Marques had made him believe-- and Wolfram had let him--

Wolfram punched the bed in a burst of energy before curling farther into himself-- hands covering his face again-- breath stale and hot. He had been so stupid. So fucking stupid.

Why couldn't he learn?

Why had he let himself fall for the wimp? The wimp that loved more than anyone Wolfram had ever known-- but loved everyone the same. Maybe if he could love Yuuri enough-- make Yuuri love him-- it wouldn't be like before-- pouring himself into another person who didn't even notice-- didn't care. But it had been worse. So much worse than anything before.

Hard wooden floor. Alone. Cold. Wood on his fingers no matter where he tried to hide. There were whispers in the darkness. Always watching him-- wanting him to break-- but he was already broken. He was already broken but he couldn't get out.

Why couldn't he ever learn? This pain-- over and over-- even Greta-- even his little princess-- she would never forgive him. Grow up-- love someone else-- leave-- die. So few years for his little one...

But then... Wolfram would die soon, too-- flesh aging-- dying all around him-- no better than a human. At least then it would be over. No more of this humiliation. This failure. And it wouldn't
matter once he had gotten his revenge-- watched them suffer.

He was nothing. He could never be anything. Weak. How could he have ever hoped to come out of this? To learn from Yozak-- be good at something. How could he have ever thought that he was more than this?

Stupid. Stupid thoughts. Not helping. Trapping him. Weak. He was so weak to even be thinking these things.

It was all Yuuri's fault. Making Wolfram love him. Only looking back at him long enough to break him.

Wolfram had tried so hard. To be better. To learn to stand alone. But he had fallen so far in love with the wimp he had lost himself completely.

And the wimp would only ever love him back from pity-- false kindness-- empty words. Yuuri had given him-- given him...

Wolfram sat up. Where had it gone? Panic. Blurred eyes searching-- hands running over sheets-- there.

Silver button.

Wolfram rolled it in his fingers-- watched it catch the harsh light of late-day sun. Silly earth tradition.

It had made him remember. Weller's button. How it felt-- finding Weller's severed arm. Yuuri gone completely in burnt wreckage. Pain. Despair. How blind he had been then. How much suffering to finally, finally catch Yuuri only to watch him cry for his brother. Watching in silence while Yuuri loved someone else more.

Fool. Wolfram felt the button biting into his clenched fist. Idiot fool.

He stood. Took a deep breath. Drowning in pointless thoughts like a lost child. That wasn't the way. It wasn't the way out of the dark. The way was only forward-- never back. He couldn't think about the one he was-- what he had lost-- done. The only thing there was the pain-- the darkness-- the sound of his nails on wood.

It was how Wolfram had made it this far-- by not thinking about the things he couldn't change. By making himself forget that he was anything other than himself-- the way he was in this moment. He could only think about what was to be done in order to move forward.

Not the past. Not what he had lost-- The only thing that had made him special. The flicker of warmth inside-- that power-- He would never wield it again--

Pain. Wolfram could remember-- when the magic tore its way out-- leaving him cold. Never again, never again--

Didn't matter. Not forward-- not the way out.

Wolfram took another deep breath and slipped the silver button into his pocket.

Yuuri.

It was hard to even think his name. Stupid, after what happened-- what he had given into... So
much of himself still wanted--

But he shouldn't. He had to stay focused. Yuuri would make him believe-- say words-- touch him until everything went away but helplessness... desire... warm.

And then Yuuri would run away. Go back to his normal. Yuuri would leave him shattered. Wolfram didn't want to be broken-- He wasn't sure he had the strength to put himself together again-- If he ever even had... Weak.

Wolfram knew he couldn't stop it. It was wrong. It was stupid and pathetic-- but Wolfram didn't want to stop it. If Yuuri pushed him far enough, he could only give in. He would give Yuuri what he wanted-- anything Yuuri wanted-- even if Wolfram didn't deserve it after what he'd done-- the bliss before the fall.

Wolfram had given into worse things after all. Darker things. Twisted desires.

He could still taste Lucien-- flesh on his teeth-- blood thick and hot-- filling him with power-- with fire-- hope--

No. Not the way forward.

Wolfram had to make them see he wasn't broken. He had to make Yozak believe he was well enough for the mission-- for what had to come next. But now Yuuri had come-- into his little world where he knew the rules.

Yuuri wouldn't follow the rules. He never did. Yuuri had gone for now-- but Yuuri was still feeling guilty-- had convinced himself he wanted Wolfram.

Yuuri would chase what he wanted-- He wouldn't stop until he had it.

Lies. Yuuri was lying even to himself. But Wolfram was too weak-- He still wanted so much when he shouldn't. When he didn't deserve it.

Seeing Yuuri again... Yuuri had looked-- made Wolfram feel-- Wolfram had forgotten how Yuuri could make him feel. He had forced himself to forget.

Wolfram had made himself forget a lot of things.

Yuuri.

How good touching Yuuri could make him feel. Even if Yuuri didn't really want him-- Wolfram had been able to close his eyes-- let himself believe.

Before...

Wolfram would have wanted Yuuri-- sometimes it seemed like Yuuri was all he ever wanted. A desire that swallowed and defined him-- made him no longer himself.

But now...

Wolfram didn't know who he was-- who he had been. It was empty. Cold inside.

Alone in the dark.

But Wolfram had gotten used to the dark. He knew what it was. How to survive.
But Yuuri...

Wolfram felt too much. Anger and hurt and want.

And need.

But Wolfram was sure... The only thing that seemed sure... He didn't want to need anyone anymore.

Or did he?

Wolfram put his hands over his face. Tried to breathe. Focus.

Why had Yuuri come? Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone?

What was he supposed to do now?

"I wonder if you know, Sir Belefield-- Wolfram-- the most effective way to kill a king?"

That voice.

That voice inside his mind-- they said he burned-- nothing left-- vile human bastard. Only thoughts.

Memories to haunt him. Keep him in the dark.

Still.

Wolfram had to do something-- make sure that if Yuuri pushed-- if Wolfram crumbled-- the only one hurting would be himself.

********

********

Medic Quarters
Ten Minutes Later

********

Gisela shook her head. "Everything is in perfect working order, Your Highness. I've told you this before-- there's no need--"

"To be absolutely sure?" Wolfram huffed. He was glaring down at her, cheeks pink and looking much less intimidating in the near-nude. "I want to be absolutely sure--"

"Well, I already am," Gisela snapped. "I have a lot to prepare--"

"I know," Wolfram interrupted. "For Yuuri. The dinner..." A sigh. He crossed his arms over his bare chest.

Gisela sighed too. As expected, His Majesty's visit had shaken Wolfram. He was trying so hard to seem unaffected, but this... Gisela didn't like where it was headed. She hadn't seen much of His Majesty or his attentions toward Wolfram, but if Wolfram was having her check for this sort of thing... Gisela just didn't think either of them were ready. "Wolfram, I've told you. You're not sick. There is no disease-- human or otherwise-- that I can detect. Whatever you have planned with His Majesty--"

"It's not--" Wolfram snapped, held himself back with an expression of mild horror. "It's not."
Gisela rolled her eyes. "Sir Belefield, do you think I'm stupid?"

The pink tinge to Wolfram's cheeks darkened-- spotting red. "No. Of course not. I--" His eyes unfocused. "Maybe I am..." He sat on her cot and put his head in his hands. "Don't tell Grier."

Gisela pursed her lips in thought. She stayed kneeling on the floor, facing him. Then she put a comforting hand on his knee. Wolfram didn't look at her-- he was too busy regulating his breathing. Trying so hard to keep himself together. "I won't tell anyone, Wolfram. His Majesty--" She licked her lips. "I know the kind of 'stupid' things love can make you do. Getting yourself checked is hardly the worst of them."

"And you're really sure?" He looked up at her, hair a bit wild from the sudden move. He reached for the tie holding his underwear in place. "I mean-- if you need to-- check everything, it's fine."

She bit her lip. Then giggled. "If I didn't know better I'd be worried you just wanted to--"

"Gisela!" Wolfram groaned, shaking his head. After a pause he looked up at her with a sad sort of smirk. "What would Lady Flurin say?"

Gisela hit him. "Oh, stop it." She looked at the floor and tried to will the blush from her cheeks. "You can't blame me, coming in here like the world was crumbling. As far as I know, His Majesty is only here for a visit-- You shouldn't worry too much."

Wolfram let out a heavy sigh. "I suppose."

Gisela clicked her tongue as she stood. "Stop worrying over nothing." She tossed Wolfram his trousers. "Get dressed, and make sure the boys don't ruin the food for me. His Grace wanted to speak to me before dinner."

"Right," Wolfram grumbled, stepping into his pants. "Blasted Sage. Probably came all this way just to stick his nose in places it doesn't belong." He finished dressing in silence, but lingered at the door. "Gisela..."

She stepped closer, brushing a bit of dust from his shoulder. Strange, he had always been shorter than her-- still was, but not by nearly so much. "You know I won't talk about that. It wasn't--"

"Thank you," Wolfram mumbled, before turning quickly and hurrying out. He closed the door softly behind him.

Gisela shook her head. They had all decided not to talk about That Night until they knew more. It had been Lucien's insistence at first, but after more thought they had all decided that if Gwendal found out what Wolfram had done their entire operation here would be in jeopardy. She would have to return to Shin Makoku... It could be years before the next time she could visit Caloria. If Flurin wasn't human it wouldn't be so...

But Flurin was human.

They had all had their reasons to want to stay.

* * *

The Sage was lingering at the table in the main room when Gisela found him, along with His Majesty, Sir Weller and Yozak. He stood when Gisela entered the room.

"Just the beautiful woman I was waiting for." He smiled.
"Have you seen Wolfram?" His Majesty asked quickly. "I went to his room... well, again... and he wasn't there."

Interesting. "Since His Grace asked to speak to me, Sir Belefield is taking over my duties outside for the moment."

His Majesty's face fell dramatically. "Oh."

"Don't worry, Shibuya." The Sage patted his friend on the back. "We won't be long. I'm sure Sir Weller and Grier have things it might be useful to hear." He added a flirtatious wink before walking over to take her by the arm. "Now, Gisela," he began as they started walking back to her quarters and medical office. "Sir Grier has told me some interesting things about your plans for the future, and it would be most helpful if you could fill me in on some of the details."

"Anything to help," she answered carefully, removing her arm from the Sage's grasp under the pretext of entering the narrow hallway. Once they reached the end of the hall she opened the door to her room and gestured for him to come inside. "Please have a seat."

The Sage entered the room and sat on the cot while Gisela took a seat in a nearby chair. "What exactly did you need clarification on?" she asked, crossing her legs.

The Sage's glasses caught the light. "Sir Grier has told me a bit about your plans for the future-- plans I'm surprised you would go along with given the risks."

Gisela narrowed her eyes. "Don't assume my support in anything, Your Grace."

"My apologies." He raised his hands in a defensive gesture. "I guess I still don't fully appreciate his... level of belief in all this. Playing with something you don't understand-- trusting lives to it. This business with using tooth of the wolf to infiltrate Shou Shimeron just seems--"

"Better than war." Gisela finished. "You see it too. The unrest-- even humans on our side. Shou Shimeron has played a dangerous game-- hurt too many to go unpunished. The people look to Shin Makoku for vengeance but we both know His Majesty will never agree to bloodshed. If we can solve this from the inside--"

"That is a big 'if.'" The Sage sighed. "Of course I can see the benefit of things going right, but we cannot ignore the consequences of things going wrong."

Gisela held her ground. "We won't know the consequences of anything unless we try something."

The Sage rubbed the bridge of his nose, beneath his glasses. "Alright."

Gisela raised an eyebrow. It was clear how much he hated not being in control of things. She could hear Anissina's voice clearly-- "men". It was all she could do to stifle another inappropriate laugh. The recent improvement to her personal life was clearly making her far too giddy to focus. She still had her latest reply half-finished on her desk--

"Gisela?" The Sage's voice took her from her thoughts.

"Yes," she answered quickly. "Is there something else?"

The Sage frowned. "Sir Grier mentioned that you had been working on something to help with the symptoms? I'm surprised to hear of it now. No doubt Lady Karbelnikoff had something to do with this."
Gisela shook her head slowly. "I haven't talked to her about it yet. All of this is still in the planning stages, really. Your visit has taken all of us by surprise."

"Sir Belefield most of all, I'd take it." The Sage leaned forward in his seat. "How is he, Gisela? Something is happening-- Gwendal is concerned. Why don't you just tell me? Save me the trouble of finding out what it is?"

She glared. "What makes you think there wouldn't be any reason for concern? After what they put him through--"

"I'm not talking about the usual recovery process for this kind of thing-- the torture. I know you have ways of dealing with that, but... tooth of the wolf-- the things it does to the mind--" The Sage paused. "Gwendal's not the only one worried, you know. I don't want to see anything happen to Sir Belefield either."

"None of us do." Gisela sighed. "He had trouble sleeping for a while-- but it's gotten better. It's almost back to normal but--"

"Trouble sleeping?" The Sage interrupted. "What kind of trouble?"

She licked her lips. "It's common for people... in his position to have nightmares--"

"If it were only that you would have said something before."

"Will you let me finish?" Gisela snapped. "I was going to tell you..." A pause. "Sleepwalking. He's always been an active sleeper-- but this... Everything he dreamed he acted out..." The Sage still didn't seem satisfied. She sighed. "We've had to use restraints."

"Ah," was the Sage's thoughtful response.

Gisela hoped solving this mystery would keep him too occupied to go searching for others. They were both silent for a long while and Gisela found herself wishing the Sage would just leave. Unfinished letters called to her-- and she had to relieve Wolfram of his cooking duties... Had Wolfram ever been in charge of meals? She shook her head. This visit was going to drive all of them mad.

It wasn't as if Gisela hadn't worried about Wolfram's waking dreams. It would be wonderful if the Sage knew something that could help them explain it. But the waking dreams had passed. The only reason they kept using the restraints now was Wolfram's own insistence. And more and more, Gisela was sure that the thing they were all really afraid of happening again... had nothing to do with the waking dreams.

"It makes sense," the Sage continued quietly. "It started after we left didn't it? Strong at first-- then less by the day."

Gisela sat up straight in shock. "Yes. How did you--"

"The thing that makes you mad-- hallucinate-- the way tooth of the wolf affects the mind-- it makes sense..." His voice trailed away, but a smile of accomplishment slowly twisted his features.

"You're not making sense," Gisela snapped. "Explain."

"Well." The Sage licked his lips, smile only growing. "Before we left, Wolfram's sleep was sound-- too still, almost. We've since figured that whoever had him was dosing him with tooth of the wolf-- driving him to desperation in hopes he would tell them what they wanted. Before I left... there must
have still been some of it in his system. It was what made him sleep so soundly-- He might have
still been hallucinating then, too, but knowing him he would have tried to hide it if he had...
Anyway," the Sage continued, "the way tooth of the wolf acts in the mind-- the way it makes
people hallucinate-- is by acting like something-- a chemical-- in the mind. It is because it is so
close to one of our natural brain chemicals that it is able to twist our reality so easily. If Wolfram
had been dosed with high levels of this chemical, his body would naturally try to compensate-- by
producing less on its own." A pause. "You still following?"

Gisela nodded. "I think so. Tooth of the wolf mimics something natural, so the body compensates
by creating less of the natural substance. But what does this have to do with the waking dreams?"

"I'm getting to that." The Sage leaned even closer. "If Wolfram's body stopped producing the
natural chemical, there would be an effect when tooth of the wolf finally made its way out of his
system. His body would now lack an important natural element. And so there would be a
withdrawal of sorts... The chemical that Wolfram's body stopped producing to protect itself from
tooth of the wolf is the same one that-- among other things-- keeps us still when we dream."

She blinked. It really did make sense. "So the waking dreams would decrease in intensity gradually
as his body started making that chemical naturally again."

The Sage nodded. "There is also no chance of a natural relapse. As long as tooth of the wolf is not
introduced to his system again, his 'waking dreams' should no longer trouble him." Another pause.
"I can only imagine the excitement Sir Belefield caused while suffering from such a bizarre
malady--"

"A few were injured, yes," Gisela answered quickly. "But nothing I couldn't handle. We didn't
know what it was... or if it would start again. Wolfram has been concerned he might hurt
someone."

The Sage leaned back on the cot. "Well you should tell him there's no reason to worry about that."
A sigh. "You should have said something to Gwendal--"

"Why? So he could take Wolfram back to the castle?" She shook her head. "Wolfram barely
trusted himself here, surrounded by armed men. Think about how he would feel back at the
castle."

"Greta," the Sage supplied, following another sigh. "Fine. I understand why you hid it. Gwendal
won't be happy you kept anything from him regarding Wolfram, but--"

"I have a feeling he'll be able to handle it," Gisela finished for him. "Now that there's no chance of
it happening again, there's no reason for Wolfram to have to leave."

"There is also less of a reason for him to stay..." The Sage crossed his arms.

Gisela sat up straight. "What do you mean? This-- What we're doing here has purpose--"

"I know," the Sage interrupted. "I know. The longer I'm here... I do think your ideas have merit,
Gisela, I really do. But I believe His Majesty's plans for Sir Belefield might be quite different from
his own."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Wolfram is doing well here-- the responsibility has been so good
for him!"

"I believe you," the Sage answered softly. "But I wouldn't put it past Shibuya to shake things up a
bit, would you?"
Gisela worried her lip. "No."

The Sage stood. "Thank you for speaking to me. Perhaps you should find some time to talk to Sir Belefield before dinner. Set his mind to rest about some things."

"I will," she managed as the Sage let himself out. "I'll do just that."

********

********

Yuuri still couldn't understand how it had gone so wrong. He had tried so hard-- He had listened-- He had told Wolfram what he wanted to hear-- what Yuuri had wanted to tell him...

They had even kissed.

Everything was supposed to be better after they kissed. Every way he had planned it-- imagined it-- It always got better after they kissed.

Yuuri only wanted things to be better. He only wanted Wolfram.

But it hadn't been enough. Wolfram hadn't believed him. It had hurt-- But he deserved it. For everything he had put Wolfram through.

Yuuri just had to think of a way to prove himself-- to make Wolfram believe how much he cared. How much Yuuri needed him. He had to make Wolfram see how serious he really was.

Yuuri fiddled with the hem of his jacket as he considered his options. Conrad and Yozak had continued talking around him-- as if he wasn't there. Not that he really was. Yuuri pouted. Still, they should appreciate the magnitude of what was going on around them-- Shouldn't they be helping him? Yuuri brought his hands to his head-- pulling hair-- groaned.

Then he lowered his head onto the wooden table.

"I think it's time we let kiddo have some ale. Hey, Kiddo, do you want some ale--"

"Yozak," Conrad growled.

"What?" Yuuri could hear Yozak pout. "Maybe I just wanted it..."

Yuuri lifted his head far enough from the table that it made a satisfying thump when he let it fall again. "Would ale help?"

"No," Conrad answered quickly. "Ale never helps."

"Speak for yourself--"

"Yozak," Conrad warned. A sigh. "Yuuri, do you want to talk about it?"

"No," Yuuri managed. Then, "Yes... Just... It's all so hard." He forced himself to look up, but left his chin resting on the table. "I just want Wolfram to be happy... I want to make him happy." He sat up-- looked at Conrad. Yuuri could feel tears beginning to well again. "Why won't he let me make him happy?"

Conrad only looked at him.

"I'm going to go and get that ale." Yozak stood. "Don't worry, Captain. Strictly for my personal
"use." Then he went to one of the cupboards.

Yuuri was too busy trying not to cry to pay much attention. "Conrad..." he asked again. Conrad had to know. Conrad just... knew the answers to thinks like this. Didn't he?

"Yuuri." Conrad's face was pained. "These things are difficult." He put his hand over Yuuri's. Squeezed. "Wolfram has always..." A pause. "I'm sure he just needs a little time."

Yuuri jumped when Yozak slammed a large bottle down on the table-- pulling his hand from Conrad's in the process.

Yozak fixed Yuuri with a hard stare as he sat. "Kiddo, what exactly do you expect?"

"Expect," Yuuri echoed in confusion. "I just... I want things to be better... like they were before. Only..." He could feel the heat spread along his cheeks. "Only better."

"Uh huh." Yozak was still looking at him-- but not his face-- lower.

Yuuri looked down. Oh. "The button? I gave it to him... It's an... Earth thing..."

"So things didn't just get a little rambunctious?" Yozak's eyebrow raised dangerously.

"No!" Yuuri all but screamed. "No. Nothing like that. No." Eyes immediately finding Conrad's. "We were just talking. Conrad-- I-- We were just talking."

Conrad smiled at him, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I know."

Yozak put a hand on Conrad's shoulder. "I'm sure you do, protective big brother that you are. Why don't you see how he's handling this? Wolf probably needs someone now, too."

"I should talk to him again!" Yuuri stood. "I should--"

"Yuuri," Conrad interrupted softly. "Not everything is going to happen at once. Yozak is right, I should go and talk to Wolfram. Just try to be patient, alright?"

Yuuri nodded and sat heavily back into his wooden chair. He didn't look up until he heard Conrad leave. The missing button on the front of his jacket wasn't all that obvious, really. Yuuri looked at his fingers. There were a few lines of peeling skin from where the thread had cut into him, but it hadn't drawn blood. He peeled it off.

"So," Yozak began, voice uncomfortably close to Yuuri's ear. "Ready to tell me what happened?"

Yuuri worried his lip for a while, tried uselessly to lessen the blush staining his face. "It's... I just want to make Wolfram happy. I thought this time... I could do something right."

Yozak sighed, exhale tinged with ale, then he sat back in his seat. "It's not that simple, Kiddo. Everyone knows how much Wolf wanted what you seem to be offering now--"

"Wanted?" Yuuri's head snapped up. "You mean he doesn't--"

"All I'm saying," Yozak continued, "is that things are more complicated now."

"I know that!" Yuuri licked his lips. "I made so many mistakes! I just need to prove to him how serious I am now! There must be something! Another custom? Something that he'll understand... I'll do whatever it takes--"
"Woah, slow down, Kiddo," Yozak interrupted. "You're going a mile a minute. Slow down. Now-- I know you've decided that you want Wolf in a special kind of way-- and that can make every second and hour-- but you have to stop and think about this. Wolfram went through a lot. More than he'll say..." Yozak paused. Made Yuuri look at him. "They did things to him that compromise what you want-- Don't push. I want Wolf to be happy. I want you to be happy, too-- but you have to remember where Wolfram came from. What he has suffered."

"I know that," Yuuri promised. "I hate that I left-- that I couldn't be there for him then. But I'm here now-- All I want is to be there for him. Everything he ever wanted from me..." Another blush.


A pause.

Yuuri could feel the blood drain from his cheeks. "You don't mean--"

"He'll deny it. He hasn't said as much-- But I've seen people come back from all sorts of things. There are patterns--"

"No," Yuuri breathed. "Why would they-- Oh god." He was going to be sick. Wolfram was so-- they had had him-- those men had had him for so long. Wolfram was so very pretty. They had had him for so long.

"Kiddo, look at me." Yozak put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "Gisela and I are the only ones who've talked about this-- I'm telling you-- because you need to know. For his sake. I sent Captain away for a reason. Understand?"

Yuuri nodded. It was all he could do. The rage inside-- He wanted to kill them again and again. He wanted justice.


Then he was being shaken. Hard. "Stop that!" Yozak's voice was rough. "None of that. No justice for now, okay, Kiddo?"

Yuuri blinked, dazed. The power was still there-- crackling beneath his skin. He tried to push it away. "You said..." Yuuri swallowed thickly. "You said there were patterns-- What do you think-- what do you think they did to him?"

"No way to tell for sure," Yozak answered. "Wolf might not really remember himself... but if he turned you down-- There have to be reasons besides his usual stubbornness." He gave Yuuri an encouraging smile. "He's wanted you too long to ever really give up. Trust me."

Yuuri nodded again. It seemed like the thing to do. "I trust you. I just... I don't know what I should do." He put his hands on Yozak's arms-- still holding his shoulders. "What should I do? I only want to make him happy-- I want to make things better. Can't you tell me--"

Yozak let go of Yuuri's shoulders-- pulled away. "Well, don't give up, I can tell you that much--"

"I won't!" Yuuri assured. "I can't..."

"Settle down, Kiddo." Yozak ruffled his hair. "I can't tell you anything if you don't let me."
"Right... okay." Yuuri looked up at Yozak. "I'll be quiet."

Yozak took a swig from the bottle of ale before continuing. "I'm not trying to get you angry or upset. I'm just telling you what I know to keep you from doing anything stupid-- none of us has time for that." A sigh. "Wolf's had it rough-- what with what happened-- but he's dealing as well as anyone could. He's too stubborn to let it keep him down forever. My advice is to take things slow. Let him know you're serious." He gave Yuuri another smile. "If you can do that I'm sure Wolf will come around."

Yuuri nodded. "But... isn't there something I can do now, to show him how much I've changed. That I can be there--"

Yozak raised a hand to stop him. "Just don't push. Show him slowly. Both of you will do better for it." Then he stood. "I'd better go and save Wolf from the Captain. I doubt he really wants to talk to anyone right now." He walked over and returned the ale to the cupboard. "Dinner should be ready soon. You can see Wolf again then." Yozak passed Yuuri on his way out, pausing to give his shoulder a final comforting squeeze.

Yuuri watched Yozak go. Then he fiddled with the buttonless hole on the front of his jacket. He let out a heavy sigh and looked at the ceiling.

Wolfram.

Why did everything have to be so hard?

* * *

Dinner, as it turned out, was not the best place to try to convince Wolfram again how much he had changed.

There was a surprising amount of food, considering how far from any town they were, and Yuuri found himself wondering how they managed to feed so many people every day. There was only one proper table, the same one they had been sitting at in the kitchen earlier, dragged outside. Yuuri sat at the head, with Murata and Conrad on either side of him. He had wanted to sit next to Wolfram, but Murata had explained several times how that would be Not Appropriate. And the last thing Yuuri wanted to do was make another mistake.

Wolfram, Yozak, Gisela and Lucien along with a human man named Hector and his son were able to fit along the wooden table. The other men sat on small stools or boxes and held their plates in their laps. Yuuri hated sitting at the table while other people had to sit on the floor, but he hated not being able to sit next to Wolfram even more. Wolfram was sitting on Murata's other side next to Yozak. Wolfram kept talking to Yozak-- not looking at him.

Why wasn't Wolfram looking at him? Yuuri could barely keep his eyes off of Wolfram. It just wasn't right! They had kissed. Just a few hours ago Yuuri had had Wolfram all to himself.

Now they were surrounded by so many people-- people that Yuuri didn't even really know but who already depended on him for so much. And Yuuri couldn't even think about that. He couldn't think about the things that Yozak had said or the way Conrad kept looking at him or anything other than the fact that he wasn't kissing Wolfram this very second. The sun was setting, casting everything in orange. Wolfram's hair shone like gold.

Yuuri wanted to touch it. He wanted to touch him.

But he couldn't. Not until he showed Wolfram how much he had changed. Not until he proved he
was finished making stupid mistakes.

There was just enough conversation at the table for it all to blend together into noise. Yuuri watched, transfixed, as Wolfram's fingers moved along his spork as he talked to Yozak-- looking away. All Yuuri could really see of his face was a peek of his ear through his hair and a sliver of his face. Wolfram's chin led into his neck--adam's apple-- then the collar of his shirt. He wasn't wearing a cravat. It was indecent, really-- far too tempting. That little hollow-- Yuuri wanted... he wanted to--

Murata kicked him under the table and glared.

Yuuri took a sip of his ale and tried to focus on his food. Gisela and the others had done a wonderful job, but Yuuri's stomach was too full of anxiety to eat more than a few bites. He was sitting so close to Wolfram, but he still felt far away. Yuuri still couldn't believe that Wolfram hadn't wanted him back-- He had kissed back. Even if it had only been for a few seconds, Wolfram had kissed him back.

If only Yuuri could convince Wolfram that things had changed-- that he had changed. Yuuri was sure he would get more kisses. He would be able to have Wolfram happy and close to him all the time.

He didn't want to have to wait. Yuuri had waited too long already.

It was terrible watching Wolfram avoid him-- look the other way. Almost like they had never been close. Yuuri had been close to Wolfram for so long now. Ever since he had first arrived in Shin Makoku. Ever since that first dinner.

The mistake that had started it all.

Yuuri stood.

No more mistakes.

People noticed him standing-- stopped talking. Everyone looked at him. Everyone except for Wolfram, who was studying his plate.

Yuuri took a breath. "Wolfram."

Finally. Green eyes on his.

"Stand up," Yuuri finished, surprised his voice hadn't broken. His heart was beating too fast.

Wolfram stood. Green eyes now focused somewhere over Yuuri's shoulder. It hurt, but it gave Yuuri the determination to finish it.

Before he could allow himself to think-- to hesitate-- Yuuri took those few steps. Until he was just close enough.

Then he raised his right hand and slapped Wolfram across his left cheek. Hard.

Silence.

The sound of it echoed in Yuuri's ears and his hand stung. Wolfram's cheek was red.

He wanted to lick it. Maybe now Wolfram would let him.
Yuuri grinned.

Wolfram seemed frozen-- his head still turned in the direction of the blow. Eyes wide with shock even in profile.

Lucien started to clap, wearing a wide smile of his own. Only Gisela joined him, though, and the humans were sharing confused glances.

After a few seconds, Murata stood, forcing Yuuri to step back out of his way. "Shibuya." A pause. "Are you sure?"

"Completely," Yuuri answered-- eyes still focused on Wolfram-- waiting for it to sink in-- for Wolfram to be happy.

"Then it is official," Murata continued. "King Shibuya Yuuri and Sir Wolfram von Belefield are now engaged." He smirked. "Again."

Lucien resumed his clapping and this time everyone joined in.

Conrad gave Yuuri a supportive smile.

Wolfram's cheeks were red and his eyes were still wide when he finally looked at Yuuri. He blinked.

Yuuri couldn't stay still any longer. He stepped closer-- grabbed Wolfram in a hug and squeezed. "I told you," he whispered through the clapping. "I told you I was sure."

Wolfram's breath was hot on Yuuri's neck-- the side of his face. Yuuri could feel Wolfram's hands come up to rest on his back, but the pressure was light. "Yuuri..."

Yuuri loosened his grip-- pulled back so he could look at Wolfram's face. Their heads were still close-- foreheads touching.

Even in front of everyone-- Yuuri wanted to kiss him.

Yuuri brought a hand to Wolfram's cheek instead. He couldn't stop smiling. "Wolfram... I'll try to do things right this time-- I promise."

Wolfram's eyes flashed to the side, looking away as he took a step back. No longer close enough to feel his heat.

Before Yuuri could say anything, Yozak slapped a hand on Wolfram's back-- smiled at them both. "Congratulations, Wolf... Kiddo."

Yuuri blushed.

Conrad put a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. Smiled again-- but something seemed off.

"Conrad--" Yuuri started.

"I'm happy for both of you," Conrad interrupted, removing his hand.

Yuuri blushed harder and nodded. "Thanks."

Wolfram had his back to him now, talking to Yozak and Gisela. Yuuri worried his lip as he watched-- missed their moment of closeness already.
As always, Conrad seemed to know just what he needed. "It's sudden." This time the smile reached his eyes. "Don't worry. Everything will work out in time."

Yuuri nodded again, just in time to notice Murata's approach.

"A bold move, Shibuya." The setting sun reflected off his glasses. "I'm sure you understand the consequences."

Yuuri furrowed his brows. "Wolfram and I--" His throat caught. "I only care about that.... That things can go back to how they were-- only better."

Murata shook his head, but there was a smile playing on the corners of his lips. "So young, Shibuya." A sigh. "But I wish you both happiness. Gwendal's face when he hears about this... It's a shame I'll have to miss that."

Conrad gave a nervous laugh as Yuur felt the blush drain from his face. Yuuri hadn't even thought about Gwendal. "You don't think he'll be upset, do you?"

"It might be a bit of a surprise," Conrad answered vaguely. "But once he sees the two of you happy he'll be as pleased as any of us."

Yuuri swallowed thickly. "Right." Then he looked over-- searching for Wolfram.

Most of the humans had crowded around Lucien and Yozak, asking questions about the demons' strange customs. They all seemed happy though, talking loudly about what it meant for them-- for Wolfram.

It only took a few seconds for Yuuri to realize he had lost sight of his new fiancé all together.

* * *

As soon as he could, Yuuri excused himself from the swarm of congratulations and went looking for Wolfram. The door to his bedroom was locked, and when Yuuri knocked Wolfram opened the door so quickly that Yuuri stepped back in shock. "Wolfram--"

"Are you out of your mind?" Wolfram hissed, face red. "How could you do this to me-- To yourself-- Are you--"

"Stop it," Yuuri begged-- in shock. "I-- I just want you to be happy."

"By making yourself miserable once this guilt wears off?" Wolfram stormed away, allowing Yuuri to follow him into the room-- close the door. "Do you even understand the political ramifications? It's not--"

"I don't care!" Yuuri shouted, making Wolfram turn to face him. "I just want to be with you, Wolfram. I don't care what happens as long as I can do that." He moved forward slowly-- needing to be closer-- to touch him-- to keep him from going away.


"Please," Yuuri tried again, voice close to broken. "I need you." Another step. Close enough to reach out and touch. "Wolfram... I'm sorry it took me so long to realize-- I don't want to waste any more time. I just want--"

Wolfram kissed him-- hard-- almost violent. Yuuri's back slammed into something but he didn't
care—they were touching—heat everywhere. *So good.* Lips—tongue—The taste of Wolfram—his smell—hot—burning—burning him inside.

Yuuri moaned into the kiss—clung to Wolfram with desperate fingers. More. Never stop.

Wolfram made a sound like a growl—pushed him closer—back hurting—front close—close together—heat. Rubbing.

Yuuri broke the kiss—cried out as he realized his hard cock was rubbing against Wolfram's thigh. So close. So close. God how he'd missed this. Yuuri kissed Wolfram again—hands in his hair—lips crushing together—catching teeth. Breath hard and hot. Shared in open mouths and desperate sounds.

Then Wolfram moved—*touched* him through trousers.

Yuuri almost came. Pulling Wolfram's hair.

"Is this what you want?" Wolfram's voice hissing in his ear—so close.

He was so close.


Wolfram bit his neck—allowing a stream of sounds to flow from Yuuri's lips—keening—sounds that hardly made sense. Wolfram was touching him. Wolfram was touching him.


"Please. Wolf—ahn—"

Wolfram held Yuuri's hips with his other hand. Kept him from rubbing—contact not nearly enough.

"How can you be sure this is what you want?" Wolfram's voice in his neck. "Do you even know what it means?"

"What?" Yuuri could hardly think. "What what means?" He tried to pull Wolfram by his hair—at least get more kissing—tried to move his hips—

Wolfram pushed him back against the wall—took his hand away—Yuuri whimpered.

Then Wolfram's hand was taking Yuuri's from his hair—pulling it down. And then—

Oh god.

He was touching *Wolfram.* He could feel it through the cloth—hard—hot—Yuuri moaned. "Wolfr—"

"This." Wolfram growled—eyes piercing Yuuri's—dark—dark with want. "What it means to be with me, Yuuri. I'm *not* a woman. You've never been with a woman. You'll always, *always,* wonder."

"What?" was all Yuuri could manage. He was touching Wolfram—his heart was going to beat out of his chest. He moved his fingers—watched Wolfram's face—beautiful face—green eyes dark. Wolfram closed his eyes when Yuuri squeezed. Yuuri caught his own lip in a sound—imagining
what it must feel like for him-- what he was making Wolfram feel.

Then Wolfram pulled away-- moved Yuuri’s hand-- back to him-- no longer close-- no longer touching.

"Wolfram--"

"You'll never know, Yuuri. You think want this now-- but you'll really always want something else--"

Yuuri grabbed his arm. "No!" He tried to catch his breath-- think. "I won't. How can you say that? How can you just assume--"

A pause.

"Have you?" Yuuri asked, voice barely a whisper. "Have you been with a woman?"

"What?" Wolfram sputtered. "No--"

"Then do you always wonder?" Yuuri stepped closer-- held Wolfram's arm.

Wolfram didn't look at him. He pulled his arm free and walked to the door. "Think about things, Yuuri. Then come back."

"What? Wolfram--"

"Please," Wolfram opened the door-- eyes to the ground. "Take some time."

Yuuri approached-- close enough to see the swell of Wolfram's lips. To smell him. Yuuri's chest ached. "Is that what you want?"

Wolfram looked back at him. Eyes so green-- clear. "Yes."

Yuuri closed his eyes. Nodded. "Okay."

It took a few moments for Yuuri to convince himself to leave. His blood was still hot, and Wolfram was so close. But eventually Yuuri found himself alone in the narrow hallway.

Everything was such a blur-- of heat-- of wanting. But Wolfram wanted more time-- made Yuuri go away for now, but not forever.

It was something.

Yuuri crossed his arms over his chest. Shivered. Then why was he was more scared than he had ever been?

********

********
Whispers from the Rye: Chapter 3

********
********
A little cottage in Eastern Caloria
Three hours later

********

Wolfram took a breath before letting his head sink beneath the surface of the water. There was barely enough room in the small metal tub, but he managed to submerge himself completely, knees pressed against his chest and arms curled around his legs.

Water rushed into his ears-- filling sound with watery echoes that rushed with the beating of his heart. The water was cold-- contact with his own skin the only source of comfort-- of warm.

Wolfram focused on his heartbeat. Steady pulse. His mind stayed far away-- physical sensation the only remnant of himself.

The water was cold. His body was warm.

But then it was time to breathe.

Wolfram raised his head to take in air-- kept his eyes closed. Cold air on his face. He could feel the thoughts-- fears-- waiting to swallow him.

Why had Yuuri come?

Everything had been so simple before. Wolfram had known what was needed-- what he had to do in order to move forward. He had forced everything else aside.

But now-- like being lost all over again-- trapped-- like everything he had gained in the past two months had slipped away in an instant.

Yuuri had come. Yuuri had proposed to him again.

Stupid infuriating wimp.

After all the times he had complained-- after all the words Wolfram couldn't forget-- Now the wimp had done it to them both on purpose.

It was enough to make him want to scream-- to shake some sense into his idiot wimp--

But in order to do that Wolfram would have to touch him. Admit to himself how much he still wanted to touch him.

It had been so easy to push Yuuri back against the wall-- Yuuri had squirmed like he had wanted it. Too easy to take what was offered.

Because now Yuuri thought he wanted him. What Wolfram had wanted for so long-- a dream amidst the nightmare of his reality. Bliss to freshen the sting.

There was nothing he could do. Wolfram still wanted Yuuri. He had wanted Yuuri for so long. Slept beside him for years-- hard and aching and unable to to touch. He had memorized the lines of
Yuuri's face-- the taste of his come-- the sound of caught-breath against his neck.

Wolfram had long since forgotten the number of times he had lost himself to that knowledge. To the feeling of his own hands on flesh. An imagined solace.

But now Yuuri had changed his mind-- made everything seem so easy.

But nothing was ever easy.

Wolfram wasn't supposed to ever have what he wanted. What would be left of him if he did?

And even that thought couldn't change it-- How much Wolfram wanted.

The want that ruined him over and over. Stupid, sentimental, fool.

Wolfram hugged his knees-- felt the pleasant burn of use in his limbs. The fighting had been good. Wolfram had never been so thankful for human tradition.

After his confrontation with the wimp Wolfram had returned to the field to make another appearance among the men. Luckily they hadn't noticed, or had at least refrained from commenting on his recent absence. They had been too busy planning something else.

Hector had given Wolfram a wide grin as soon as he approached, crossing through a circle of conversation to slap him heartily on the back. "Congratulations, Sir!" The scent of Grier's ale was heavy on his breath. "I've never seen stranger customs than what you demons come up with. If I'd have slapped my wife like that I don't think she'd have been nearly so keen on marrying me." A laugh.

Wolfram managed an awkward smile. Hector's wife and daughters had died from Shou Shimeron's bread when the first outbreak had hit Southern Habalouge. He and his son Erec had been some of the first humans to believe Shin Makoku's claims about the "plague".

Hector continued, "The boys and I were thinking-- this being a cause for celebration and all-- that we should treat you and His Majesty to a bit of human culture. What do you say?"

Wolfram paused, taking note of the smiles and glances from the other men as they pretended not to be hanging on Hector's every word.

"What do you suggest?" Wolfram asked carefully.

Hector laughed. "The moon is full tonight-- there'll still be plenty of light once the sun sets. Happy times shouldn't go without a bit of sport."

Wolfram arched a brow. "A hastilude?" Mock battles for celebration had been a part of older demon culture as well, but had fallen out of favor as they became more popular with humans. Wolfram had always found the separatist movements after the fall of Gael to be a tad excessive.

Hector blinked at him. Then smiled. "To use a fancier word."

Wolfram sighed and shook his head. "We don't have nearly enough horses--"

"No, no," Hector interrupted. "Not with horses. The men are itching for a bit of swordplay-- We have the wooden ones for training already. I'm sure we can give that Maou of yours a show." Then Hector took a step closer, lowered his voice. "And Sir Weller-- To see him fight... It would be an honor."
Wolfram felt his muscles tense. Of course. It would all be about Weller.

"Grier would be better to ask about that." Wolfram nodded politely and took a step away, intending to remove himself from the conversation entirely.

His retreat was interrupted by Lucien's approach. "Congratulations, Sir." He colored. "Wolfram, Sir."

Wolfram sighed and crossed his arms. "You're as bad as Weller with the wimp." Wolfram did his best to avoid looking at Lucien directly. He always did these days.

*Taste him.*

Lucien continued, "Sorry-- I-- I assume Hector filled you in on the plan? What do you think?"

Wolfram caught a glimpse of Yuuri. He was talking to Weller, but obviously scanning the crowd... "Alright," he answered quickly. Licked his lips. "How do you want to do this?"

Eventually they had decided on a two team melee with Wolfram and Lucien each commanding an even number of the men. Not that it really mattered in combat this close. They would all be fighting for themselves.

Yozak, Weller, and Gisela were positioned on the sidelines-- watching to see when blunt wood connected with flesh-- making sure everyone was honest in the game. Any solid blow would disqualify a soldier. The team with the last man standing won.

Yuuri and the Sage were given seats on one side of the field to watch. Wolfram knew that Yuuri wanted to talk to him-- kept *looking* at him-- but Wolfram had kept himself occupied elsewhere until it was time to begin.

This was good. It was something to focus on. Something to lose himself in.

In practiced motions. In muscle and anger and *fight*.

It started with a shout-- springing forward to throw his shoulder against the man directly across-- unexpected-- a quick twist of the wrist and his wooden sword struck the man in the side. On to the next.

Why had Yuuri come?


*Wimp.*

Two more down. Hector fighting at his side-- bested by Lucien. Now another to the left. Dodge. Counter. Strike.

How dare Yuuri do this to him? Act like everything could be fine. Make *him* into the person holding them back.

*Wimp.*


Lungs full. Heart thrumming. World so full of movement.
Wolfram lost track of how many he hit.

Of course it had come down to himself and Lucien in the end. The only two who had held a sword for so many years. The only two with a proper demon military training.

It was the only time he really felt Yuuri's eyes on him. The final moments when the adrenaline of battle focused on a single player. His muscles sang. Tight with power.

Wolfram's sword connected with Lucien's side. A bitter victory.

If Lucien had used his fire he would have won.

But even his small triumph was just an opening act for Weller and Grier.

Wolfram had to relinquish his position on the field-- go and sit in a chair set up on Yuuri's other side. Avoid the wimp's eyes as sweat cooled on his skin.

"Good show, Sir Belefield," the Sage smirked.

Wolfram managed a nod.

"Wolfram," Yuuri tried. "I--"

"Not now," he hissed.

Yuuri was pouting. Wolfram could tell without even looking. He gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles ached.

Weller and Grier had decided against using the practice swords. They had fought each other enough times to know when to pull a blow, and the men only seemed all the more impressed for it.

Wolfram shifted in his seat-- crossed his arm over his chest. Typical.

There was a hush when Weller and Grier raised their swords-- practiced positions. Ten paces apart.

Moonlight flashed along the back of Gisela's pale hand as she brought down her arm. Begin.

As always, Weller with a sword in his hand was art. With Grier-- A dance.

There were no cheers. No calls from the sidelines. Reverence for the skill. Awe at the grace of motion-- the back and the fourth. Yozak made Weller work for it. A song of clashing steel. Grunts of exertion echoed across the field.

All of them watched in rapt attention. Even Yuuri.

But really, Yuuri had always watched Weller with such admiration-- whether the wimp realized it or not.

Wolfram narrowed his eyes. Watched Yuuri watching Weller. Was that all he was? Weller's opening act.

Wolfram knew-- hated-- that even this-- whatever happiness lay beneath his anguish-- was nothing more than a result of Weller's self-restraint. He could have taken Yuuri from him long ago.

Weller had wanted Yuuri before Wolfram had known him-- before Yuuri was born.
But Yuuri was not Susannah Julia.

That reality... perhaps a part of why Weller had kept his distance. That and Weller had seen-- seen Wolfram breaking-- falling in love with the wimp. Weller was too fucking noble for his own good.

The only way Weller could hurt him was if Yuuri wanted him-- If Yuuri asked-- If Yuuri pushed.

The way Yuuri was pushing Wolfram now.

Wolfram gritted his teeth. Watched Yuuri.

Wolfram wouldn't let him. He wouldn't let Yuuri stop wanting him for a moment.

He wouldn't lose Yuuri now.

It was then that Wolfram had made his decision. He couldn't afford to wait-- to take any chances. If he did, he risked losing everything.

Missing his chance.

Even if Yuuri didn't really know what he was doing-- even if it was only physical-- Yuuri wanted him now.

Or at least thought he did. Either way, it didn't matter-- Wolfram had to move forward. He had to act.

It was the only thing to do.

The water had only gotten colder as Wolfram sat-- curled in on himself in the metal washtub.

After Weller's victory most of the men had gone to bed or the bottle. Wolfram had pulled Erec aside and had the boy refill the tub. The young human had always looked up to him, and Wolfram hated giving him a servant's task, but it had to be done. Wolfram had needed time to get Yozak on his own.

It had already been decided that due to the arrival of their honored guests Wolfram would be sharing Yozak's tent. Giving up his room for the Maou, while the Sage slept on the small cot in Gisela's improvised infirmary.

Yuuri's rash proposal hadn't changed the sleeping arrangements. Now that Yuuri had made it known that he planned to take their engagement seriously there was no way his brothers would willingly let him share Yuuri's bed. Weller's personal feelings aside, if word ever got back to Gwendal...

That could be dealt with later. At any rate, without Yozak's help Wolfram knew he wouldn't be able to put his plan into action.

It had been surprisingly easy to get Yozak alone. The spy had been sending Wolfram significant glances since the proposal. As soon as Yuuri had gone to congratulate Weller, Yozak had inclined his head toward the empty cottage.

After the roar of excitement following Weller's victory the small kitchen only seemed more hollow. Yozak sat in one of the chairs and looked at Wolfram expectantly. Wolfram crossed his arms and leaned against the table, doing his best to control the sudden fluttering of his nerves.

"I want you to distract Weller tonight." Wolfram could feel the blush rising in his cheeks, but he
didn't look away. Didn't show weakness.

After an almost inappropriate pause Yozak raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Wolfram didn't trust his voice. A nod.

Yozak let out a heavy sigh. Watched him-- eyes searching Wolfram's face.

Wolfram couldn't take it. "Please--" he started. Then took a breath to calm his voice. "I... I've waited long enough."

Yozak sighed again. Shook his head. "Gwendal won't be happy about this, little Wolf."

Wolfram stood up straighter. Looked down at Grier. "Brother won't know unless someone tells him."

Yozak chuckled darkly. "I imagine he won't." Then he stood-- put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder.

Wolfram's heart raced. Yozak had agreed. He hadn't expected-- there hadn't really been a reason for him to. Still-- "Thank you," Wolfram managed.

Yozak dropped his hand from Wolfram's shoulder, walked to the cupboard to retrieve his ale. "I'm not doing it for you."

"What?"

But the question had been lost to the sound of approaching footsteps.

Yozak had crossed the room-- pressed something into his hand-- before the others had entered the tiny kitchen.

Wolfram could hardly remember leaving. Too busy blushing-- trying to hide the bottle of cooking oil-- rushing from the room.

It was still sitting on the nightstand.

Another step.

Wolfram took a deep breath and stood. He had spent too much time in the bath already. He shivered and stepped from the tub, drying himself as quickly as he could before draping the cloth around his waist. The last time he'd seen a mirror was their trip to see Flurin at Caloria's capital. He hadn't looked too different then but still... What if Yuuri didn't--

Wolfram shook his head.

The glass bottle caught the light of the flickering oil lamp. Wolfram swallowed thickly. He hadn't really done this before. As much as he blamed himself for the incident with Marques, they hadn't really--

He hadn't really done this before. Sure he had Shinou's implanted memories-- but for the most part Wolfram had forced himself to forget. He had experimented on his own a few times... in his Seventies... but even then-- it had been so much easier not to bother. Using oil... finding the place inside... it was more awkward and had involved more clean up than was really worth it.

But Yuuri... Wolfram didn't even know how much Yuuri knew about this kind of thing. He had
been so against it for so long. The wimp had probably only ever imagined being with a woman.

He couldn't risk hurting Yuuri. No matter how much Wolfram wanted to just feel him. Take what had been withheld for far too long. Make sure he would be Yuuri's first-- something no one else could ever have. Wolfram had wanted Yuuri for so long. To feel him-- to own him. He just wanted to push inside and take.

But he couldn't.

What if he wasn't careful enough? He couldn't risk it-- couldn't risk Yuuri hurting-- hating it-- changing his mind. Yuuri had probably only ever imagined being with a woman... which meant that Wolfram had to be the one to...

He shivered. Sat on the bed. The glass bottle twinkled at him from the nightstand.

Yuuri probably didn't know anything about being with another man. He would expect... The wimp probably didn't even know how things worked. What if that was part of the reason he was was able to convince himself he wanted Wolfram in the first place? Yuuri might not even know... What if he was disgusted... Wolfram had been careful in the bath but still--

He reached for the bottle. Cool glass.

It wouldn't hurt to prepare beforehand. Save them both from any awkwardness later on.

It wasn't as if the wimp would have any idea what he was doing. This was the only way forward.

Wolfram had no other choice.

********

Yuuri was sure he was about to lose his mind. It had been almost an hour since he'd seen Wolfram. What if Wolfram had left? What if Yuuri really had done something horribly wrong and Wolfram had left?

He hadn't meant to do anything wrong. Yuuri was only trying to do things right.

What if Wolfram had left?

Conrad and Yozak were giving him worried looks. They were trying to pretend like they were having a normal conversation-- but Yuuri could tell. Something was going on.

Yuuri took a bite of his biscuit. Chewed slowly.

Wolfram had said they would talk later. Wolfram had said. He wouldn't just leave. Yuuri was just driving himself crazy for no reason. Wolfram had just wanted to clean up after his tournament. He had to calm down. Conrad, Yozak-- everyone had told him as much. He had to just calm down.

For some reason things had been a little easier before Murata went off to bed, leaving Yuuri alone with Conrad and Yozak. They were best friends, the two of them. They probably had all sorts of things they wanted to talk about-- without him here. There was just--something -- that made Yuuri oddly uncomfortable to be the third person sitting at the table.

It didn't help that Wolfram was probably naked. Bathing. With water--

"Yuuri?"
Yuuri jumped-- missed the chair coming back down-- crashed to the floor. He stood as quickly as he could. "Wolfram..."

"My apologies for taking so long." The corner of Wolfram's mouth twitched up.

Yuuri blushed. He should say something-- but Wolfram was right there, smirking at him. Looking perfect and composed in a white shirt buttoned up to the collar and plain grey pants. Every fold was military-- crisp-- and all Yuuri wanted to do was touch him. Break that perfect composure and make Wolfram feel as needy and terrified as he was.

Wolfram's hair was ruffled-- half dry-- damp where it touched his neck and ears. Yuuri could imagine the water beading, slipping down skin-- Licking it off.

Yuuri swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. "I... I mean... It's fine."

Yozak snorted. "Show Kiddo to his room, already. It's late."

Wolfram nodded sharply. "Right." Then he turned on his heel and headed back the way he had come.

Yuuri watched him go. Blinked. It wasn't fair that he wasn't allowed to sleep with Wolfram-- Wolfram always slept with him when they had been engaged before-- though not slept with him-- but now everyone knew what Yuuri wanted-- Oh-- Maybe it did make sense that the others didn't want them to sleep in the same room.

But...

But Yuuri still didn't like it. He was supposed to be king, after all. Why did everyone else always get to tell him what to do?

Behind him, someone cleared his throat. Yozak.

Oh.

Yuuri turned to give Yozak and Conrad an awkward smile. "Well-- goodnight."

Conrad made a move to stand but Yozak put a hand on his shoulder. "The kiddos won't miss you for a minute or two, Captain." Then he took a swig of his drink. "Time's much better spent saving me from facing the bottom of this bottle all alone." Yozak winked.

It looked like Conrad was going to protest and so Yuuri took the opportunity to slip from the room. Even if it was only for a minute or two, time alone with Wolfram was... Time alone with Wolfram.

The narrow hallway was dark, a flickering slash of light from the half-open door to Wolfram's room the only thing marking his path. Yuuri could feel his heartbeat in his ears.

He licked his lips as he pushed open the door the rest of the way. The hinge creaked, making him start.

"You're on edge tonight, Yuuri. Something on your mind?" Wolfram was sitting on the bed, smirking at him again with one eyebrow arched.

Yuuri was sure there was one less button done up on Wolfram's white shirt than before. He swallowed. "Um..."

Then Wolfram stood. "Close the door already, Wimp."
Yuuri obeyed at once, but it still didn't keep him from asking, "Wolfram... what--?"

"We're not supposed to be alone, you know. It's hardly proper." Wolfram stepped closer, eyes never leaving Yuuri's face.

Yuuri licked his lips again, mouth suddenly dry as blood rushed toward his groin. "Oh," he managed. Wolfram looked so good. Yuuri could hardly keep himself still-- keep from pouncing. Because if he started... Yuuri wasn't sure he would be able to stop touching Wolfram even if Conrad and Yozak came in.

But as much as he wanted... Yuuri couldn't stand the thought of going too fast-- making a mistake and ruining things before they even really started.

Wolfram kept coming closer though, kept looking at him.

He stopped just in front of Yuuri.

"Wolfram..." Yuuri couldn't help himself-- reached forward to touch Wolfram's cheek. Skin cool, damp from the bath.

Wolfram leaned into his palm and Yuuri's heart soared. He grinned-- pulled Wolfram closer-- foreheads touching. Feeling the pull for more but not quite giving in. Eyes closed. Feeling the good. The close.

"I missed you so much, Wolfram." Yuuri's hand slid back-- tightened in half-wet hair. "I'm so sorry--"

"Wimp," Wolfram interrupted-- moved closer-- a hand on Yuuri's waist-- thumb on his hip-- tiny circles.

Yuuri's breath caught-- opened his eyes. Wolfram's eyes were so green. "I want..." he blushed. I want to kiss you. "You said we're not supposed to be alone and what if Conrad and--"

"I took care of it." Wolfram's grip tightened-- pulling Yuuri in.

And Yuuri followed-- let himself go-- just enough-- just enough that he kissed the very corner of Wolfram's lips. Soft skin. Pressing.

Wolfram turned his head to kiss him fully-- Yuuri's top lip trapped between Wolfram's. Eyes closed. Feeling everything.

Yuuri was sure he was shaking-- steadying himself by putting his other hand on Wolfram's waist-- shifted-- moving his attention from Wolfram's bottom lip to the top. Soft touching-- slow-- heat rising-- building inside. Wolfram's tongue slid along Yuuri's bottom lip. Whimpering. Open mouths. Sloppy-- Desperate--

More.

Yuuri gripped him tighter. Needing more of him. He was so scared. Scared of doing anything other than kiss Wolfram for the rest of his life.

********

********

Yuuri had never kissed him like this before. Never touched him like he was afraid Wolfram would
fall apart in his grasp. Slow. Careful.

Terrifying.

How much he needed it. How every press of lips-- the gap between the next was almost unbearable. Each time could be the last-- before Yuuri realized. Remembered that he didn't really want him.

Wolfram had to do everything he could-- hold Yuuri closer-- keep him from going away. Keep Yuuri from noticing that he was starting to shake. That he would break if Yuuri stopped kissing him-- if he left.

So he kissed Yuuri harder-- held him closer-- tight-- tried to memorize the moment. Wolfram drowned himself in every sound and motion-- trying to learn what Yuuri liked-- be what Yuuri wanted.

But Yuuri never tried to take things further-- almost frozen in place. One hand on Wolfram's hip and the other tangled in his hair.

And so Wolfram had to push-- pull Yuuri's hips closer-- press against him. Groins met. Hard on hard-- and Yuuri made a wonderful noise-- breaking the kiss to cling to him and whimper while Wolfram kissed his neck. Yuuri's hand on his waist moved down-- gripping Wolfram's behind through his trousers while he rutted against him-- fingers pressing against flesh-- squeezing.

Wolfram could feel his face get hot. Forced himself to stay calm. No one had ever-- he had never let himself be handled like that-- but this was Yuuri-- Yuuri wanted to do it-- seemed to like it-- and it was good.

So Wolfram returned the favor-- feeling Yuuri squirm against him. Captured his lips in a kiss. Yuuri was so eager-- it made Wolfram feel warm-- safe-- too hot-- too many clothes.

Wolfram set to work on the buttons of Yuuri's jacket-- had to push him back in order to make space between them. Yuuri clung to him where he could-- hips-- leaning forward for desperate kisses. Jacket buttons done-- Wolfram pulled the undershirt from Yuuri's waist and let the tips of his fingers have their first taste of the soft skin of Yuuri's stomach. More buttons. Smaller this time. Going up Yuuri's front. Kissing-- fumbling-- finished.


"Wolf..." Yuuri shuddered as Wolfram's fingers trailed down the path of skin where his shirt and jacket parted. Licked his lips.

They were still standing by the door.

Wolfram let his fingers slide beneath Yuuri's belt-- tugging him forward-- walking back-- more kissing-- Yuuri pulling at his shoulders-- clinging to him-- until they reached the bed. A small cry of surprise when Wolfram turned and used the force to toss Yuuri onto his back on the mattress.

Dark eyes blinking up at him. Fear.

Wolfram rushed to kiss it away. Knee between Yuuri's legs-- leaning over him. Kissing. Yuuri's hands pulling him down-- desperate for more contact.

Like the first time Yuuri really kissed him. On the bed-- seconds of bliss before he realized
himself—kneed Wolfram in the groin and panicked. Back when Wolfram hadn't really dared to hope.

Wolfram stopped kissing him again to look—leaned back. He needed to see Yuuri cling to him—look at him like he was—try desperately to pull him back. Wolfram drank in the sight.

Yuuri's shirt and jacket were twisted—exposing skin—blush—shadows in the flickering lamplight. Wolfram used both hands—pushed fabric away—felt Yuuri's breathing. His fluttering heart. Yuuri closed his eyes—hiding shame—shallow breaths.

Wolfram finally touched skin.

A taste of what he had wanted for so long. Removing his shirt completely—fingers moving against flesh. Hard muscles hidden beneath soft. Wolfram's hands looked pale—so pale—even against Yuuri's chest. Hard nipple—pinched lightly between fingers—a high sound—then his right hand moved down—started on Yuuri's belt.


"You're wet," Yuuri breathed. Traced the head of Wolfram's cock with the tip of his finger. Sensation too light through cloth.

Wolfram blinked. Torn between Yuuri's impossible—didn't he know what he was saying—and—"Wimp."

Yuuri smiled up at him.

It was too much. Wolfram had to lean forward—kiss him to escape unknown scrutiny. One hand—not-shaking—trying to undo the buttons of Yuuri's stupid Earth pants—Yuuri's palm against him—distracting—pressing.

Wolfram growled in triumph—pulled—dragged Yuuri's pants and underwear down all the way—before backing off the bed entirely, pulling Yuuri's shoes off with a growl. Yuuri used both hands to cover himself—watching with wide eyes as Wolfram undid his own pants—stepped out—long shirt draping over him—a barrier.

But Wolfram was back on the bed before he realized it. Drawn in by the impossible need to be closer—to touch—drunk on Yuuri's mouth—wet kisses.

_Gods._ He had wanted this forever.

To have Yuuri like this—_His._ To hold and to take.

Legs tangled together. Cocks touching. Wet. Rubbing. Knowing that Yuuri was this hard for him. Kisses and sounds of want blending together. Lost. _Feeling_ that Yuuri wanted him.

He had wanted Yuuri for so long. Watched him. Imagined getting to touch him—hold him—kiss him until the world fell away. Until the only thing left was sweat and need and _more._ It was all but impossible to believe that Yuuri was really here—finally _finally_ wanting him.

But for how long?

Wolfram had to make sure it wouldn't end. He shifted—leaned back to sit—Yuuri's legs trapped beneath him.
Yuuri sat up-- followed him. "Wolfram--"

"Quiet," he snapped-- pressing Yuuri down-- back against the bed. Wolfram leaned forward-- a
brief kiss as he reached for the oil on the bedside table.

Yuuri tensed when he saw what it was-- babbled protests becoming nonsense as Wolfram's slick
hand made contact-- *Stroking*. Watching his hand move against dark, heated flesh. Yuuri's hips
rose up to meet the downward strokes. Chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Flawless skin.
Perfect mouth--

Perfect.

How could anyone be so perfect? Look so good-- Wolfram was sure he could die from touching
him.

Yuuri kept trying to pull him down-- closer-- kiss him. But it was time. Wolfram had to move
forward.

Keep Yuuri from changing his mind.

More shifting-- Yuuri's cock still in his hand-- Yuuri seemed to realize--

"Oh god-- Wolfram, I-- Oh god." Yuuri's fingers pressing into Wolfram's thighs as he lowered
himself-- feeling the head against him-- pressing forward--

Pain.

But not enough to make him stop. Wolfram lowered himself completely-- watched Yuuri's back
arch as he sank onto him.

Yuuri's hands-- nails digging into Wolfram's thighs-- trapped hips still trying to thrust up farther
into him. Wolfram's legs were folded beneath him on either side of Yuuri's-- using all his weight to
trap him-- give himself time to adjust.

Yuuri was in him-- he was still hard-- shaking-- looking at Wolfram like he *needed* him. Hands
scrambling on thighs-- knees. Yuuri was in him.

Wolfram reached forward to touch Yuuri's chest-- convince himself it was real. That Yuuri was
really there.

Yuuri's eyes were so dark. So dark.

"Please..."

Wolfram couldn't deny him. Rising up-- lowering slowly-- feeling the burn and the stretch and the
entirely new feeling of full.

Yuuri was lost-- looking at him-- soft words catching his breath-- hips trapped-- muscles in his
stomach clenching as he tried to press himself farther up-- farther in--

A whimpered moan-- head thrown back--

Wolfram could feel the base of Yuuri's cock throbbing-- a new rhythm to the stinging of his own
heartbeat against the stretch.

Yuuri was coming. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds-- but Wolfram had made Yuuri
come.

And now he had nothing left to offer.

Panic. He couldn't panic.

Wolfram rose up-- felt Yuuri fall out of him. Still mostly hard. Wet.

Yuuri looked so good-- so happy-- *ravished*. Reached out to pull Wolfram closer--

But he couldn't-- Wolfram had to turn away. It was just too much. He was-- There was nothing else.

What if it hadn't been enough?

But then Yuuri was pressed against his back-- warm kisses on his neck-- arms wrapping around--

holding him.

Holding him tight.

Wolfram leaned back into the warm. Let himself believe--

"I'm sorry," Yuuri whispered against his ear.

And Wolfram felt his blood run cold.

He had known. Yuuri wanted a woman-- didn't want him.

Wolfram had known-- he had known--

He was a fool.

********

********

Wolfram felt so good.

Yuuri's mind was still gone-- somewhere far away-- body so warm-- *content*-- with Wolfram here in his arms. Wolfram felt so good.

Yuuri had never imagined anything could feel so wonderful. That perfect heat-- *So tight.*

Surrounding himself with Wolfram.

Yuuri hadn't been prepared for it to feel like that. He had only lasted a few seconds-- just a few seconds when it should have gone on forever.

And Wolfram-- Yuuri hadn't even made him--

"I'm sorry," he said again-- pressing his lips to the back of Wolfram's neck. Squeezing Wolfram tighter in his arms. "I'll do better next time."

Yuuri felt Wolfram relax slightly.

Now that his mind was drifting back Yuuri hated that Wolfram wasn't facing him-- that he was still wearing a shirt. His fingers found the row of buttons-- pushing the smooth metal through tiny slits in fabric.
There couldn't have been more than three or four left undone when Yuuri started. He remembered them so well-- watching them-- white fabric hiding Wolfram from him-- the damp part where the front hung down-- where Wolfram's cock had leaked-- fabric gone partly clear-- and Yuuri could see the outline of dark flesh. Yuuri could remember watching it-- watching himself-- disappearing into Wolfram. Wolfram holding him down-- keeping him from falling into himself completely-- coming the moment his erection was swallowed by tight flesh. Wolfram was so beautiful. Eyes partly hidden in shadow-- damp hair-- but lips so red and swollen.

Yuuri had done that. He had kissed Wolfram-- made him look like that.

He never wanted it to stop.

Yuuri hadn't been able to see more than a wide portion of Wolfram's collar-- first few buttons undone-- sometimes almost slipping over a shoulder. One pink nipple peaking into view. Yuuri had wanted-- had wanted-- he had never really thought about nipples before-- on boys anyway. But Wolfram had touched him-- feeling of close spreading up his body-- from cock to an entirely new point of contact-- He had wanted to touch Wolfram too-- wondered if Wolfram would let him use his mouth--

But now Yuuri could touch-- buttons fell away-- pad of his thumb finding a place of softer flesh-- touching until a bead of nerves hardened-- biting Wolfram's neck and scooting closer-- one leg on either side of Wolfram-- back pressed completely to his front-- Wolfram was on the very edge of the bed-- feet on the floor-- Yuuri copied his position from behind-- legs touching-- needing everything to be touching. His other hand moved down-- strong stomach-- Wolfram tensing against him-- pressing back into him.

"I'm sorry I couldn't stop... Wolfram, I'm sorry--"  

"Wimp." Barely a word. So quiet-- caught.


Yuuri's hand moved down Wolfram's stomach. Lower. He was going to-- he had touched it through cloth before-- loved making Wolfram feel good-- but this-- there was no going back.

Wolfram made a small noise when Yuuri's fingers curled around him. Yuuri had to pause-- feel the weight of him in his right hand. So very very hard.

Yuuri whimpered-- bit down on Wolfram's shoulder. He was making too much noise-- he realized vaguely-- he couldn't seem to help it though-- and Wolfram was so quiet.

Yuuri wanted to make him scream.

He moved his hand-- slowly at first-- light-- just grazing skin. Closed his eyes. It was almost like touching himself, only-- only Wolfram was bigger than he was. Not by much-- but it was enough for Yuuri to notice. Of course Wolfram's body had to be perfect-- Had he ever expected anything else?

And Yuuri hadn't even been able to make Wolfram come. He had lost control in a matter of seconds-- He had been too lost in the feeling-- in looking at Wolfram-- in being terrified and impossibly excited that he was having sex with Wolfram. Having sex with another man-- he had
even caught himself being grateful-- for a second or two-- that the shirt had covered Wolfram's front-- Yuuri didn't know what he would have done-- faced with so much at once. All his fears. Everything he so desperately needed.

Just picturing what it would have looked like-- moving when Wolfram moved-- If only he had had the courage to reach out and touch-- but that thought alone had been so--

God.

Yuuri hadn't been able to hold himself back. Wolfram had been too perfect-- too hot-- too impossibly yes-- and Yuuri... Yuuri wasn't good enough for him. He was so average-- not like Wolfram.

What if Yuuri was never good enough?

Yuuri tightened his grip-- brought his other hand down-- working Wolfram with both hands-- Wolfram's back pressed against him as he breathed-- both breathing hard now-- Yuuri rocked his hips-- feeling the head of his cock slide against Wolfram's back-- the feel of Wolfram's cock in his hands. Hard and heavy and wet.

He kissed Wolfram's back-- any skin he could reach-- needing to touch Wolfram with his mouth-- the taste of salt on his tongue.

Wolfram was so hard-- leaking-- leaning forward-- away-- until he was almost off the bed entirely. Yuuri pulled him back-- touched him-- did what he could-- what he liked-- needing for Wolfram to feel as good as he had.

"Please," Yuuri said aloud without meaning to. And "God, you're so perfect, Wolf." Breath came harder. It was almost like touching himself-- imagining what Wolfram would feel-- knowing that Wolfram was this hard because of him.

Wolfram's hands-- Yuuri didn't know where they had been before-- covering his-- Wolfram shifting-- turning just enough to kiss him-- hot-- tongue in his mouth--

So good.

Because Wolfram had turned it was easier if Yuuri hooked one leg over his-- Wolfram's hands covering his own-- over Wolfram's cock-- guiding his movement.

Kissing.

Yuuri hadn't realized how lost he had been without kissing. Then-- he almost lost himself-- one of Wolfram's hands was on him now. Stroking. Yuuri had almost forgotten--

"No," he begged "Not until you come-- I can't-- I can't-- Wolfram please."

How could Wolfram be this good? Just one hand-- how could it be this good?

Wolfram stole his lips again. Kissed-- Hard--

A shuddered breath.

Yuuri felt Wolfram's cock pulse in his hands-- strong-- wet-- hot wet-- slipping between his fingers-- god he even heard it.

And then Yuuri was coming too. Keening. Why? Why couldn't he stop?
Wolfram had been so quiet.

For a while neither of them moved. Only heartbeats. Only breathing.

He had had sex. Yuuri had had sex with another man.

But it was so much more than that. More than he could have ever-- Yuuri had had sex with Wolfram.

And Wolfram was...

Wolfram.

********

********

Wolfram didn't know how he was supposed to feel.

What came after this.

He could hardly look at Yuuri-- pressed his face against his shoulder instead.

His body felt good-- touching Yuuri-- post orgasm. Safe.

But later-- Later he would be somewhere else-- feeling something else--

And it would all be so much worse after having this.

He didn't want to think. Wolfram didn't want to think about anything.

But then Yuuri shifted and the thoughts came rushing back. Almost all at once. All screaming--

competing in his head.

He had to get away.

He needed time to think.

Yuuri's arms were still around him-- both of them were sweaty-- and Wolfram could feel their come beginning to cool-- dry-- on his back, front, and hands. Other places.

At least now he had earned the reputation of the King's Whore.

No.

Yuuri didn't think of it that way.

Yuuri didn't think of it that way and that was all that mattered. He couldn't allow his thoughts to take him back to the dark.

Wolfram needed a moment-- just a moment to collect himself-- make sure he wasn't bleeding. He couldn't scare Yuuri now.

"I," Wolfram breathed-- kept his eyes closed for now-- "I'm going to go to the outhouse for a minute." He forced himself to look at Yuuri when the other boy's arms tightened around him--

keeping him. "I'll be back, Wimp."

Yuuri looked at him-- worried his lip.
Wolfram leaned in to kiss it briefly and Yuuri loosened his hold. "Okay." Then, "You're okay, right? I didn't--"

"Wimp." Wolfram kissed him again, then stood.

** **

Wolfram's stolen minutes alone didn't help much. He still didn't know what he should do-- and, worse, he was beginning to feel like he never should have left Yuuri alone. That he was going to come back to an empty room.

The moon was high-- bright above the clearing-- the little house. Most of the men had fallen asleep-- but across the field a few scattered fires burned-- human shadows outlined against the light. Wolfram had been lucky-- hadn't had to see anyone-- hadn't had to talk--

Not that he hadn't gone out of his way to ensure it. Wolfram had avoided the front door of the cottage entirely, sneaking out the window at the opposite end of the narrow hallway, just outside the Sage's door. Wolfram knew-- he wouldn't be able to look Grier and Weller in the eye without knowing.

A sharp exhale caught his voice-- almost a laugh. After everything-- something like that should be nothing-- It was strange-- habit.

Wolfram tried to push the thoughts away as he walked back toward the cottage. The trip outside had been pointless. He hadn't injured himself significantly-- He could still feel that it had happened, but-- the new feeling must have just caught him off guard-- Everything had caught him off guard.

He hadn't woken up this morning expecting any of this.

Wolfram had spent most of the day covered in mud to hide his scent-- still-- waiting-- counting his breath as he watched for movement in the woods-- watched for his prey to get close enough to strike. An old way to hunt-- passed down-- a tradition of patience. It was an opportunity for clarity of thought. A separation from self--

Wolfram could have used some time dedicated to such things now-- a few hours ago--

Had he made a mistake?

Would Yuuri even be there when Wolfram got back?

He paused at the still-open window. The hallway seemed dark, without the light of the moon. Further down there was a hint of light beneath the kitchen door, illuminating the wooden floor but nothing else. There was still light beneath the door where he and Yuuri had...

The pause grew. If Yuuri wasn't there...

But if Wolfram was really honest with himself-- Yuuri had seemed less disturbed by their encounter than he was-- Yuuri had clung to him-- even as they were cleaning up-- wiping Wolfram's stomach with a bit of damp cloth-- blushing-- smiling up at him. But Wolfram-- he had barely managed to keep himself together-- suffocating in the little room.

It was stupid. These feelings were just stupid. He had wanted Yuuri for so long. Wolfram should be happy-- angry that it had taken so long-- anything but this irrational fear.

Wolfram climbed back through the window, determined to ignore the feelings that didn't make
sense. And when he reached for the door-handle he forced himself to believe that Yuuri would be waiting for him.

Yuuri, as it happened, was just on the other side of the door, looking anything but calm and happy. Instead--*panicked*. Pale.

The cold feeling happened again-- but only for a second-- until Yuuri all but pounced on him. Held him close.

Wolfram somehow managed to close the door. "What's this, Wimp?"

Yuuri pushed his face farther against Wolfram's neck. A muffled answer.

A muffled answer that sounded all together too much like "Conrad" and something else.

********

Yuuri was tired of world-shattering revelations. He couldn't take it anymore. He had been so scared-- finally gotten Wolfram-- He had thought everything was going to be fine from now on, but then--

But then he had gone outside. He had tried to follow Wolfram-- didn't want to let Wolfram get away--

He had gone outside.

Yuuri held Wolfram tighter-- something solid-- something that made him feel good. Calmer.

Yuuri managed to speak again, shifting so he could be heard. "I saw-- I mean, I didn't really see-- but I-- there were sounds..."

Wolfram was silent. Yuuri had to move away-- if only a little-- to look at him. He could feel his cheeks go hot. Yuuri could still hear it in his mind. "Conrad and Yozak," he tried again. "I went out-- and when I got to the door to the kitchen-- I heard them before I opened it. They were-- They were--"

"Doing what we just did--"

"But LOUDER!" Yuuri let go of Wolfram to pace. He had never thought that Conrad would be capable of something like that. Conrad was what a man should be-- he was supposed to be *normal*.

"Are you jealous?" Wolfram's voice cut through the room. Cold.

Yuuri stopped pacing. Blinked. "What?"

Wolfram stalked toward him-- face coloring in splotchy rage. "If you had known-- If you had known Weller was an option would you have chosen him?"

Yuuri backed up. He backed away and Wolfram followed. Until his back was pressed against the wall and Wolfram's fingers dug painfully into his shoulders. "What?"

"You heard me-- If you had known-- If you only asked, Weller would-- You've always-- You still want him, don't you?" Wolfram's eyes were so wild, breathing erratic. So hurt.

How had everything gone so wrong?
"What? Wolfram... What? I-- no."

"Liar," Wolfram hissed-- his head moved forward-- forehead resting on the wall-- next to Yuuri's.
"Liar," he said again, and Yuuri jumped-- gasped-- when Wolfram's hand came off his shoulder--
fist connected hard with the wall on the other side of Yuuri's head.

And then Wolfram was silent, silent and shaking-- And it was so terrible-- the worst thing in the
entire world-- and Yuuri didn't even know what he had done.

Yuuri was-- he had been so shocked, and nothing Wolfram had said even made any sense. But
Wolfram was hurting and Yuuri was sure it had to be his fault.

"I'm sorry," Yuuri tried. "Wolfram--"

"So you admit it." Wolfram's voice was empty. He didn't move.

"No," Yuuri answered. "Wolfram, I don't even know what you're talking about." He licked his lips.
"You're upset about... Conrad? That he and Yozak were... doing that?"

Nothing.

Yuuri shifted slightly, still trapped against the wall. He was so close to Wolfram--
almost touching-- it was hard to think. To try to make sense of everything Wolfram had just said.

"You think..." he tried again. "You think that I... That I'm jealous of them?"

"Aren't you?" Barely a breath.

"No," Yuuri answered quickly. "You were-- I mean, I could have been better but you were-- That
was...." Wolfram was so close it was impossible for Yuuri not to turn his head-- to brush his lips
against Wolfram's neck. Mouth hot skin. "I'd never even thought anything could be like that."

Wolfram still didn't move. Yuuri wanted to kiss him-- to take the pain away-- but-- kissing always
had to end. And Yuuri had to face whatever had made Wolfram this upset.

He swallowed. "Wolfram-- I'm sorry-- You always call me a wimp and I guess I am... I just... I
don't know what to do-- I've done something wrong-- but I can't do anything to fix it until I know
what--"


Yuuri could hardly breathe, let alone move. The silence gnawed at his insides.

When Wolfram started talking again his voice was clear-- soft against Yuuri's ear but detached.
"Weller's wanted you since he laid eyes on you. And you've wanted him just as long."

"That's-- That's stupid," Yuuri sputtered. "Conrad-- Conrad's straight and I... I've only been... like
this for you."


"Stop," Yuuri begged, so close to tears. "Stop it, Wolfram. I don't-- I just want you. This has to
stop. I can't-- I can't stand it being like this. It has to stop." Yuuri brought up his arms-- clinging to
the front of Wolfram's shirt. "I want to be with you. I can't even imagine wanting anyone else.
Please, please just stop--" He moved his face into Wolfram's neck. Breathing him. "Stop hurting--
I need you to stop-- I need to be able to make you stop."
And now Yuuri was crying. He was a wimp who couldn't even not-cry when it was so much more important that he take care of Wolfram.

"I love you," he sobbed. "I can't-- I don't have enough inside me to feel like this about anyone else. I'm already-- I can't stand the thought that I've ruined this. I'm too scared that you'll leave to even think. I can't-- I can't--"

Wolfram's kiss silenced his broken words. Mouth hot and wet and desperate. As desperate as Yuuri felt. Wolfram's hands came up to cup his cheeks-- holding his face like he was afraid Yuuri would break. The kiss slowed. Wolfram's lips-- tongue-- heat. So much heat. Every motion so drawn out. Careful. Slow.

Yuuri copied Wolfram-- touching his face with both hands-- drawing back from his lips enough to kiss higher-- his nose-- under his eye-- forehead-- down over both cheeks. Wolfram's eyes were closed-- They were so close that Yuuri couldn't really see, but-- but Wolfram let Yuuri kiss his face as much as he wanted-- as long as it took for the panic to dull.

And then Yuuri was lost in green eyes. He could look at Wolfram forever-- cheeks-- lips red. Then Wolfram looked away-- lowered his hands-- a wince.

Yuuri noticed a splash of red against white skin. He grabbed Wolfram's hand in an instant.

Wolfram looked at the floor.

Yuuri frowned-- then gently pulled Wolfram across the room. Made him sit on the bed.

This was something he could do. He touched Wolfram's bloodied hand gently-- knuckles raw-- blood slowly trailing between his fingers. Yuuri thought about the hurt and how much he wanted it to stop. The green light came, bouncing off the surrounding air more than starting from one particular place.

It felt good flowing through him, better with the knowledge that he was helping Wolfram.

When he was done, Yuuri used his sleeve to wipe the stray blood from now-unbroken skin. He didn't look up.

"You ruined your shirt."

Yuuri brought Wolfram's hand to his mouth-- kissed it. "Don't care."

* * *

It took a while for both of them to get in bed-- shoes off but still mostly clothed. Few words were said, but Yuuri knew Wolfram was still upset with him.

Yuuri pouted as Wolfram turned off the oil-lamp, sending the room into moonlight. Points of color until his eyes adjusted. This wasn't how he pictured it-- after finally...

Things were supposed to be good-- They were supposed to-- to cuddle or something.

Did boys cuddle?

Yuuri shifted nervously as Wolfram got into bed beside him-- not touching. Whether boys were supposed to cuddle or not-- Yuuri was sure he should be feeling happy-- not terrible-- not guilty over something he hadn't even done.
Something Wolfram had thought up on his own.

Jealous of Conrad.

Yuuri sighed and crossed his arms. Sure, he cared about Conrad-- but what Wolfram had said... about Conrad being interested in him like that...

It was impossible.

And now that Wolfram had said it, Yuuri knew it would never really get out of his head. It was just so... awkward. Conrad... Conrad was supposed to like girls-- be the perfect soldier-- That was why Yuuri had been so upset before.

Looking back on things-- Yuuri had even thought that Yozak was flirting with Conrad this afternoon. Conrad and Yozak were best friends-- they had been through so much together. But... but if they were in love wouldn't Yuuri have noticed before? Wouldn't Conrad have told him... especially after Yuuri had confessed his own feelings about Wolfram?

Why hadn't Conrad ever told him about Yozak? And Yozak was gone so often-- How could Conrad stand being away from him? He had never complained.

Conrad had always been so focused on him.

Ever since the beginning-- when somehow Conrad had felt like the only safe thing in this strange new world. Yuuri remembered looking forward to going on adventures with him-- playing baseball. Yuuri remembered how much he had cried when Conrad betrayed them-- even when he hadn't really--

How he would have rather died than let go of Conrad's severed arm after the box activated. How he hadn't even thought that Wolfram would be the one to save him.

Yuuri tightened his crossed arms-- suddenly cold. Had Wolfram been right?

No.

He loved Wolfram. Yuuri was so sure of it it burned. If he wasn't-- if Yuuri didn't love Wolfram he wouldn't have been able to admit he could want another boy. Loving Wolfram had made Yuuri face something inside himself he never would have been able to otherwise. And now that he had finally faced it, Yuuri was determined not to be a wimp about it any more.

"Wolfram," Yuuri began-- shifting to look at moon-lit cheeks-- open eyes. "You were right about some things. Things I didn't even know myself. When I first came to this world... Conrad was... I was closer to him."

Even in the near-darkness Yuuri could see the hurt seeping into Wolfram's face.

"But," Yuuri continued firmly-- sitting up-- leaning over Wolfram to hold his gaze. "I didn't know then. And whatever it was it went away. It went away even before you were the only one that I could--" He took a deep breath. "I know you don't understand why it's hard for me-- admitting that I feel like this for you-- for a boy. I know you don't understand. But you have to understand that-- that you are the only one I could have faced this part of myself for."

"If Conrad," Wolfram whispered. "If Weller had pushed-- If he had let himself touch you-- lead you-- If Weller had taken you then I never would have had a chance."
Yuuri leaned forward, put his forehead against Wolfram's. "First-- please stop saying that Conrad wants to... do that kind of thing with me. It's weird."

Wolfram humphed.

"Second, I'll never be able to convince you of something you don't seem to want to believe-- but it didn't happen. You have me now-- and I don't intend on going anywhere." Yuuri almost held his breath. He needed this. He needed Wolfram to be happy-- to know that he was wanted more than anyone else.

Wolfram's eyes fell shut for a while-- opened again. "Is that so, Wimp?" His breath was hot on Yuuri's face.

"Mm," Yuuri answered, about to burst with warmth at a sense that he was finally on the way to doing something right. Then he kissed him.

Wolfram's arms were around him at once-- pulling Yuuri down until they were pressed wonderfully close. Yuuri could feel his body's interest-- Wolfram was just too attractive for it to be real-- felt too good-- but it was almost sore. A distant arousal that he didn't feel a need to pursue.

Yuuri allowed himself a moment to enjoy the feeling of just touching Wolfram, before he broke the kiss. "Are you... are you still upset?"

Wolfram let out a heavy sigh. "Wimp."

Yuuri grinned, feeling the hint of warmth behind the word. Then he snuggled closer-- put his head on Wolfram's chest. Wolfram's arms were still wrapped around him and Yuuri was sure he had never felt so cozy. Yuuri breathed deep-- enjoying Wolfram's scent-- the sound of his heart.

Warm.

********
********

Wolfram still wouldn't allow himself to believe all the things that Yuuri had said. It was too much.

Yuuri had admitted it. Justified all of Wolfram's jealousy and spite. Yuuri had wanted Weller then-- Wolfram had known-- it wasn't a surprise.

It still hurt.

But Yuuri seemed to believe he wanted Wolfram now, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Wolfram allowed himself to enjoy it, just a little bit.

He had Yuuri in his arms, on his chest, hair tickling his chin. Wolfram moved a hand to brush it away, running his fingers through black strands. Regal coloring. Smooth. Something Weller would never have-- not if Wolfram could help it.

Yuuri made a happy noise into his chest and so Wolfram continued to play idly with Yuuri's hair. Something to think about besides falling asleep.

Wolfram had wanted it for so long it didn't seem real. He had wanted Yuuri for so long-- it wasn't-- Wolfram hated having to share him. Yuuri had loved other people before-- loved everyone around him so much-- It wasn't right, but Wolfram couldn't help but want all of Yuuri for himself.
Wolfram squeezed the boy in his arms closer for a moment, enjoying the small sound Yuuri made when he did it-- the fact that the wimp was half-hard against his side. The ghost of a feeling of Yuuri still inside of him. When Wolfram lessened his grip the wimp shifted his head to look up at him-- eyes shining in the dark.

"Wolfram?"

"Hhn?" Wolfram continued to play his fingers through Yuuri's hair.

"From now on we'll get to do this every night, right-- stay together?" Yuuri shifted in his arms, rested his chin on Wolfram's chest to look at him.

Wolfram frowned. "Unfortunately not. Of course after we're married-- but until then-- Tonight was a breach of protocol."

Yuuri pouted. "But Conrad and Yozak-- they've probably-- It's not a big deal if they spend the nights 'drinking'."

"Of course not," Wolfram huffed. "They're half-breeds."

Yuuri gave him an odd look before resting his head again. Wolfram went back to playing with his hair. It had been so long since he'd shared a bed with the wimp in any capacity. He would miss this. Who knew how long it would take for a proper ceremony to be arranged?

Still.

Was he being reckless?

Gisela had told him this afternoon-- the Sage had figured out the cause of the Waking Dreams. Said they wouldn't happen again unless he had more of Shou Shimeron's poison. But the fear... The reason he hadn't dared to consider going back.

Was he putting Yuuri in danger by even risking it...

Wolfram went tense. He went tense and Yuuri felt it, shifting to look up at him-- eyelids heavy with contentment. Close to dreams.

"What's wrong, Wolfram?" Yuuri's words were slow.

Wolfram tried to smile at him. "Nothing, Wimp. Go to sleep."

Yuuri frowned. "Don't lie." The sleep was gone from his voice. "What's wrong?"

Wolfram sighed. "I shouldn't stay here-- I want to, but..."

"No!" Yuuri held him tighter. "Especially if I only get you tonight. We've already 'breached protocol'," he mocked. "Stay."

Wolfram worried his lip-- copying the wimp's bad habits already. Then, "I want to, Yuuri-- but I want to make sure you're safe and--"

"You're with me," Yuuri assured. "I'm safe."

Wolfram had to lower his gaze.
Yuuri pulled away, sat up to look at him-- put a hand on his cheek. "What?" Yuuri forced Wolfram to turn his head-- look at him. "I'm safer with you than anyone."

Wolfram closed his eyes. Forced himself to breathe.

Another kiss. Wolfram opened his eyes to see Yuuri smiling. Hopeful.

"What? It's worked so far."

Wolfram snorted.

The smile began to fade. "Hey..." Yuuri's face was close. Breath on his lips. "We made it this far. I can't... I can't do anything if I don't know what's going on."

Silence stretched-- forced out the words. "You're not safe with me. Not anymore."

"What?" The word was almost a laugh. "That's ridiculous. What--"

"No," Wolfram growled, shifting on the bed-- sitting so he could put the needed distance between them. He couldn't feel this close. He couldn't. "You don't--" He stopped.

It was there behind his eyes. Blood on his hands. Metallic in his mouth. Lucien's willing flesh.

Gisela had assured him about the Waking Dreams-- the violence of nightmares. Of fiction.

But that wasn't what called him from the darkness inside himself. Flesh tearing in his jaws. Power. Life.

A flicker of flame.

It was so wrong. Sickening. Why wasn't it sickening? Why didn't he gag to think on it-- More.

How had he let himself go anywhere near Yuuri? It wasn't safe--

If he felt like this-- If he wanted to do that to Lucien-- Every time he saw Lucien the urge was there.

How had he let himself go anywhere near Yuuri?

Yuuri was around him. Holding him. Making him feel good when it was so wrong. Wrong that he feel anything but vile. "I..." he started. Swallowed hard. But then it all came out anyway. Like vomit.

"I just-- It was like-- I tried to..." Wolfram could feel the world fall away. His voice forced into meaningless sounds. Detached. "I woke up covered in Lucien's blood. In my mouth. Everywhere. I couldn't stop-- I didn't want to stop-- Yozak made me but I didn't want to stop..."

Yuuri held him as the words came tumbling out. Words that said everything. What he had done to Lucien-- still wanted-- Everything he had done that night that would make it impossible for Yuuri to want him.

Yuuri waited until he was done. Kept holding him. Even though he heard. What Wolfram had done-- tried to do--
Wolfram told Yuuri things he hadn't allowed himself to think-- now voiced-- *real*.

That Lucien had come to him. That Wolfram had *swallowed* parts of him. That he couldn't have made himself stop once the first drops of hot crimson welled between his teeth.

Yuuri waited until he was done. And then he was quiet for a long time. "You haven't told the others have you?"

An accusation.

"No." Wolfram could hardly speak. "Not everything."

"It has to be something else. It's not... It's not *you*. It has to be--"

"No." Wolfram shook his head. "You can't-- there's no way this isn't... You can't--"

"Stop it." Yuuri held Wolfram's face with both hands. "I know what it's like to want to do things that aren't you. To want to..." A shaking breath. "I remember more these days-- The things the Maou wants to do. His justice. Things I wouldn't..." Yuuri touched Wolfram's forehead with his own. "This world has so many things I don't know about. Magic. I've seen you controlled by Soushi-- I remember it being inside me to. Things in this world... No matter how terrible there has to be an explanation. There always is."

Wolfram looked at Yuuri. So close. He wanted to believe. He shifted-- kissed him. Needed to forget the world for only a moment.

After a while they broke apart. Breath quickened, but not with panic.

"Tomorrow we can talk to Murata," Yuuri assured. "There has to be an explanation."

Wolfram didn't have the will to argue so he nodded. Kissed him again.

********

********

A little cottage in Eastern Caloria

Early morning

********

The garden was as bright as ever. It made Murata's head hurt.

Shinou was no longer across from him-- Teacup full and abandoned on the other side of the table. Now Shinou was next to him instead-- breath on his ear-- hand working its way steadily beneath his robes.

"Stop it." Murata couldn't move-- could barely speak. "Stop."

Shinou chuckled, deep, low in his chest. "Relax. I've already taken care of everything, my pretty Sage."

Murata growled as Shinou's hand made contact with solid flesh. "And what is it *exactly* that you think you've taken care of?"

"It's all falling into place."

Infuriating.
Murata tried with all his might to pull away-- sun on his cheeks-- uncomfortable bed-- hard.

"I love it when you squirm." Shinou licked his cheek. "Soon you'll see. I took care of everything before it started."

Murata hated him. Hated that he was so close.

"Just remember, pretty Sage. You're mine, no matter how many kings you serve." Breath-- hot-- hot in his ear-- tongue pressing inside.

He came. Gasping into consciousness. Sticky and alone.

* * *

Breakfast was an interesting affair.

Even if Murata hadn't been a master of hiding personal distress he needn't have worried. Everyone was far too absorbed with themselves to give him a second glance.

The packed table was nearly silent. Gisela had left with the human troops and Lucien a few minutes earlier, leaving the rest of them to figure out where to go from here. Shibuya had made it fairly obvious he intended to escort Sir Belefield back to the capital, but both seemed to be much too busy trying to communicate through a series of impressively un-subtle glances to breach the subject aloud. Sir Grier, at least, seemed to appreciate the humor of the situation, but his smirking was less appreciated by Sir Weller, whose self loathing was more palatable than ever. Occasionally Shibuya would remember that other people besides his newly-reacquired fiancé were present, or more precisely, would become aware of Sir Weller, turn even more red, and take a sip from his currently-empty glass.

The most agonizing part about all of it was that everyone seemed to know exactly what the others had been up to, but none were willing to break the increasingly heavy silence.

Murata sighed. They really didn't have time for any of this.

Oddly enough, it was Shibuya who spoke first.

"Hey, Murata." Shibuya's voice was small, but grew stronger after a quick glance at Sir Belefield. "I was wondering if you knew exactly what happened-- When Wolfram first had to leave Shin Makoku-- With his fire and Lucien. I mean-- if we should--"

"It happened again," Sir Belefield interrupted. He was looking at the table with determination. Exhaustion. A hint of worse. "Yozak was there-- stopped me from..." His voice shook, then fell into nothing.

Murata closed his eyes for a moment. Opened them. "And your magic has not returned, not like last time?"

"No," Sir Belefield answered softly. Shibuya reached for his hand beneath the table.

"I see." Murata formed the words carefully, his mind searching for an explanation.

He had suspected Lady Gisela was not being completely honest with him the day before, but this had been far from his thoughts since Sir Belefield had suffered his first "incident". Then, Sir Belefield's actions had made a kind of sense. The young corporal had accompanied Sir Belefield as a child to receive their blessings from the spirit. Of anyone alive only the ones who accepted the
flame directly before or after Sir Belefield should have magic close enough to Sir Belefield's own to complete such a blood ritual.

Of course, from Sir Weller's accounts of the first instance, "ritual" was a generous term. The only things Murata could think of that could be remotely similar happened before Mazoku history was properly recorded. Written texts in this world... there was only so long they could last. Stories had continued, though-- legends about how magic had been passed from one mazoku to the next before formal pacts had been made with the elemental spirits.

It made sense in theory that Sir Belefield might be able to prolong the life of his magic by taking some from the young corporal. But now that his magic was gone there was no reason for him to try to reclaim it.

Unless Sir Belefield's magic hadn't really gone.

But that was impossible. Sir Belefield had cheated death so many times already... But if his magic had truly gone he would be dead-- Why hadn't Murata really thought about it before?

It was all so improbable. So unheard of for a mazoku to simply lose his magic.

There had been so much going on... Why hadn't Murata realized that something was amiss before?

Bit by bit, the pieces began to arrange themselves. Sir Belefield must still have some magic left. But why hadn't Gisela been able to detect it?

There must be more to this than he was seeing.

"What exactly happened?" Murata asked, taking note of Sir Belefield's expression. Guilt.

Sir Belefield opened his mouth but no words came. Shibuya looked rapidly between them, wanting to comfort and protect but not wanting to overstep.

Hopeless.

"Gisela informed you about his waking dreams," Sir Grier answered instead. "We were having trouble with those and so Lucien and I were sharing a watch over the Wolf. I was outside when it started, but from what I can tell it was close to what I heard about what happened before. What the Captain saw. Wolf took a bite or two out of Lucien before I got there, but Gisela and I were able to get him to come to his senses."

"Was it like the Maou?" Shibuya asked quickly. "The way I get-- Wolfram wouldn't have done it if there wasn't something else--"


"The first time it happened..." Sir Weller's voice was quiet, clear. "Wolfram almost didn't make it. He was burning from the inside-- But then he got cold when the fire went out. Lucien tried to warm him up and that was what brought it out-- whatever it was. Wolfram only bit him once, then there was fire."

Murata nodded. "Sir Belefield survived by taking some of Lucien's fire. Old magic. Blood would have been necessary to seal it."

"It wasn't just one bite," Sir Belefield spoke, voice empty. "It was... This time was different."
"Hmm," Murata pondered aloud. "And this time I would imagine there was no fire, as well."

Sir Belefield nodded, gaze firmly on his plate.

"Interesting." Murata adjusted his glasses. "Perhaps a visit to Lesser Gael cannot be avoided."

"But!" Shibuya interjected loudly. "What if-- I mean... Isn't it dangerous? Wolfram could... Didn't Gisela say before that Wolfram might not be able to reaffirm anymore? What if he..." Shibuya didn't seem to be able to finish.

"There have been cases where those who went to reaffirm have been killed, yes." Murata leaned forward. Gave Shibuya what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "But I highly doubt that will be the case with Sir Belefield... He just seems to keep surviving things these days. Moreover, Ethne asked for him by name, when his magic was running low. The spirits don't usually take such an interest."

Shibuya looked like he was about to protest.

"Besides," Murata continued, "I believe their Taibaseer is still being 'detained' at the castle. We would be remiss to ignore a chance for a more diplomatic apology."

Shibuya blanched. "What?! He's still-- How could we have forgotten? He's not... He's okay, right?"

"He's well taken care of," Sir Weller assured, raised a hand to put on Shibuya's shoulder-- stopped. "There are places for political prisoners. The room I was kept in after the Shimeron incident was nicer than a soldier's quarters." Sir Weller folded his hands on the table in front of him. Knuckles white.

"Gwendal sent an apology in regards to the matter," Sir Grier supplied. "I don't know much more about that situation. If there was trouble on that front I'd have been told."

"Well then, that settles it." Murata leaned back in his seat. "I suppose we'll be making a stop on our way home."

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
The following day

********

Greta kept the tail end of the yarn wrapped around her right pinkie as she worked. Wolri had gotten less enthusiastic about the twitching line of purple over time, but occasionally her precaution would keep the careful row of loops from being pulled off of her needles by an unexpected pounce.

At the moment though, Greta didn't need to worry. Wolri's paws were visible under Gwendal's desk, probably planning his latest attack on unsuspecting sock-covered toes.

Recently Greta had learned that whenever Gwendal knew he was going to be in his office uninterrupted for long periods of time he would slide his boots off under the desk. It made sense. Greta couldn't imagine having to wear her riding boots all day long. It must get stuffy.

Greta liked that Gwendal did it even though he knew she was in the room. It made everything feel just a little more comfortable-- more safe when so few things were.
Without really meaning to, Greta had fallen into the habit of spending her midday break with Gwendal in his office. She still had her lessons in the morning and dance practice in the evening—riding and swordplay less often with her fathers gone. Replaced with sewing and sneaking off to help Anissina in her lab or visit with Wilfrido in the stables.

Every day she had so much to do. So many people...

But she still missed them.

Greta paused. Felt the hurt crawling up her throat. Then she took a deep breath and continued her work.

They didn't need her. She would just have to keep getting better at not needing them.

Greta kept a steady pace—beginning to connect loops as she casted off. She was almost done with the last piece. The little purple cat was only missing one of its legs, but today Greta would add the stuffing—sew on the final piece. Yesterday Greta had taken a break from legs to stitch the details onto the face. The purple cat wasn't the happiest looking of her creations. Its mouth twisted off to the side.

Grumpy purple cat.

She smiled. Wilfrido was a little bit grumpy too.

* * *

It was almost sundown before Greta got any time to herself again. She went back to her room to change out of her fancy dancing dress and put on something the maids wouldn't lecture her for getting a bit dusty. Wolri followed her into her room and mehhd—almost tripping her as he walked around her feet—big eyes pleading up at her.

"I know." Greta picked him up—tucking the cat against her chest with one arm while she carried a basket in the other. "I'll get you something yummy soon. We're just going to give Wilfrido a quick visit."

Greta left her room with her head held up high and stopped to address the guard outside the door. "I'm going down to the stables. Edwin, would you mind escorting me?"

"Yes, Princess." Edwin bowed.

Greta sighed. "You can call me Greta, you know."

Edwin coughed, but didn't answer.

Greta tried not to let it bother her. Of course the older man would feel the need to be proper with her. She was sure Wolfram must have scared him half to death when he ordered his guard to look after her. At least now that she let him accompany her instead of sneaking off, Wilfrido seemed to be in less trouble.

Still, Greta hated having a "chaperone". As if she were doing anything wrong.

She put Wolri down along the way. He still followed her, running ahead and falling behind but always in sight. Greta imagined the little cat had a good idea where they were headed.

Once they were near the stables Wolri raced toward his favorite tree. Greta smiled to herself,
remembering when Wolri was new and got stuck-- that Wilfrido had rescued him. It was a good
tree for climbing, but unfortunately the higher branches didn't quite reach the window to the upper
loft that Wilfrido shared with his father.

Greta asked Edwin to wait outside while she went to find Wilfrido. It was starting to get dark, so he
should be done with most of his chores.

Ao looked at her as she passed, bumping the door of his pen with his chest as he stuck his head out.
Greta smiled at him-- and at the flick of Hildefuns' tail. He had been even more stubborn than usual
lately.

The ladder to the loft was down, light shining into the stables. Greta touched a wooden rung with
her hand.

"Good evening, Princess."

Greta froze. Swallowed. Then she turned and smiled up at Wilfrido's father.

"Good evening, Sir." She managed a small curtsey. "Is Wilfrido--"

An animal screeched outside-- Wolri-- Edwin's voice. Greta forgot about everything else-- rushed
outside.

Wilfrido's father followed.

Sure enough-- Wolri up his favorite tree-- struggling with another bird.

"Wolri!" Greta cried-- stepping toward the tree.

"Don't worry, Princess." Edwin was already at the base. "I'll take care of it--"

"Wait." Wilfrido's father's voice was gruff. "I'll do it."

Edwin paused. "But--"

Wilfrido's father moved forward. Didn't listen to Edwin's protest.

Greta held her basket tightly with both hands-- hurting-- She hoped both Wolri and the poor bird
would be alright.

Wilfrido's father was not a small man. He wasn't fat-- but his shoulders were wider than Gwendals-
more like Adelbert. His long ponytail swayed as he climbed, catching in the leaves.

It felt like forever until Wolri was safe in her arms again. A little ruffled, but safe. The bird hadn't
been so lucky.

It was all her fault. If she had given Wolri his dinner instead of rushing out here... It was her fault.

"I'm sorry," she said to no one.

Wilfrido's father's face was was set in a frown. Untangling a scrap of paper-- a letter-- from the torn
bird.

"Pigeons really are better for that kind of thing," Edwin supplied. "If you require I could request--"

"No," The larger man snapped. "It's fine."
Greta bit her lip.

Once he was finished with the bird Wilfrido's father looked at her again. "Was there something you required?"

She flushed. "No... I was... Wilfrido..."

"I sent the boy down to the town to pick up a few things. He should be back before dark."

Greta nodded. "Oh... I'll just-- I'll find him some other time then."

Wilfrido's father grunted in response and headed back into the stable.

The basket was still in on hand-- struggling cat in the other. Greta fought back tears as she turned around. "Come on, Wolri. Let's go have some real dinner."

She started walking. Didn't look back even though she knew Edwin would follow her.

The grumpy purple cat would have to wait until another day.

Wolri's claws dug into her chest as he tried to wiggle free. She didn't let go. Knew that there would be holes in her dress and tiny spots of red. Poor bird.

Why did Wilfrido have to be out? She hated talking to his father.

Greta blinked back tears all the way to the kitchen. Wolri was glad to be set down, but jumped up onto the counter top almost immediately-- making the cook give a shout. Made her feel even worse.

The bad feeling lingered as she watched Wolri eat his dinner back in her room. Door locked. Edwin-- the whole world safely on the other side.

And then the tears came. Hot on her cheeks.

They had forgotten about her. Both of them--

Left her all alone.

********

********
Lesser Gael
Temple of the Faithe
Three days later

Kellan held the wrapped bundle of still-warm bread close against her breast as she wove her way between the hanging webs of rope. She had called the meeting to be held within the third inner chamber. The heart of the temple cut deep into the stone of the mountain. The place where the oldest of prophecies hung.

It had felt right, holding it there.

Ahead the glow of torchlight peeked between the drapes of woven words-- shadows mixing on the floor in great stretching patterns of light and dark. Kellan could hear voices growing larger at her approach.

Good. Sorcha had already gathered the young ones.

Kellan smiled, remembering when she had been the youngest of the girls. It was surreal now to lead them all. Seventeen years had passed so quickly. And it had only been eighteen months since Flanna had died, leaving Kellan to hold the role of Head Faithe.

Leaving her with the Blessing.

It had taken months for her to adjust-- even leave her bed. Past prophecies-- visions-- all that had ever been Seen by the Faithe since the dawn of their creation. All of the prophecies that ever had been were placed within the modest vessel of her mind. Such history-- such power-- given to her alone.

Kellan remembered the moment that the Blessing first swelled within her. The pain. The confusion. Sights and thoughts that were not hers swallowing her mind-- invading every inch of her body. How it had all seemed too much-- too large to ever fit inside her. How five years seemed an impossible time to wait until it would finally kill her.

Frith's death had been a surprise to them all. Because Frith had died before she reached Head Faithe, her memories had not only been passed onto Kellan, but to all the girls who walked and saw. The younger ones had been far from ready for such a Blessing-- Muriel was barely five-- far from ready for such a wealth of vision, especially from one so gifted as Frith.

The worst of that was well behind them, though. Kellan had called this meeting for another purpose.

Another smile graced her lips.

Their King was coming. Kellan had never dared to hope that she would be there to see it come to pass. Their King was coming.

Her smile faded into a mask of calm as soon as Kellan felt the light of the inner chamber touch her
"Are we really going to meet him?" Muriel jumped up from Sorcha's lap and came to greet her. Kellan nodded, then knelt to pat the girl's bushy blond hair. "But you haven't told your Taibhsear yet have you? Master Quilliam doesn't know?"

Muriel shook her head dramatically. "I haven't said anything-- just like you said. But why, Miss Kellan? Won't he be happy, too?"

"That's why I called you all here, little one. To explain." Then she stood and addressed the group. Without Frith they were only six. An appropriate girl was still to be found-- traded for one of the city's demon youth. "I owe you all an explanation."

Kellan moved forward to place the bread and collection of jams on a slightly raised portion of the uneven stone floor. The others came to make a close circle-- except Meckenzie, who as usual was too busy weaving to hear words-- even when directed at her.

"Meckenzie," Kellan chided. "You can rest for a moment."

Meckenzie looked up through a tangle of red-brown hair, in the dark light reminding Kellan for a moment of Frith. Meckenzie was close to Frith in age, and out of them all Meckenzie had been the one to mourn her longest. "Sorry, Miss Kellan," Meckenzie sighed, "but... can we meet over here..." She raised her toes and wiggled them-- the girl had used them to hold various places in her work.

Kellan had to stifle a laugh, shaking her head instead. "Fine."

Meckenzie had taken it upon herself to reweave the completed history of what was-- forgoing the burned, blackened remnants of what could have been. She had even taken to dying part of the rope fibers-- walking around for days with blue or red stained fingers. In the beginning Kellan had been sure Meckenzie would grow tired of her self-appointed mission, but she had been working for over three years now, and her work spread from their King's first prophecy to the separation of Gael. The tangle of knots had almost reached the life of the great Shinou and its size was more than impressive-- bigger than Meckenzie was herself and too heavy for the girl to drag without help.

The food was moved over to the side, and they gathered to sit in a tight circle just under the central pillar. Apirka began cutting pieces and distributing them around the circle until everyone had a piece of warm bread on which to place their choice of sweet jam. The great ovens had been lit for the arrival of the royal travelers from Shin Makoku and food was already in abundance in preparation for the coming feasts.

Kellan allowed a moment to pass. It would be no good to begin while everyone was concentrating on the treat they could not yet taste. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She knew she has to be mature for all of them-- but speaking with authority had never been her strongest point.

And yet, she had to try.

"Alright," she began once everyone had finished their treat, taking pride in the way her voice echoed in the hollow spaces of the chamber. "We have Seen that he is coming, but it is a sight we shall not share--"

"But Miss Kellan," Muriel interrupted with wide eyes. "We have to tell our Taibhsears what we See. It's our duty!"
Kellan nodded slowly. "It is. And we shall tell them, just not now."

"Then when?" Shorcha raised an eyebrow. "His coming will hardly go unnoticed. Do you think our silence will go unpunished?"

"Our punishment will be less than the world's if the Taibhsears-- the Masters try to interfere again. They have forgotten their place. They are not to dictate what path fate will choose--"

"But Master Cailean says--"

"Master Cailean sent Frith to a pointless death. She died bleeding in a foreign land as a result of their folly. Worse will come if they continue to meddle."

Silence. Her words had been too strong, perhaps.

Muriel sniffled.

"But if we don't help Our King choose the right path-- if rage takes him, then everyone will die," said Aprika eyes cast down in her defiance.

"Then everyone will die," Kellan spoke softly. "But do you really have so little faith in him? Our King was chosen for a reason. I believe that he will follow the right path on his own. If the Masters meddle they will only send him farther down destruction's road."

Meckenzie nodded. And soon all of the girls were voicing their agreement.

Kellan let out a long breath and folded her shaking hands in her lap. At least this step was finished. The girls would all keep their word.

Their King. Seeing him was so amazing, but his face... The one he had worn had been false. Something that wasn't his.

Just thinking about it-- The magic filled her mind-- thick and sweet like honey on her tongue. The world spun around her though she was still, and everything went dark and bright at once. Their King's first prophecy rose to the front of her thoughts-- she could feel it touch the others too. The words were spoken together. The good path. The one they wished for him to follow. Both a prophecy and a prayer.

*Twice born of Ash*
Twice raised by water
Killed by God
Filled by God
Our King who joins with waves
Will unite the world in mist

May the gods save us all.

********
********
Lesser Gael
Borderlands
The next day

********
It wasn't as cold on the mountains as Conrad had expected. No matter how much chill crept into the air, the ground remained unnaturally warm.

Despite the warmth, the barren peaks were harsher than they had appeared from the small encampment in Habalouge. The mountains curved into a nearly complete circle, serving as protection for the ancient Mazoku city. Reaching the only pass would mean an extra week's ride at least. And so at Yuuri's insistence they had decided to head directly up and over.

Horses had seemed like the best way to go about it. One for each of them, despite Yuuri's hints that he would have been more than happy to ride with Wolfram. Conrad was glad that Gisela was joining them, as she seemed to be the only one left with any ability to reign in Yuuri's need to be in constant contact with his younger brother.

Conrad was happy for them. There was nothing else for him to be-- but happy for them.

Wolfram must only be worried about decorum, now that Yuuri intended to take their engagement seriously. The Maou had even written to Gwendal to begin preparations for a wedding upon their return. That must be the reason Wolfram wasn't more... open about his happiness.

But Wolfram had been through so much. Conrad hardly knew his little brother anymore.

Conrad forced himself to stop thinking about any of it. He hadn't the right.

Now there were more pressing matters. The slope had worsened, barely manageable for the horses. And after this morning... There was nothing left to do but insist that they head back down. Retrace their path and go around the jagged peaks. Every day the trail had become more narrow, more rocky, before it had stopped all together. They had been going slowly since dawn. But this morning Yozak's horse had lost a shoe-- cut the tender part of its hoof on something sharp and bucked-- bucked while climbing a steep rocky path.

They had all been lucky.

Yozak had been out in front-- they had been lucky that Gisela had been riding far enough behind the lead horse to avoid a deadly chain of events. Yozak had jumped to safety but the horse had fallen backward-- slid. The poor creature had snapped its spine on the rocks.

Conrad had drawn his sword to put the pained beast out of its misery, but by the time he approached Yuuri had already changed. Already healed it instead.

He shouldn't have expected anything less. Yuuri always found a way to heal.

Conrad had sheathed his sword-- kept his distance while Wolfram steadied Yuuri as the Maou's power slipped away.

Even though Yuuri had insisted he didn't need it, they had decided to rest here for the remainder of the day. Made a small fire to heat a meal.

Yozak had left to scout ahead about an hour ago while Conrad had taken up a small watch away from the others. The area was bare. Nothing but rock and dirt and stale wind. There was no real reason to be keeping watch-- A coward's escape. An opportunity for a few moments alone. Conrad knew that Yozak thought they should head back as well-- but Yuuri wouldn't agree on anything that would set them back until they were sure the way ahead would be impossible. Yozak was only taking precautions.

Conrad hadn't expected Yozak to come along. Not after their last night at the camp in Habalouge.
But Yuuri had insisted.

Yozak should have stayed back to head up the remaining human men at the camp. Wolfram's corporal was too inexperienced-- too young to be left alone in charge of such an operation. Yozak shouldn't be there-- shouldn't be allowed to stay with them-- looking at him and knowing all the things that tore him up inside.

But Yuuri had insisted.

Conrad sighed and shifted his position on the unforgiving stone. He knew it was impossible-- that it was only in his mind-- but even after so long Conrad could still feel him when he closed his eyes.

Still shiver at the ghost of breath on his neck-- Yozak's voice in his ear-- his words-- the way it made him feel.

Pain that he deserved.

* * *

Yozak didn't return until nearly sunset, shadows long and grey, stretching along the barren mountainside.

But he wasn't alone.

Conrad stood to watch the figures approach from the distance-- farther up the mountain. Yozak and three others-- all shorter.

All children?

Conrad blinked. It was as if Yozak had gone back in time and made copies of himself-- or had sons. Three youths walked with him, all with hair just as red. Their clothes reminded him of what the man from Lesser Gael-- Tai-- had worn back when he had arrived with the little girl.

The girl that Reyes had killed. That Conrad's sword hadn't been quick enough to save.

Conrad could feel himself tense as he remembered king Saralegui and his guard. His escape-- both of their escapes had been--

"Evening, Captain." Yozak's smirk brought Conrad from his thoughts. "I don't think we'll be heading back tomorrow after all."

What must have been the oldest of the boys beside him spoke. "Greetings from the most ancient Gael. The arrival of Shin Makoku's king has been Seen by the Faithe. We have been sent to ensure all of you safe passage through the sacred mountains."

Conrad nodded sharply in acknowledgment, avoiding Yozak's twinkling eyes. "I'm sure His Majesty will be pleased to hear it."

The boy's eyes shifted to the group of tethered horses. "Such beasts cannot scale our mountains. These two will take them back down for you. I will lead the rest of your journey, if it pleases you." He bowed slightly. "I am Doyle of Milesius. If you have any requests, you have only to ask."

"Thank you."

Yozak slapped Conrad on the back and grinned. "No need to be so stiff, Captain. Doyle here's a trustworthy fellow. An excellent scout, too, to pop out of nowhere at me on a barren bit of rock like
The boy to Doyle's left spoke abruptly. "The sacred mountains are hardly barren rock. Though it is unsurprising that their riches cannot be felt by those of mixed birth."

Doyle sent the boy a glare. "The Lions of Ruttenburg deserve more respect, Tynan. It was not only Shin Makoku that their victory saved."

Tynan stared at the ground, jaw tight. "My apologies."

Yozak ruffled the boy's hair in forgiveness, rough treatment making young eyes go wide.

Conrad sighed. He had gotten used to far worse a long time ago. Still, since Yuuri had come it was easy to forget how progressive the capital had become.

Everything had changed so much. Yuuri had made things so much better for everyone. And Yuuri would continue to make things better-- make his baby brother truly happy for the first time since Conrad had ruined his chances for Belefield. Since he had lied to him.

Yuuri would build them a new world of peace. A world that wouldn't have any need for the likes of him.

Conrad would do everything he could to make sure of it.

He wouldn't fail again.

*******

*******

Lesser Gael
Borderlands
The following morning

*******

Yuuri shifted under his blankets and sighed. The sun had only just begun to rise and already Conrad, Yozak and the boys from Lesser Gael were moving quietly around the campsite, preparing for the day.

A few feet away a bit of sunlight had settled on Wolfram's cheek.

Yuuri still didn't understand how Wolfram could sleep so soundly with things the way they were. Ever since that night-- since that-- Yuuri hadn't been able to so much as breathe without wanting him. Without remembering that tight heat-- Wolfram's mouth on his.

He reached into his night-pants to give his erection a squeeze, as if the pain would help. This was hopeless. Yuuri was going to go crazy before they got to Lesser Gale, let alone returned to Blood Pledge Castle. Even going through a wedding didn't really seem so much a wedding as it did an obstacle. Another step to take before finally being allowed to touch Wolfram again.

Yuuri bit his lip and removed his hand from his night-pants, rolling onto his stomach instead. He tried to concentrate on his breathing-- the rock making a lump beneath his bedroll-- anything other than the fact that Wolfram was so close. Almost within arm's reach. Yuuri tried to remind himself that even if he were to try anything, Wolfram wouldn't let him. Even without Gisela enforcing the
rules, Wolfram didn't seem to be having any trouble with the arrangement. With not being close to him. Yuuri had told himself a hundred times that Wolfram was only worried about doing the proper thing. Wolfram had always been concerned with being proper, after all.

It still hurt.

Yuuri hated being the only one teased for not being able to keep his eyes to himself. Hated that Wolfram made it look so easy to act as if nothing had happened. Hated that the reason it must be so easy for Wolfram was that Yuuri hadn't been able to make it good for him. Yuuri had come so fast- -barely been able to make Wolfram come at all.

But now Yuuri was remembering how it felt-- the slick weight of Wolfram's cock in his hands. The way it had felt to touch him.

Yuuri squeezed his eyes shut even tighter, willing the image away.

There was no way he was going to make it.

* * *

An hour or so later they said goodbye to the two younger boys and their horses and started up the mountain on foot. As early as it was, it still felt good to be moving. To feel blood in his veins-- through his legs. Somewhere other than the ache in his groin.

It helped that Wolfram wasn't in front of him, but instead was separated from him by Murata, who was directly behind Yuuri. Even though the area was remote, they kept him and Murata in the middle of their line. Yozak guarded the front, following carefully after Doyle, with Conrad at the very end in case an attack were to come from that direction. Gisela followed Yozak, and there had been a time when walking directly behind any girl would have made Yuuri feel an awkward need to lower his eyes. Now all Yuuri felt was nothing, which was both good and bad.

Yuuri knew he had made his final decision. That he loved Wolfram and would never do anything to hurt him again. But Yuuri supposed he had always been lying to himself about his feelings in regards to women. And for a while it had been easier to let himself believe that he was just Wolfram-sexual. That Wolfram was the only man he could ever feel like this about. But the things Wolfram had said... the more Yuuri thought about it the more likely it seemed that without realizing it he had liked Conrad that way in the beginning. That he really had let his eyes wander in the changing room after baseball practice.

That he had never really been all that normal.

Maybe, before, the anxiety he had felt around pretty girls was because he didn't really feel the way he should about them. As hard is it was to accept that he was... like that... Yuuri also had to admit that in other ways it was a bit freeing not to worry so much about it anymore.

He had enough to think about as it was.

Yuuri paused as Gisela turned abruptly to the right, gave a small shout as she looked like she was going to walk straight into the face of the mountain. A moment later he felt like an idiot. The shadows on the rocks had only made it look like there wasn't a path. Once Yuuri was close enough he could see Gisela smiling back at him from a few steps down a narrow crevice.

"This trip is starting to get interesting, isn't it, Shibuya?" Murata smirked behind him.

Yuuri huffed. Murata had been doing far too much smirking lately. Driving him crazy.
Yuuri started down the narrow path without giving his friend a response. The rock beneath his feet was slick with use and Yuuri had to run his hand along the wall beside him for balance. For a while the path was only at a slight decline, but after a few more minutes of walking the slope seemed to become more and more like a slide than a path. A few more turns and the narrow crevice became a cave, almost black even with the sun shining over them. Doyle stood by the entrance until their entire group had caught up.

"The next part of our journey will be through the tunnels," Doyle explained. "Please be sure to follow the person in front of you as carefully as you can. A wrong turn on this path is nearly always fatal."

Yuuri swallowed thickly and stole a glance at Wolfram. Green eyes were focused at the blackness behind Doyle but snapped to him almost at once.

"Hear that, Wimp?" Be careful." There was sweat shining on Wolfram's brow and even in the early light Yuuri could tell he was more pale than normal.

Yuuri opened his mouth to ask if he was alright but Murata spoke first.

"Yes, Shibuya," he chuckled. "No daydreams on this leg of the journey if you can manage it."

Yuuri blushed and clenched his fists, glaring at his friend. He wished Murata would stop going out of his way to embarrass him.

Doyle gave them all an odd look, clearly surprised to witness such direct teasing of someone of Yuuri's status. Yuuri wondered if he should tell Murata to stop-- or would it be worse to admit that the teasing comments bothered him? Then again-- Murata wouldn't do anything that would put them in a politically delicate situation. After all, he knew so much more about the customs of this world, maybe there was something Yuuri was missing.

Yuuri held his tongue. He would just have to trust Murata for now. There had to be a reason he was doing what he was...

"There will be another opportunity for a rest an hour or so into the tunnels." Doyle lowered his head, obviously uncomfortable speaking over the now awkward silence. "Do you wish to take a moment here or press onward?"

Wolfram coughed.

Oh.

"I'm fine to keep going," Yuuri answered, licking his lips. "Is everyone else okay?"

Several nods of agreement and a few more worried glances in Wolfram's direction later they all took their first steps into the tunnels to Lesser Gael.

Yuuri could feel the air warm around him the deeper he walked. For the most part, the tunnel was like the narrow path they had taken to get to it, only covered. Minutes passed with only the sounds of their breath and echoed footsteps ringing in his ears. It was so dark. The light from outside had vanished a few turns ago, making even the white of Gisela's uniform seem a deep gray as she walked in front of him. Dark but not black.

Odd. Yuuri didn't know how he could see enough to put one foot in front of the other. It shouldn't be possible to see anything with the air around him so devoid of light. Like wearing night vision goggles in a video game, but without the green.
"Doyle," Yuuri spoke, startling himself with the abruptness of the sound against his ears. "This is probably a weird thing to ask... but, well, it's so dark, why haven't we been tripping all over each other? It's so dark... Why can I see?"

"The mountains protecting Lesser Gael breathe magic, Your Majesty. It's the magic that you're seeing, not any light."

Yuuri blinked. Magic instead of light? But what about people who couldn't use magic? "Conrad," Yuuri asked, "can you see it too?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Neither can I, Kiddo. Captain and I have to rely on our other skills, isn't that right?"

At the back of their line, Conrad coughed.

"Wolfram?" Yuuri was almost afraid to ask.

Everyone seemed to wait for his answer.

"Not very well, only brief flashes every so often." His voice was soft.

"Humm," Murata mused. "Interesting."

"Wolfram..." Yuuri wanted to touch him, for reassurance more than anything else. Hope welled inside him and he grinned. "That's... That's good, right?"

"Quite probably." Murata answered quickly. "But we can discuss this later. Shall we continue?"

"Yes. Of course, Your Grace." Doyle answered and started walking again.

Yuuri worried his lip but didn't argue. Wolfram could see the magic. That meant there must be a good chance that Wolfram could reaffirm his rites without anything bad happening. Wolfram should be able to get his magic back. Yuuri broke into a grin. It was obvious that Wolfram missed having his magic, it was so much a part of who he was. Wolfram would be so happy once he got it back! The mental image of a happy Wolfram made Yuuri's grin widen further.

They were finally on the path to making things right again.

* * *

The place Doyle claimed was safe to rest felt anything but. Up until now their journey had consisted of narrow tunnels with ceilings no higher than you could find in the average Japanese home. They turned fairly often, ignoring particular forks and breaks in the path until Yuuri gave up trying to picture their progress in his mind altogether and instead tried to think of anything besides the tons of mountain hovering over him, or why Murata was being such a pain. Still, over time Yuuri had gotten used to all that tight space and now... Now the place they sat in didn't even seem to have a ceiling. Or any other walls for that matter, the only exception being the wall that held the tunnel they had passed through. But even that path seemed to be nothing more than a darker spot of darkness from where he sat, even with the help of magic.

As always, after a while Yuuri's gaze found its way to Wolfram, whose brow was furrowed in concentration as he ate his lunch, squinting suspiciously before putting anything past his lips. Yuuri smiled and watched him for a while. Wolfram was his again, and Yuuri had a lifetime of furrowed brows and long overdue smiles to memorize.
Wolfram seemed to sense his staring and huffed, taking a larger bite than usual. All it did was make his cheeks bulge and Yuuri smile even harder.

There was still so much to deal with, though, and Yuuri felt his smile fade as he reminded himself that he still had responsibilities. Politics, the "plague" and Sara. Even though he hadn't forgotten, everything seemed... less impossible to manage when he could just look at Wolfram in peace. No taunting from Murata. No dirty thoughts.

Yuuri took a bite of his lunch and grimaced. The sound of his jaw squishing food seemed too loud in his ears. He did his best to ignore it.

Yozak and Doyle were having a half-whispered conversation that was somehow incomprehensible even though they were just a few feet away. Like being under water. Yozak was talking with his eyes closed and it was strange to look at. Yuuri supposed it wasn't really weird now that he thought about it, since Yozak's vision would be the same whether he had his eyes open or not.

Yuuri jumped a bit when Murata leaned in closer to him and spoke, breath tickling his ear. "I'm glad you've crossed your 'Shirakawa Barrier', Shibuya, but now is not the time to let your mind wander."

Yuuri blinked. "Shirakawa?" Then he groaned. "Is this really a time for a classical reference, Murata?"

Murata sighed, then pouted. "Why must no one appreciate my humor?" His face grew serious. "I suppose it can't be helped. Shibuya, you need to focus when we enter Lesser Gael. It is important how their leaders see you."

Yuuri frowned. "Which is why you've been going out of your way to humiliate me?"

Murata shifted closer, his face outlined in the silver of the air. "I was trying to discourage your behavior. I know you've come to terms with your more intimate feelings for Sir Belefield, and I am happy for you both, but it will not do for him to be so obviously the center of your attention. You are the Maou. Lesser Gael has never fully submitted to the Maou's leadership of the Allied Demon Nations. On top of that, the young Faithe's recent death as your guest puts us in a somewhat delicate position. It is not advisable that you make any weaknesses so easily known."

Yuuri could feel his heart begin to race. "You think that they may try to hurt Wolfram--"

"I'm not saying that. I am only suggesting that you remain aware of your position. Sir Belefield is in a delicate situation, too. I wouldn't suggest making things more complicated than they already are."

Yuuri nodded, almost to himself. It would be hard to stop paying attention to Wolfram, even for a short time, but not impossible if he had to in order to protect him. "You could have said something sooner, instead of all that teasing. I'm sure that didn't help Doyle or the others think of me as a proper Maou."

"It didn't hurt, really." Murata smirked. "Besides, it was fun."

Yuuri gave his friend a shove. "Jerk."

Murata only laughed.
Wolfram was tired of being in darkness. Of touching walls to find his path.

He could feel familiar power radiating from beneath him. Surrounding. A warmth he had all but given up.

The hope seemed small. Swallowed by the darkness. Every thought was choked with memory--despair. Naked and alone. The knowledge that not only was he weak but helpless.

No control over anything he did. Wanted.

Yuuri had decided that he wanted him, for the moment at least, but there was nothing Wolfram could do to make himself believe that Yuuri's attention was real. Was close to what Wolfram had felt for so long. Had felt.

Had felt.

Wolfram had no choice. He had to follow orders. He had to leave his hopes-- his men-- in Lucien's hands. Abandon his ambition for anything other than becoming Yuuri's pet. His toy. Thrown out when he was no longer wanted.

Wolfram caught his foot in the dark but only stumbled, jerking himself out of a daze. He frowned. The warmth of familiar magic was enough to allow his mind to relax-- wander from his careful thoughts. His focus. He didn't have time for doubt. He would not become a victim.

They would not win.

Before he had been captured, Wolfram had known so many things. How he felt. What he wanted. Where fate would take him in spite of it all. Somehow he had been able to persist. To chase Yuuri when there was no hope.

But that had been before he had felt it. That pit at the very bottom of the darkness. The place where he had broken.

Weak.

The things he had given up-- alone in the dark.

Wanting to die.

Killing himself to kill them--

Wanting it all to end.

Another flash of vision flooded his eyes. Gone like lightning in a storm. The path ahead had widened again. No more wall on which to trail his fingers.

Nothing but the dark. Wolfram clenched his jaw and continued forward.

He wouldn't let them win. Before those bastards had taken him-- He would have been able to be happy, more than happy, about the progress he had made with Yuuri. Wolfram wouldn't let them win. He would be happy. He would not doubt.

Who he was now-- this weakness-- it was something they had created. Wolfram wouldn't allow it to swallow him.

He would be who he was before. There was no other path. Anything else would mean defeat.
He would not lose.

Wolfram balled his hands into fists. Nails biting his skin. Those bastards would pay.

His fire had killed them-- but it wasn't enough. Wolfram wanted to watch them suffer by his hands. Hear their tortured screams echoing in his ears at night instead of his own.

And Marques had escaped.

Marques owed all of them answers.

It had taken Wolfram a long time to remember enough. To force himself to remember. But after what Lucien had told him about the day he was captured-- what Yozak had seen the day he was found-- It had to have been Marques.

Marques who looked like Yuuri. Talked to him like he was Yuuri.

_Touched him._

Bastard.

And yet Marques had saved him. Hadn't killed him. Lucien was convinced of his innocence, that he must have some purpose for doing what he had. For being there when Wolfram was taken. For the words--

The comfort that had kept him back from the darkest edge for so much longer than Wolfram could ever have done alone.

Marques had always been a pervert, and Wolfram had hated him for their-- incident. But Marques wasn't evil.

Wolfram didn't know what Marques was.

Another second of vision alerted Wolfram to how close he had come to walking into the Sage. He slowed his pace. His breathing.

There was no point in getting so worked up over Marques. There was nothing Wolfram could do about it now. Not until they found him.

Now all Wolfram had to do was focus on not falling over like an idiot. Or running into the Sage, who would likely make some needless comment, given his mood. Yuuri seemed to be tolerating the Sage's inappropriate behavior well enough. Growing up. How much had Yuuri managed to grow up without him? How quickly would he change again now that Wolfram was back in his life?

Wolfram sighed.

Yuuri had changed so much. Had done things he never would have-- _wanted him._ Come so easily at his touch. Drowning in the needs of flesh.

Wolfram had already forgotten the number of times that night had played itself over in his mind. Each sigh. Sweat on the edge of Yuuri's neck. The _stretch._ Yuuri's face when he came inside him.

And Yuuri still wanted him. Wolfram could see that night in Yuuri's eyes whenever he looked at him. Yuuri still wanted him.

Even though he was a man. Even though he knew he could have Conrad any time.
Yuuri wanted him.

Wolfram should be able to take comfort. Relax in that knowledge. The want in Yuuri's eyes.

Instead he felt the power in it. Remembered the years he spent in Yuuri's bed. Unable to touch him. So much time spent so very hard.

Petty revenge.

Was that who he was now? What they had made him?

Or was it what he had always been?

He loved Yuuri. He loved Yuuri. He loved Yuuri.

But could he ever love him enough not to feel some small pleasure at watching him squirm? Love him enough to be happy without any hope of satisfying his personal ambitions?

Selfish.

Selfish loafer.

He didn't deserve what he had.

If he even had it...

Wolfram nearly growled aloud in frustration. Damn his mind!

Vision flashed and Wolfram adjusted his course again, following the Sage at a careful distance.

No good seemed to come of any of his brooding. Marques was long gone and thoughts of Yuuri led to doubt and confusion at best, and at worst the erotic images of his time with Yuuri would morph into the memories Shinou had left in his mind. Images of the past. Private moments between Shinou and the Great Sage that Wolfram had thought successfully forgotten until-- until they set foot on this mountain.

As if there wasn't already too much in his head.

Wolfram wanted to go back. Just one moment of peace. A simple moment of watching Yuuri sleep or reading Greta one of Anissina's ridiculous stories.

Greta.

It had been nearly two days since his last letter to her.

He had been so busy-- so absorbed in himself that he had forgotten--

Wolfram's right hand cracked against the side of the rock. They must have re-entered a narrower tunnel. For a moment Wolfram relished the pain as his knuckles dragged against the sharp rock. Cutting flesh.

Selfish loafer.

How could he even hope to take care of anyone else when he was such a mess? Not a father. Not a fiancé.
Murata spread his bedroll on top of rock and sighed. It seemed too long since he had had a decent mattress beneath his back. Longer since his last uninterrupted sleep.

Dreams of Shinou usually only bothered him when he was at the temple, but the closer they climbed toward the raw power of the mountains the more he seemed to dream of his infuriating former king. Always the same place. Always the same half-remembered conversations and infernal hinting.

Pointless, all of it. Shinou was dead. Murata had helped kill the man himself.

Shinou's spirit should be at rest, not interrupting his.

It was nothing more than the perversions of his own mind. Dreams that didn't mean anything. There was no way that any part of Shinou's spirit was still alive. If it was--

If it was than Murata would know. Shinou would have contacted him in some way other than dreams.

The dreams were simply a result of Murata's subconscious. There was a perfectly logical explanation, as pathetic as that made him seem.

Still.

Shinou's words tugged at his mind.

"I've taken care of everything, my pretty Sage."

Murata snorted as he finished setting up his bed for the night. Everything.

Shou Shimeron's "plague". Shibuya's decision to rush his wedding to Sir Belefield. The mess concerning Sir Belefield's magic. Diplomacy with Lesser Gael.

There was a whole lot of "everything" for a manifestation of his dreams to have solved.

Murata narrowed his eyes as he watched Sir Belefield arrange his own bed several feet away. He seemed to be managing mostly by touch and Murata felt his suspicions rise about the truth of Sir Belefield's earlier statement. That he was able to see in any sense down here in the tunnels. His description of having his vision in flashes in particular seemed strange. If his magic was low he should simply have a low visibility, not sudden moments of bright clarity amidst nothing.

The incident with Sir Belefield's hand, too, was suspect. Shibuya had showed some restraint-- allowing Lady Gisela to heal the wound-- but that it had happened at all combined with the fact that Sir Belefield had tried to hide it made Murata question if Sir Belefield could actually see or if his flashes of vision were nothing more than wishful thinking.

Murata yawned.
Exhaustion always seemed to add to his pessimism and they had been walking almost non-stop all day. Even though he couldn't see the blackness surrounding him, it was dark enough when he closed his eyes that Murata suspected he would have no trouble falling asleep.

Staying asleep was a separate matter.

* * *

Murata woke in sweat to an unnameable sound. A deep pounding that seemed to come from the rock itself. There was a moment where he considered the heartbeat of the mountain itself before he was asleep again.

Back to the staggering brightness of the garden.

Murata could almost feel Shinou's smirk against the back of his neck.

"You'll remember what I said, won't you? About you always being mine." Blue eyes shone with want.

Murata narrowed his eyes. "Shibuya is king now--"

"Yes, yes." Shinou stood and moved to stand directly behind him. "And another coming." He chuckled. "I should have known you would be right about that prophecy. In my defense..." He leaned closer, arms draped over Murata's shoulders. Breath on his ear. "...someone had me a bit worked up at the time. You should know how I get when--"

"Selfish and hot-headed like you always are!" Murata jerked away from his grasp, surprised for a moment that it worked. He turned to glare.

Shinou pouted. "To be fair it sounded probable. I was already suffering under Shoushi's influence." He looked away. "I was scared of destroying everything we had built--"

Murata gasped as he was shaken into consciousness. Hands tight on his shoulders. He blinked--squinting in the odd vision of magic.

"Murata!" Shibuya's face was full of concern. "Are you alright? We tried to wake you but you were hardly breathing. Everyone was worried!"

Lady Gisela was hovering over him as well. "How are you feeling, Your Grace?"

"I'm fine," Murata managed, once he had caught his breath from the shock of being so suddenly pulled from his dreams. "It's been a while since I've slept deeply is all. My body is just tired. I'm sorry to have worried you."

Shibuya bit his lip but didn't say anything else, glancing at Lady Gisela instead.

The medic frowned and touched Murata's forehead.

Murata had to hold back a grimace. He had always hated the tingle of magical examination.

Gisela sighed. "You seem fine."

Behind him Doyle spoke. "It's my fault they're so worried, Your Grace. The mountains take people sometimes. The magic--" A pause. "It hasn't happened in centuries. I should have said something--but your safe arrival was Seen and I didn't think... I wanted to save concern-- But then you weren't responding..." He lowered his head. "My most sincere apologies, Your Highness-- Your Grace."
Murata shook his head. "How soon will we be arriving in your country? Will we need to spend another night?"

"No, Your Grace," Doyle answered quickly. "We should be arriving later today."

"Good." They couldn't risk Shibuya to something like this. A quick glance at Sir Weller and Sir Belefield confirmed a similar concern.

"We can continue as soon as you're ready." Doyle bowed his head.

Murata nodded slowly and stood.

* * *

The pounding sound not only continued but grew as they made their way through the winding tunnels. It was Shibuya who eventually asked about the noise, and Doyle had revealed that it was actually the sound of drums. Drums to honor and announce their arrival.

Murata had barely managed to hold his tongue. As far as he knew, the drums were not to be sounded in welcome for the Maou. They hadn't even been struck in Shinou's honor all those years ago, back when he was at the height of his power.

The drums of Lesser Gael were reserved for their True King.

Did they truly believe it to be Shibuya?

Murata could understand their logic to some degree, but in reality it was impossible. The first prophecy could easily speak of Shibuya, but even as the Maou he would be incapable of the kind of destruction the later prophecy described. The vengeful range-- It was why Shinou had been so sure it spoke of him.

Murata hadn't believed him at first. But then Shinou's corruption by Soushi had come to light... Murata had been so blinded by his own fear that he had let himself forget how much the original prophecy seemed to say nothing of Shinou.

One prophecy that fit Shibuya, another Shinou, but both spoke of the same man.

In all likelihood the elders of Lesser Gael were simply erring on the side of caution. It would be better to risk showing more respect than failing to show enough. The elders had yet to meet Shibuya for themselves, though the Taibhsear had been sent. As he had yet to return they would have only heard vague tales of Shibuya's great benevolence and power.

And who knew. Perhaps Murata was wrong again and Shibuya really was to become the True King of Gael.

He squinted as a splash of light came into view. Murata allowed himself a small sigh of relief. It would be nice to feel the sun on his skin.

********

********

Capital City of Lesser Gael
Four hours later

********
Yuuri didn't know how he would be able to eat any of the food that the sprawling expanse of table cloth promised with the way his nerves were fluttering in his stomach. At least they were sitting on the ground. One thing that was familiar after the unending stream of strange formality that hadn't stopped since they had first left the mountain tunnels.

The cushion he was sitting on was firm and thick and reminded him of the few times his grandparents had taken him to a temple before they passed away. Yuuri remembered feeling so lost. Restless. Sitting still on his cushion while the chanting of the people around him blended into noise and the heavy smell of incense made his stomach turn.

Back then he had felt lost and uncomfortable, but more than anything he remembered the awe and respect he had felt for this thing that he didn't understand. This place and practice that made so many adults so still. That time he was supposed to be focusing on the air in front of him, but Yuuri could still remember the ornate picture over the altar. The blooming lotus and images of the Pure Land. Beliefs so old they had changed a thousand times yet remained.

Like most Japanese, Yuuri had grown up visiting Shinto shrines to welcome the new year and Buddhist temples to honor the dead. His mother's favorite holiday was Christmas and there was a decorative cross hanging in their living room. Yuuri supposed it was part of why he had never thought twice about all the various religious practices in this world.

Shinou's temple reminded him of the fancy church from his parent's wedding photos. Wolfram said a prayer when he summoned complex fire. Greta had talked about all sorts of Subaralian traditions when they had first adopted her, but less now that she had noticed how uncomfortable it seemed to make Wolfram. This world had its own religions and traditions. Yuuri didn't need to understand them to respect them as being important to someone else. Important to his friends. His family.

Now Yuuri wished he had learned at least a little more about this world's religions. About the magic that seemed to be so much a part of it. Somehow it hadn't seemed nearly so present in Shin Makoku. The capital seemed to focus on Shinou, who was as much a figure in their history as he was divine. It wasn't like people didn't treat Shinou's word as law, or weren't willing to go to great lengths to follow him. Even Conrad had betrayed him to obey Shinou. But even then, something about it had felt more political than religious.

In Lesser Gael Yuuri could feel their religion in the air, see it in everything around him. Even the ground felt sacred.

The elders of Lesser Gael were more like priests-- like Ulrike-- than they were like any of the other political leaders that Yuuri had met in this world. Their hair was covered in braids and colored rope and each of their faces was painted with its own unique pattern of blue. Their demeanor-- how every movement and word was so careful-- made Yuuri feel like he had walked into a kabuki play. Living tradition in vibrant color.

Yuuri wished he could pull Wolfram aside to get a quick explanation of things. Wolfram had always been good about explaining things to him. Good at giving rewards...

But Wolfram had been taken away by some more girls like Frith to prepare him for his visit to Ethne. Yuuri almost pouted. Wolfram's reaffirmation of his rites wasn't scheduled until dawn tomorrow, surely he shouldn't be kept so far away from him right now. Yuuri supposed he could try to ask Murata, but his friend had seemed to be in a particularly foul mood since the incident this morning, and of course there was the worry that he would be caught asking a stupid question, which would undoubtedly hurt the respect that the elders so clearly felt for him.

Now, more than ever, Yuuri couldn't afford to be a disappointment.
He sat up straighter on his cushion as the head of the elders, Master Eoin, leaned in to speak with him. "Your Majesty," he began, even though Yuuri had asked him to use his given name a dozen times, "are you sure there is nothing else you require before the meal? The Faithe would be overjoyed to dance for you if you'd like. Or perhaps a ballad? Master Quilliam can sing the History of Three Worlds beautifully."

Yuuri could feel the blood drain from his face at the mention of the fire dances. That poor girl. "No." Yuuri swallowed thickly. "I mean, first I need to apologize."

To his right, Murata sent him a careful glance.

Yuuri steeled himself and continued. "I am so, so sorry that I was unable to do more to save Frith." He took a breath, tried in vain to force down tears. "She was so young... It happened so fast and there was nothing I could do... I'm so sorry."

Yuuri could still see it when he closed his eyes. The blood. The way Frith's body had simply stopped. Crumpled. Tai's face in anguish. The sound of his desperate cry. The splatter of blood on Greta's cheek.

Yuuri hadn't been able to do a thing.

Yuuri opened his eyes when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Master Eoin. "You are not to blame for what happened." The old man's face was hard. Yuuri bit his lip. Of course. It would make sense for them to blame Reyes. Reyes who had escaped. And yet, Reyes had only acted to protect his king. Yuuri raised a hand to wipe stale tears from his face.

The master continued, "We knew that her death was a possibility when she was sent. We also knew her master Taibhsear's death was possible." He paused, removing his hand. "As was your own."

Yuuri could feel Conrad go tense behind him. The click of metal as he touched his sword. "What?" Yuuri sputtered in confusion. "I don't understand."

Master Eoin was perfectly still. "No one can fully understand. Perhaps they should not have gone and perhaps they should have left sooner."

Murata's glasses caught the light. "I'm sure you realize that you owe more of an explanation than that, after such a threat."

The old man shook his head. "I did not mean it to sound as a threat, and for that I apologize. You see, Frith Saw a prophecy before she and her Taibhsear were sent to Shin Makoku. A prophecy that warned of a great danger to befall Our King."

"So you believe him to be living now." Murata spoke to master Eoin but his eyes were fixed on Yuuri. "The True King of Gael."

Yuuri blinked. Was Murata insinuating that they thought Gael's True King was him? But Wolfram had said it was probably Shinou...
Master Eoin nodded. "Our King has been Seen in many of our recent prophecies, though some doubt still remains as to his identity." Then Master Eoin looked at Yuuri, blue-green eyes alight. "We have heard many great things about you, Your Majesty. When Our King's death by another king's order was prophesied we could not do nothing. You were our best hope."

"But if it wasn't Shibuya, then Tai and his Faithe were prepared to do anything to protect Gael's future King-- even if it meant an attempt on Shibuya's life."

Master Eoin lowered his head in recognition. "We had hoped it would not come to that."

"But Frith attacked Sara, not me."

"Yes," the master answered. "What we have heard from Tai indicates that the one who would attempt to kill our king was in fact King Saralegui."

Yuuri clenched his fists. No. Sara wouldn't hurt anyone-- It was Reyes. Reyes who was controlling Sara. Yuuri wouldn't believe his friend would try to hurt anyone of his own free will.

"I know it is against tradition," Murata spoke carefully. "But do you think it would be possible to hear this prophecy? Perhaps hearing it would help us to figure out the identity of Gael's True King for certain."

For a while master Eoin was silent. Then, "Alright." He leaned toward the closest of the other elders. "Taggart, would you go and fetch Kellan?"

"Yes, of course." The man nodded and stood.

Once he was gone, Master Eoin made a small gesture and platters of food began to make their way to the table, carried by men and women wearing the now-familiar blue plaid.

"While we wait, please enjoy some food." Master Eoin turned to him and smiled. "We've prepared quite the feast."

Yuuri did his best to return the smile.

* * *

Yuuri was already full by the time master Taggart returned with Kellan, and while they had waited the sky had turned from blue to purple, settling near red. Red above the now-black silhouette of the surrounding peaks. The one break in the natural walls of rock faced west, and Yuuri had watched in appreciation as the sun had lowered precisely in the pass. As if it had been the sun that sliced the stone.

When Kellan arrived so did the other Faithe, the youngest of which was pulling Wolfram by the hand. Instead of coming to kneel before them like Kellan, Wolfram and the younger girls moved to sit at another table which until now had been empty. Yuuri tried to catch his fiancé's eye, but Wolfram seemed to be absorbed in conversation with the little girl who had held his hand. He was smiling.

Yuuri worried his lip and tried to be anything instead of jealous.

"Your Majesty." Kellan bowed her head. "It is an honor to be called before you."

Yuuri gave her a nervous smile. Kellan looked like she was nearly his age and was very pretty. Like all the other times Yuuri had been introduced to pretty girls, he could feel the growing worry
that soon Wolfram would find a time to pull him aside and yell. Not that Wolfram had anything to worry about. No matter how pretty any girl was, she could never compare to Wolfram. "It's an honor to meet you, too," he managed.

"Kellan is the Head of the Faithe," Master Eoin informed them. "It is only proper that she be the one to speak the prophecy to you." He looked at Kellan. "Master Taggart has informed you which one we will permit our guests to hear, I trust?"

The girl nodded and closed her eyes. When they opened again a moment later her pupils had gone impossibly wide. No white remained, only a deep darkness that seemed to pull at the light around them. She spoke. "Our King, he gives it away-- The king will take it-- The king will order it done-- The king must die, to save Our King." Her eyes snapped shut, tension leaving her back and shoulders.

Yuuri glanced at Murata, whose lips were tight with concentration.

"Thank you, Kellan," said Master Eoin. "You may go."

Kellan nodded at them again before leaving to join Wolfram and the rest of the Faithe at their table.

Yuuri watched her go and waited for Murata to explain. The word "king" had appeared so many times that to Yuuri it seemed impossible to tell who was doing what. Who was ordering, giving, or taking. He spun Wolfram's ring on his finger as he waited for the tense moment to pass.

Murata let out a long sigh before speaking. "So the prophecy speaks of at least two kings, correct? Possibly three or even four?"

"Yes, our thoughts were the same," Master Eoin answered.

Murata adjusted his glasses. "So what we can tell for certain is that the first and last mention of a king, 'Our King', refers to Gael's True King... And 'The king who must die' must have been King Saralegui, or else Frith would not have tried to kill him."

Master Eoin nodded.

"That still leaves... two more kings, right? The one who takes it and the one who makes an order?" Yuuri wondered aloud. He had to. If he didn't he would say something else. Defend Sara. Things no one else seemed to want to hear.

"Yes," Murata answered. "According to the prophecy, Gael's King gives something to another king, who takes it, whatever 'it' may be. Then a king, who could either be the one who takes it, orders it, or both, must die."

Yuuri frowned. This was impossible. Vague. How could anyone have made any kind of decision-- one that had ended in the death of an innocent little girl-- on something so vague?

Master Eoin continued. "It is also unlikely that four kings would be involved. The king who takes and the king who orders, one of them must be the same king who must die. It is unlikely that the prophecy would speak so non-specifically about someone not already mentioned."

Murata nodded in agreement. "So to simplify what we know so far... 'Gael's King will give it away; king A will take it; king A, or possibly B, will order it done; King Saralegui, who could be A or B or both, must die to save Gael's King."
Master Eoin let out a heavy sigh. "If we were positive of the identity of our king, this would not be so difficult."

Again, Yuuri worried his lip. If they knew who Gael's King was then they could try to figure out what he gave, which would eventually lead them to who had taken it, thereby solving more of the puzzle. But as far as Yuuri was concerned there were still too many variables unknown to have any hope of figuring things out for sure. Both Murata and Master Eoin seemed to believe that there was at least a chance Gael's King was him, but what had Yuuri given that would even remotely involve Sara?

Friendship? Trust? Wolfram's status as his fiancé, at least temporarily.

Yuuri twisted his ring and sighed. They were never going to figure this out. Why couldn't he just eat dinner with Wolfram... spend time alone... Anything but talk about Sara like he was evil-- about a decision based on a vague prophecy that had lead to a pointless death.

"Well, it seems like until more is known there is no way to discover the meaning of this prophecy for certain." Murata sighed. "Thank you for sharing it with us. I am sorry I was unable to provide more insight."

Master Eoin nodded.

Yuuri swallowed thickly. So casual. Both of them. "I still don't understand why you sent her to me. She died." His voice was shaking. "What about that prophecy made that decision right?" Now Yuuri had the full attention of not only master Eoin, but all of the elders. His body felt alive with power. Anger. Justice. "What purpose did the death of a child serve to your King?"

Master Eoin licked his lips before he spoke. "Any one of us-- Any member of the elders, faithe, or community would gladly die in Our King's service. The prophecy warned not only of the possibility of his death, but of the need for him to be saved from a path which will lead him toward unimaginable destruction. Of fire that consumes the world. Worse than the tragedy of Our King's death is the danger of his corruption. A darkness which leads to the deaths of millions. We did not send Frith to die, Your Majesty. We sent her in the hope that if it came to it she might help to save our world."

Yuuri barely managed to suppress the Maou's power. Hands fisted and shaking in his lap.

Behind him Conrad shifted, and Yuuri tensed in preparation for a touch of comfort that never came.

* * *

They didn't talk about prophecies for the rest of the meal. Instead, Yuuri sat in silence while Murata and Master Eoin discussed Tai's appointment as a temporary ambassador, as he was already at the castle and more than qualified.

And so Yuuri spent his time watching Wolfram.

Now that the sun had set, a mass of torches had been lit and dancing had begun in earnest. Tables had been moved aside to make room and everywhere that Yuuri looked seemed to be filled with flickering light and dancing figures. The music was much faster than the classical, waltz-style that was popular in Shin Makoku. Here there was more jumping and laughing and it all seemed so very free.

The little girl who seemed so attached to Wolfram had pulled him onto the dance floor as soon as
the music had started. It had been so hard for Yuuri to keep a stupid grin off of his face as he watched. Wolfram really was great at dancing. He picked up all the steps remarkably fast and was soon caught up in the circles and lines of the dancing citizens of Lesser Gael.

Even Yozak and Gisela had gotten to try the dancing. And even though neither of them were quite as skilled as Wolfram it was clear that they were having a good time. The benefits of not being king.

Yuuri wanted to be out there dancing with Wolfram, even if he looked like an uncoordinated fool. Yuuri was so caught up with watching and wanting that he jumped a bit when master Eoin leaned closer to him to speak.

"Your friend is very lucky. Not many could survive for so long without their gift once they have had it blessed by Ethne."

"Lucky," Yuuri murmured, unable to take his eyes away from Wolfram. "I don't know what I would do without him."

"Pretty words, Shibuya," Murata teased. Then he faced master Eoin. "His Majesty and Sir Belefield are planning a wedding. Though it is happening soon, we are appallingly behind on the preparations and have yet to send out the invitations. Yourself and any other guests from Lesser Gael would be more than welcome to attend if you so choose."

Master Eoin's lips formed a careful smile. "I would be honored to attend." He looked at Yuuri. "Congratulations, Your Majesty. It is not common that one finds their anam carna so young. The gods have smiled on you."

Yuuri blushed. "Thank you." Then, "Anam carna?"

Master Eoin nodded. "Soul friend. The way you look at him. You reach with magic as well as your eyes. If you were to complete the ritual there is a potential for a merging of magic, beyond the political union."

"Shibuya's magic opposes Sir Belefield's--"

"A fact of which I am well aware. I felt His Majesty's power. It is true his bond with water conflicts with his anam carna's fire, but with magic as strong as His Majesty's I expect he would be able to achieve a more traditional union of kings."

Murata's glasses caught the light. "There is a reason the old ways are no longer practiced. It is a needless risk. A mistake would kill them."

Yuuri shivered. He had thought about enough things that could possibly kill Wolfram in the past few months to last a dozen lifetimes. He didn't even want to attempt to process another. Getting married was a big enough step as it was...

Murata put a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, Shibuya. You went from red to pale there. I guess Sir Belefield has had too many close calls of late to risk it."

Yuuri managed a nod.

"His magic tells some of the story, but not all." Master Eoin gave Murata a sharp look. "His Majesty's anam carna has fed from both of his potentials-- but not enough."

"Fed?" Murata spoke even as Yuuri opened his mouth.
"You know of what he has done, then?" Murata continued. "The ritual is so old. I haven't been able to learn all of the details."

Master Eoin sighed. "Yes, it is old. All but lost." He gave Murata a smug sort of smile. "All but lost, but without it... Well, I am surprised that your anam carna was able to do it at all. That kind of instinct speaks of power I have rarely known."

"You said fed, though." Yuuri licked his lips. "What happened with Lucien..." He couldn't bring himself to finish.

The look Master Eoin gave him was grave. "He fed off of magic. A pact that is sealed with blood. With flesh. However, he did not take enough to truly heal himself from either of them. To truly heal he would have needed to consume them completely."

Yuuri looked at Wolfram again, had to see him happy and alive. Yuuri could only imagine how much more hurt Wolfram would have been. How much Wolfram would have hated himself if he had given in.

"So he did take from both..." Murata mused. "I suspected that that was how he was able to survive."

Yuuri blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The two Sir Belefield received his rites with," Murata answered quickly, almost an aside. "Lucien we already were sure of, but since Marques was there during Sir Belefield's capture-- It not only confirms his presence, but explains how Sir Belefield was able to live long enough for you to save him."

Yuuri could feel his heart begin to race. That's right. Marques. Marques who had gotten Wolfram to Yozak and then disappeared. Wolfram had been so hurt... He probably didn't even remember it.

"Sir Belefield's jaw was broken at the time, though," Murata continued. "Would he still have been able to take Marques' magic?"

"Yes," Master Eoin answered simply. "As long as blood was drawn."

"Interesting." Murata adjusted his glasses. "If you have time before we leave I would love to talk to you more about this."

"Of course." Master Eoin bowed his head. "Your Majesty," he said to Yuuri. "If you wouldn't mind, I would like you to describe your anam carna to me. What he looks like is hidden to my eyes, behind the magic that is not his. I see a man with dark hair. Though he is handsome enough, I would like to hear of the man who has gained the favor of such a powerful king."

Yuuri blinked and felt his cheeks go hot. Master Eoin saw with magic? Couldn't see Wolfram? It must be like when they were in the tunnels... "Well he's-- he's blond... And, I suppose if you've seen a portrait of Shinou you would have a good idea of what he looks like. Everyone says Wolfram looks just like Shinou when he was younger, only Wolfram's eyes are green."

Master Eoin nodded. "I am familiar with the image of His Majesty Shinou. You are a lucky man."

Yuuri gave a nervous laugh. "Thank you." Then he folded his hands in his lap and allowed his eyes to find Wolfram again. Wolfram's face was flushed and this time when Yuuri looked at him he was looking back.
Wolfram woke feeling refreshed for the first time in months. He hadn't expected to enjoy the banquet as much as he had the previous night. The dancing in combination with a glass of mulled wine had put him into a deep sleep from the moment his head hit the pillow.

He smiled as he opened his eyes and climbed from his bed. It was still dark, but dawn would mark the day he reaffirmed his rites. The day he would get his magic back.

Wolfram had spent the night in a room of the Faithe's temple, along with Gisela and Kellan, the eldest of the Faithe. Muriel and the younger girls had their own quarters.

Yesterday Wolfram had been surprised that so much preparation had been necessary for today's ceremony. The first time he had come to Lesser Gael they had only been greeted by one of the elders. Wolfram hadn't expected to get so much attention from all of the Faithe. Or for them to act so much like little girls fawning over a new playmate. The Faithe were the most sacred remnant of the old ways. Human girls given the most precious of blessings by by the mazoku gods. A reminder of the importance that humans and demons be able to coexist.

Of course the humans failed to appreciate the sacred calling of their children. Waile of "kidnapping". Killed the mazoku children that were offered in their place. No matter how much Yuuri loved the humans, there were some practices Wolfram knew he could never forgive.

Wolfram's smile had faded by the time he had finished preparing for the day. Though he had slept in a separate room and it was still well before dawn, he couldn't bring himself to be surprised to see Yuuri, smiling sleepily at him from the table that had been laid with an array of food. Conrad, Yozak and the Sage were there as well, along with one of the elders.

Yuuri stood to greet him, forgetting of course that it was inappropriate and would force all those already seated to stand. Then Yuuri rushed forward to hug him.

"Yuuri," he whispered disapprovingly, but the wimp only held him tighter.

"Don't," Yuuri breathed. "I missed you."

Even though it was stupid, Wolfram found himself smiling again. Allowed himself to enjoy the moment. Feel how much Yuuri had missed him.

Yuuri stepped back and smiled, leaving them both blushing from the incredibly public display.

No one mentioned anything over the silence as they all took their seats. Yuuri's eyes lingered on him, though, and so did the warm feeling at being the center of his wimp's attention.

"So." Yuuri licked his lips. "Today is the day. How are you feeling? Nervous?"

"You seem nervous enough for the both of us," Wolfram teased, hiding his smirk behind his cup as he took a sip of hot honeyed milk.

Yuuri pouted and it was unendingly cute.
Wolfram did his best not to grin. Getting his magic back combined with the rush of sweet made it all too easy to be happy about other things. The excitement of what was to come. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so happy. This hope. Hope for magic. Real hope for a life with Yuuri.

They were going to get married.

This time Wolfram didn't even try to hide his smile.

Breakfast was eaten for the most part in silence. Wolfram was seated next to Yuuri and he was able to keep the wimp's obvious concern at bay by indulging him in the occasional, though subtle, brush of hand or foot.

Or so he thought.

"It's going to be okay, right?" Yuuri gave the elder a pleading look. "Wolfram is going to get his magic back and everything will be fine?"

"We can't be certain, Shibuya," the Sage answered. "I've told you that a dozen times."

Kellan put down her cup. "Actually, we can be certain," she said softly. "Sir Belefield's connection to his magic is very great. Ethne is already excited. Her hopes are almost overwhelming."

"It is true." The elder nodded. "I've never felt anything close to this from the mountain." Then he gave Wolfram a strange look.

"That's good then?" Yuuri asked. "Ethne wouldn't be excited to do anything bad to Wolfram?"

"I have a feeling that your anam carna will be fine, Your Majesty," the elder assured.

Anam carna?

Wolfram looked at the elder. Was he daft? Yuuri had already taken Water. Still... A bond like that would ensure Yuuri was his until they died. A tantalizing prospect, though it was impossible.

Wolfram sighed. At least now Yuuri seemed to be somewhat reassured, and Wolfram found himself once again the subject of Yuuri's gaze.

"So, what do you have to do? Is it the same thing as before? What did you have to do the first time?" Yuuri leaned closer to him to speak.

Wolfram shook his head. "Nothing terribly complicated. We just took turns going before Ethne to receive our blessing." Wolfram could remember being so nervous the first time. Having to go into the mountain alone, naked. The awe of standing before a god. Wolfram could only remember being there for a moment, but somehow his blessing had taken much longer than both Marques and Lucien's. Strange, though, how now all he could feel was elation. No nervousness at all. Perhaps it had something to do with the excitement of Ethne the Faithe could feel.

Whatever it was, Wolfram could hardly wait for the dawn.

* * *

The sun was just beginning to peek above the mountains, casting the world in grey. Wolfram did his best to sit still as Kellan's fingers traced the contours of his face in prayer. He opened his eyes when her motion stopped to see her looking at him with an unreadable gaze.
"The world has been too cruel. Take comfort in your healing." The she bowed and left him. Alone before the entrance.

Patterns of blue crawled from the depths of the cave. Painted centuries upon centuries ago. The patterns told the story of how the world began in a language lost to all but the collective memory of the Faithe. It told of the origin of the gods and of the sorrows and wars between them. Of the fire and water, wind and stone that together had made the world. Of how their power had been too great and they had been trapped in prisons of their own design, no longer able to travel freely on a world of their own making. A sacrifice for the children of this world.

Through their blessings, the power of the gods was able to walk with the footsteps of their chosen people. Over fifty years ago Ethne had chosen him. Ethne had freed the magic he had been born with. Channeled it into something he could use. And in all his life that power was the only thing that had ever earned him respect.

Wolfram took a deep breath and finished taking off his clothes. Even though he was surrounded by dense woods and no one was permitted to come near the sacred space, it was still unnerving being so naked. Another breath and Wolfram headed into the darkness of the cave. The rock was warm and smooth beneath his feet and only got hotter the farther he walked.

Soon the dim light from outside faded completely and left him to the darkness and the bare echo of his footsteps. Occasionally his vision would flash, revealing only more and more open space. An unending wound of rock.

After a while Wolfram could feel sweat begin to trail between his shoulder blades, bead on his neck and forehead. His heart pounded in his ears and he tried to remember if he had really walked so far the first time.

And then the cave was filled with fire.

Wolfram covered his face-- felt the flames lap at his skin. Threading through his hair.

But none of it burned.

**Bright One.** The fire cooed, crackling in his ears as it pressed against him. *I missed you so.*

Wolfram shivered. **Opened his eyes against the light.**

The fire danced around him. Giddy laughter filled his head. Surrounded his thoughts. *I waited so long for one like you. For you to be ready. To come back to me.*

"What?" Wolfram wanted to say, but the world was swallowed by the flames.

And then the hot-- the crackling bright-- had found its way inside-- pouring in his mouth. Wolfram couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. The fire burned without burning. Everywhere was heat and there was no place for it to stop.

The fire roared. Joy. Rapture--

**There is so much room. He used you-- the once mortal king. Used what's mine.**

Everything seemed to move faster. More moments to fill with fire.

**Do not worry, my Bright One. I have waited far too long, to wait for another now.**
The fire laughed. Cackled in its joy as it filled him. Until there was nothing left. Nothing left to feel.

And then he was nothing but the fire. But the mountain. But magic.

And for a moment he was gone.

Then everything was pain.

The fire screamed.

The fire screamed and everything stopped.

* * *

It was dark. The floor was hard where Wolfram sat. A wooden floor.

Panic.

Panic until there was the brush of soft fabric against his cheek and Wolfram realized he was in another place entirely. Somewhere safe. The closet of his childhood bedroom. What once had been his favorite place to hide.

Wolfram pushed the door open slowly, wincing at the creek.

It really was his old bedroom, complete with a pile of Gwendal's knitted creatures stacked upon his bed. Wolfram stepped out of the closet, noticing that even though his room was unchanged from the time he was a child, he was still his current size. Wearing his blue lieutenant's uniform, cravat tight and comforting against his throat.

And then he turned and there was Shinou, sitting in the armchair by the door.

Whatever calm the familiarity of his room and dress had given vanished instantly. He was dead. He was dead.

"You are not dead, Sir Belefield." Shinou smirked and stood. "And very soon you are to be more alive than you have ever been."

"What?" Wolfram took a step back in awe as Shinou approached.

"I don't have a lot of time, so you're going to have to listen instead of asking questions." Shinou crossed his arms.

Wolfram managed a nod.

"First I must apologize for far too much. For using your body while I was corrupted by Soushi, and for leaving a small part of myself there after I became free of him."

Wolfram opened his mouth, but managed to stop the question.

Shinou gave him another smirk. "I used those memories as a shield of sorts, to keep you from finding me. I had a feeling you wouldn't be one to... think too hard on such intimate moments from long ago."

Wolfram could feel his cheeks get hot. Intimate moments indeed.
"I learned a lot about you, before you were even born. I could feel you coming, though I wasn't sure it was you until I was too far under Soushi's power to have much influence. Until we shared your body. I could feel the seeds that Ethne had sewn the first time you had your blessing. Her plans to use your potential for her own selfishness." He fixed Wolfram with a hard look. "You have a complicated destiny, Sir Belefield, one too great for me to risk entirely up to fate." Then he sighed and retook his seat, legs crossed and eyes a weary blue.

"What do you mean?" Wolfram couldn't help but ask. "What plans? What destiny?"

Another sigh. "Ethne wanted to steal your form as I once did. Her power is very great, and it was likely that she would see more days than you. Your magic has always been so much more than most, Sir Belefield. Ethne planned to abuse this connection that you have to walk the world again. She would have stolen your body, your life. And would have likely set many lives ablaze before our Yuuri would be able to bring himself to stop you."

Wolfram swallowed thickly. "And now?"

"Now you should be able to contain her most of the time. This is not the first time a god has tried to walk, you know. I was able to handle it quite well the last time." A wink.

"The Maou," Wolfram breathed. "But how... How do you know this? How were you able to--"

"Being me has its advantages." Shinou smirked. "Anyway, setting this trap for Ethne within you, among other things, has kept me from visiting others who would have missed me. I still have a great deal more to do, but you'll send my apologies to the Sage, won't you?"

Wolfram nodded. His mind was spinning. This was all too much.

And then the room began to dim.

"Wait!" Wolfram rushed forward.

But it was too late.

********
********
Lesser Gael
Borderlands
Later that day

********

Yuuri squirmed on the overstuffed cushion covering his carriage seat. Though it was a much more comfortable carriage than the one they had taken to meet Wolfram in Habalouge, Yuuri still hadn't expected to spend the day sitting down. He tried leaning against the wall to his right and sighed. At least this time he got to spend the ride looking at Wolfram.

Kellan had come to them this morning after Wolfram had started his ritual to reaffirm and had all but insisted that they begin to make ready for their departure. She and some of the other Faithe had brought them this fancy carriage and more than enough supplies to get them all to Caloria. Everything had been prepared by the time Wolfram had returned from the woods, tired and all but glowing from his success.

Wolfram had his magic back. Yuuri smiled as he let the comforting thought wash over him for the hundredth time.
They had left soon after Wolfram's return. Looking back, Yuuri felt a little weird about the fact that he didn't get to say goodbye to the elders or anyone else. Kellan had assured them that everything was fine and Yuuri had been so happy that everything was going to be alright that he hadn't really thought about it at the time. Yuuri brushed his concerns aside. Murata would have said something if it wasn't alright.

Wolfram was currently sitting across from him in the tiny carriage, eyes closed as he rested his head against the curtain-covered wall. Murata had decided to sit in the driver's seat with Gisela, and Yozak and Conrad were riding one in front and the other behind, leaving Yuuri alone in the tiny carriage with Wolfram.

Of course, the walls were thin and there was no glass in the windows, so there was little chance that they would get up to anything inappropriate.

But a little chance was still a chance.

Yuuri left Wolfram in peace for a few minutes more before shifting over to squeeze into the small space beside him. Wolfram let out an annoyed grunt and shifted, but there was enough room that if Yuuri twisted a bit he didn't have to worry about falling anywhere during the turns. Wolfram opened the eye closest to him and pouted.

Yuuri only grinned. "Hi."

Wolfram closed his eyes and crossed his legs. "Don't start anything you can't finish, Wimp."

It was Yuuri's turn to pout. There was sweat beading on Wolfram's neck and all he wanted was to lick it off. He grumbled instead and contented himself with studying Wolfram's profile. Then he reached out and touched his nose. Something he had never done.

Wolfram opened his eyes to blink at him. "What?"

"It sticks out-- more than people like me is all. I like it." A blush.

Wolfram furrowed his brows. "Glad to know I stand a chance against your Earth standards."

"It's not an Earth thing, it's a Japan-- or really... well, never mind. I just like you... is what I was trying to say," Yuuri mumbled.

For a moment Wolfram only looked at him, then snorted. A smirk teased the corner of his mouth while he pretended to study the curtains.

Yuuri grinned and continued to enjoy his profile. Nose. Lips. Then he blinked and shifted closer.

"What are you doing?"

"Your eyelashes." Yuuri reached out to touch. "They're so long."

Wolfram closed his eyes to humor the gesture and Yuuri ran his fingers over the soft skin of his eyelid. Brushed over his eyebrows. "Really, now. What's all this, Wimp?"

Yuuri snuggled closer to put his head on Wolfram's shoulder. Breathe his scent. "I'm just glad you're alright. And... And you're ignoring me."

Wolfram raised a hand to ruffle his hair. "Sorry... I've just..." A sigh. "I have a lot to think about."

"About what?" Yuuri rubbed his cheek against the warmth of Wolfram's shoulder.
A pause. "I'll tell you more later. I just... I just need to think."

Yuuri made a noise to show his displeasure, but it only earned him another hair ruffle and more silence. Once again, Yuuri allowed his eyes to wander. And then he noticed it.

Wolfram was hard.

For a second Yuuri forgot to breathe. He licked his lips and shifted closer. "Wolf?" Then he put his hand on Wolfram's thigh... moved closer--

"Don't."

Yuuri pulled away to look at him. "But why?"

Wolfram's eyes were a stunning green. Almost glowing-- but then he blinked and the light was gone. "If I start," he whispered, tangling his fingers in Yuuri's hair. Keeping him at a distance though their foreheads were close enough to touch. "If I start I won't stop."

Yuuri's breaths were short. He whimpered. "Then don't stop."

Wolfram closed his eyes and shivered. "I don't know what I'm capable of right now. I can't-- Just please. I'm not ignoring you. You know I want this, too. I just-- Not now." Then he moved away. To the seat that Yuuri had occupied earlier. His pants were still distractingly tight-- tented-- even as he brought up his ankle to rest on his knee to try to hide it. Cheeks flushed. Eyes dark.

Yuuri wanted him so much.

Wolfram gave him a sad sort of smile. "Later. I promise."

"But..." Yuuri whined, "I don't want to wait. It feels like I've been waiting forever."

"No, Yuuri." Wolfram narrowed his eyes. "I waited."

And the heat in Yuuri's blood went cold. "Oh," he managed. "I mean-- I'm sorry-- I--"

"Stop." Wolfram sighed. "That's done. Just let me have a moment, alright?"

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded. Wolfram closed his eyes again and Yuuri took the opportunity to readjust what was left of his erection to a more comfortable place.

He could never forget. He had made so many mistakes.

So many things to make right.

********
********
Before he left his home Camilio made sure to kiss Rebecka goodbye. She had been so quiet. So lost since the others had come. Even though Camilio had yet to consummate his marriage to any of the other three women-- girls that His Majesty had given him, even though Rebecka knew he loved her above all things. The sparkle in her eyes had died.

His face slipped into a careful mask of indifference as he walked the pristine streets of the inner city. Blessed by the gods.

He nearly scoffed.

So far Camilio had been lucky. Lucky he had spent his youth blind so he could spend his adulthood pretending to be. Lucky that his pretty new wives were as interested in him as he was in them. Two were young enough to be his children, and were treated as such within the household, and Annette was sleeping with his neighbor. If Camilio was truly lucky, the man would have her pregnant soon and Camilio would never have to worry about raising suspicion by not performing his husbandly duties.

Because there was no way out.

Camilio had even allowed himself to think about it once. Running. But it was impossible. With his promotion there was no need for him to enter the second ring of the capital, let alone the third. Even in his younger days of preaching at Gatherings, he had only been past the walls separating the Second from the Third Class twice. Each time it was under the pretense of preaching the word of the gods to the most unfortunate of souls, and each time he had been accompanied by several guards. Even if he were to gain permission to do so again it would be impossible to take Rebecka-- his children-- Camilio could never bring himself to abandon them.

Nor could he bring himself to do anything that might put them in danger.

He knew it made him a coward. Hiding behind words and prayers that he used to believe in with all his heart.

It wasn't to say he had abandoned the gods completely, he still believed in their divine choice. Their selection of the Pure. The duty of the Pure to help those less fortunate.

But Camilio could no longer ignore that in recent years the Pure had fallen. Even along his walk to the central tower he passed them. Eyes wide, black, with the abuse of their gift. These Pure had not helped those less fortunate-- how could they when they were so lost in their own destructive pleasure?

Though Camilio could remember the way it felt to love everything about his position as Cleric, to love a future where everyone was as blessed as the Pure, Camilio could no longer feel anything but disgust, but fear for the world around him. A shining capital surrounded by disease, idiocy, and
despair.

Despite his dark thoughts Camilio's careful mask remained intact as he made his way to the central tower.

He had received a personal summons from His Majesty this morning and so the quickness of his pace left him all but breathless as he climbed the winding stairs. At first, summons like this one had terrified him. But the more they arrived, the more strangely fond His Majesty became of him, the less Camilio feared for himself and the more he began to fear for their kingdom.

Upon reaching the top Camilio paused to place his hands in the basin. Water dusted with black. Camilio tried to catch his breath as he completed the ritual. An attendant arrived to escort him to the inner chamber sooner than he would have liked, and Camilio rinsed his hands in clear water and finished his prayer. Then he followed the attendant to His Majesty's quarters in silence.

He could hear the king shouting before he arrived.

The attendant left him at the door and Camilio took a deep breath before opening it. Even the foreknowledge that His Majesty was angry did not prepare him for what he saw.

His Majesty was wearing his dressing gown and little else, sleeve falling off his shoulder as he paced. His face was spotted red with rage as he yelled at his favorite guard, who stood, tall and impassive as ever, against the opposite wall.

"I should have killed that miserable cunt when I had the chance!" His majesty roared even as he slowed his pacing at Camilio's entrance. "They were supposed to kill him! Can no one follow the simplest of orders?!

"Valesco had never failed before. There is no way for us to have anticipated--"

"Reyes, enough!" His Majesty snapped, before turning his attention to Camilio instead. It was then that Camilio noticed the formal document, crumpled in the king's right hand. "His Majesty Maou has invited me to his wedding to Belefield's Bastard." Every word was sharp. And then he paused, his voice fell to a whisper as he all but crumpled where he stood. Hair wild and covering his face as he sat on the floor. "We are done for."

Camilio swallowed. "What can I do, Your Majesty?"

"There has to be something..." His Majesty whispered without looking up. "There has to be."

After a nod of approval from the guard, Camilio stepped closer to kneel before his king. Still he dared not touch him. "We cannot be certain that they will turn to war. Did you not tell me yourself how certain you were of King Yuuri's favor?"

"None of it matters now." His Majesty hissed. "None of it. His husband will make sure of it. He's the only one who could ever tell Yuuri to do anything..." And finally the king looked up into Camilio's eyes. "You are this city's greatest Man of Faith. There must be something left... Something I haven't thought of... Camilio" Words fell away.

Camilio found he could hardly breathe. It had to be a trap. "There are many men with far more years-- higher ranked within the clergy--"

"Traitors all of them," His Majesty spat. "I had them dealt with this morning. No. They wished for me to fall. Wanted my place-- my birthright for their own. I cannot put my faith in those who wish me dead." His Majesty stood then, walking toward his guard. "Do you know what the men of
higher ranks and years had whispered when my back was turned, DeLa Rosa? They thought to save themselves by offering my head to the demon nations as an apology. As if that would stop their fool's revenge." His Majesty scoffed. "The demons would tear this land apart before they retreat to their northern kingdoms. Lands of their barbarian gods with soil free from the houseki that so pains them." The king had reached his guard. Pressed his back against him as the taller man folded his arms around the suddenly frail looking child that was their sovereign.

"Then the true horrors will descend," His Majesty continued. "The Pure will be purged. A hundred hundred years of the god's chosen people will be so diluted by *filth* that they will be destroyed."

Camilio licked dry lips. Nodded. He pressed his tongue against his teeth to keep his silence. To distract himself from thoughts of how this never would have happened if His Majesty had not attempted to accelerate the will of the gods.

His Majesty smiled. "I knew I could depend on you, DeLa Rosa. Your family has served me well. Unexpectedly well in fact," he purred.

"I am glad, Your Majesty." Camilio bowed.

"Now, Camilio, take the day to think about what I have told you. Then I wish to hear your thoughts on what we might do to ensure the continuing legacy of the chosen."

Another bow. "Yes, Your Majesty." The Camilio turned and headed for the door.

"Dela Rosa."

Camilio paused.

"I needn't remind you of the fate of traitors?"

"No, Your Majesty," Camilio managed and escaped beyond the door.

********

********

Caloria
Royal Palace
Later that evening

********

Yuuri let out a heavy sigh as he leaned against the railing of his room's balcony. It was a beautiful night. A sky full of stars and a half moon. Yuuri's body was still warm from the bath, wet hair soaking the back edge of the nightshirt against his neck. The balcony faced the harbor, and even though he was too far away to hear the waves break against the shore, Yuuri could see the lines of ships bobbing in the moonlight.

Tomorrow they would finally be heading home. Anissina's Banana Boat would have been faster, but it was unfit for the journey after so long in human territory and so Flurin had insisted upon lending them a ship.

As kind as the offer was, it seemed like it had taken years for the preparations to be made instead of days. Of course, it hadn't helped that Flurin herself had gotten a cold or whatever it was. Gisela had said there was no need for concern, but Yuuri couldn't help but worry anyway. It was hard not to with how much time Gisela had spent treating her since they'd arrived.
This was to be Yuuri's third night in the royal guestroom. Alone in his giant bed.

Tomorrow seemed a long way off.

Yuuri frowned. This bizarre custom to keep him away from Wolfram was getting beyond ridiculous. It had been a month since he and Wolfram had done That and Yuuri had barely gotten to touch him since. Admittedly, Yuuri had gotten a bit better about restraining himself in public lately, but it was only because present circumstances left him with no other choice. That and his body had decided to start taking care of the problem on its own every so often while he slept. A solution that was more embarrassing than anything else. At least these last few days he had had his own room and was able to take care of himself before his body had to.

As if on cue the beginnings of an erection brushed against the front of his pajama bottoms. Yuuri was determined to ignore it.

He had received a very terse letter from Gwendal this morning, informing him and Wolfram that the date for their wedding had been decided and as such invitations had finally been sent. Thankfully, Gwendal hadn't mentioned anything about Yuuri's insistence that Sara be invited. He had already had enough of an argument about it with everyone else.

Yuuri had gotten so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice the movement on the balcony of the next room over until Wolfram's voice made him jump.

"Why so sullen, Wimp?" Moonlight played on pale skin and hair.

Yuuri flushed when he saw him, all too aware of how thin his pajamas were. How quickly his blood was rushing to make it worse.

Wolfram only smirked, coming to lean against his own balcony closest to where Yuuri stood. No more than five feet away, but separated by a drop of several stories. It was the first time that Yuuri had seen him out on the balcony-- something Yuuri had no doubt Wolfram had done on purpose to keep Yuuri from pondering the kind of thing he was pondering now.

How sure he was that he could make the jump.

Wolfram looked beautiful in moonlight. All the time really, but it had been so long since Yuuri had gotten to enjoy how good Wolfram looked in formal dress. The uniform Wolfram wore now was similar to what he had always worn back at Blood Pledge Castle, only black. Cravat shocking white and soft against the figure forming angles of stiff wool and shining silver buttons. Flurin had given it to him yesterday as an early wedding present, and Yuuri had yet to see Wolfram out of it since.

Yuuri licked his lips and smiled, moving as close as he could to Wolfram on his own balcony. "Miss you," he offered as a belated answer.

"Hhn?" Wolfram's smirk only widened as he leaned a bit across the gap. "You've been doing well though."

Yuuri gave a frustrated sigh and ran a hand through his half-damp hair. "It's so annoying!" He closed his eyes and shook his head. A useless attempt to cool his blood. When he opened his eyes again Yuuri had to gasp in shock. Wolfram was still grinning only now he was standing on his own railing, looking down at him. "Careful!" he gasped, but Wolfram had already begun the leap.

Yuuri could only stare dumbly as Wolfram made the jump, one foot landing on the stone of Yuuri's railing before he hopped down to the platform.
Wolfram barely had time to turn toward him before Yuuri had pounced.

Bodies crashed together and lips and teeth met in a desperate need for more and now. Wolfram's smell was everywhere-- his skin-- hands hot against his back-- already under his nightshirt. Yuuri whimpered into Wolfram's mouth, pushing closer and closer. Holding him so tight and forcing himself so close that soon Wolfram's back was to the wall and there was no where else for him to go. No escape.

_Finally._

Wolfram was hard inside his uniform and Yuuri's cock was full and free inside his lose pajamas-- pressed up between the heat of Wolfram's flesh and the flat plane of his own stomach. They were so close. So close and all Yuuri wanted was more.

Wolfram's lips were so warm so soft-- hard-- yes against his own. Kissing him back as hard as Yuuri was. For a moment one of Wolfram's hands moved from Yuuri's back and his mind screamed for it to come between them. To touch him-- touch them.

"Wolf..." he begged against wet lips. He begged.

The hand moved to the back of his neck instead. Pulling at hair. Pulling until Yuuri couldn't kiss him anymore and he all but sobbed as Wolfram ran his tongue against his bottom lip. Just a taste. A tease.

"Patience," Wolfram breathed against his lips. "Shh..."

And it wasn't fair. Wolfram's eyes were as dark as his must be-- his cock as hard. Yuuri rocked his hips for emphasis. Watched Wolfram's face as he felt him twitch. "No," Yuuri mumbled. All he could even feel was his cock. The wet heat of Wolfram's mouth so close to his. "Can't."

Wolfram tightened his grip on Yuuri's hair until he squeaked. "Wimp." Another kiss. Hot and fast and no where near enough. "We're going inside." Then he pulled away.

Yuuri had no choice but to follow-- holding the damp bulge in the front of his pants self consciously as he went. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that Wolfram was so impossibly wantable while he simply wasn't. He looked at the ground. Worried his lip while Wolfram closed the balcony doors.

Yuuri refused to look up even as Wolfram approached. So close now that they were almost touching.

"Hey," Wolfram's voice was warm. A quick breath beside his ear. "What's the matter, Wimp?"

Yuuri wanted to glare. Instead he shivered as Wolfram hands touched his shoulders, trailing slowly down his arms, forcing them to his sides. Forcing Yuuri's erection to bounce free-- pointing embarrassingly between them. Tip barely touching Wolfram's still-trapped heat.

This time Wolfram shivered. His hands moved from Yuuri's arms, trailing up his sides. Down his back. Lower. Yuuri blushed, leaned his head forward to hide his face in Wolfram's shoulder. Let Wolfram have his way.

Even though Wolfram's hands were sure-- moved with purpose against his skin-- the buttons of his night shirt-- Yuuri could see, could feel the steady rocking of his hips. The brush of hard. Of heat. Soon Yuuri rocked against him, lost in the motion. Barely there. Without realizing his hands had moved to the front of Wolfram's pants. Thumbs rubbing, barely touching where Wolfram was so
hard-- tucked up-- thick and hot and needing to be free.

Yuuri lost himself in the way that Wolfram's breathing changed as he ran his thumbs against him. Imagining every shape, feeling strength. Wolfram hissed when Yuuri's fingers found the buttons, found the wet soft slick where the head had escaped his formal underwear. Dark. Shining. So smooth as he let the pad of his thumb slide just barely against the head. Let himself feel the curves of it, the dip of the slit-- soft and hard and wet.

Yuuri whimpered. Seeing him-- touching him. Familiar and different and so much more. Yuuri rocked his hips until the still covered head of his cock pressed against Wolfram's shaft, sliding slowly up and down. Hardly touching at all. Just enough for the thin cloth to start soaking up the precome already dripping from Wolfram's full thick--

Another sound of want.


They were the same height and yet there was so much different. Wolfram's legs were longer, cock higher, making him look even bigger than he already was. Making him look--

He blinked, shifted to look up into Wolfram's eyes.

A flash of wild green and wanting and Yuuri found himself pressed hard against the wall-- Wolfram's lips tight on his. And then Wolfram's hand was between them where it should have been all along-- tugging at Yuuri's pants until they fell, pooled at his ankles-- and then Wolfram was finally touching him-- touching them-- pressing together. Sliding hot and hard against hot and hard and the earlier surreal fascination that had swallowed him fell away and all Yuuri was capable of feeling was how very very good it felt.

Yuuri clung to Wolfram's back. Pulled him closer. Tried anything he could to get closer. Pushed Wolfram's pants down-- the click of metal on the floor as the weight of his belt did most of the work-- hands on the small of Wolfram's back-- lower as he pushed his fingers beneath too tight underwear to grab at flexing flesh while Wolfram rocked breathlessly against him.

And all too soon Yuuri could feel it starting-- too late to do anything but break their kiss to gasp into Wolfram's neck as he came into his hand-- body jerking with each pulse of heat-- clinging desperately to Wolfram. This feeling.

Wolfram loosened his grip as Yuuri continued to rock slowly, lost, movement spreading his own come against him. Yuuri turned his head to see Wolfram's smirk of a smile-- so pleased with himself. Bottom lip caught on teeth.

His entire body was so warm. Wolfram kissed his nose, across his cheek-- neck. Warm and content. Sleepy. Basking in the attention he was finally being given, but then Wolfram stepped back.

Yuuri could feel his cheeks go hot. "I'm sorry... your hand..."

Wolfram half laughed as he walked to the basin of water on Yuuri's bedside table. "I wasn't going to let it get anywhere else."

"You mean your new uniform?" Yuuri stayed where he was, silent and blushing while Wolfram cleaned his hands and then tossed Yuuri a clean cloth of his own. Yuuri wiped away what was left and watched as Wolfram began to unbutton his jacket. He hung it on a nearby chair before bending
over to remove his pants where they had been bunched around one ankle along with his shoes. Unfortunately Wolfram was facing him by that point and so Yuuri was unable to appreciate the view.

Still, his renewed desire to touch was impossible to ignore and Yuuri stepped out of his pajama bottoms, leaving them in a crumpled heap as he made his way to sit on the bed near where Wolfram was standing. Wolfram had adjusted his underwear so that he was fully covered again, but the stretching of cloth over his arousal was unmistakable. Black fabric pulling away from his body the slightest bit.

And Yuuri realized he was staring.

Wolfram raised an eyebrow and smirked down at him as he undid his cravat and slowly began unbuttoning his crisp new undershirt. If it weren't for the pink staining his cheeks-- his mussed hair and too red mouth-- It would have been impossible for Yuuri to muster the courage to reach out and touch him. Wolfram made it look so easy. He was so sure of himself. It made Yuuri feel like nothing more than a half-naked teenager with the stamina to match.

Despite these fears, Yuuri reached out to brush his fingers against the exposed jut of Wolfram's left hipbone, pulling him closer. "You haven't come yet..." he heard himself murmurer. Watched the blush spread to Wolfram's ears and his smirk falter.

Wolfram covered Yuuri's hand with his, shirt now open-- long line of skin cutting gracefully down his chest and stomach. "It's fine. I-- I don't need to." He gently tried to push Yuuri's hand away.

Yuuri only held him tighter. Pouted. Was he really so unwantable? But at the same time... Wolfram had wanted him for so long. It was so hard to remember but it was true. Had Wolfram changed his mind now that he had him? Now that Yuuri had proven himself to be so intimately incompetent. "Why?" he whispered, tearing his eyes from the exposed flesh before him to look up into Wolfram's eyes-- to see them closed-- bottom lip gone white where his teeth pressed hard against it. Brow furrowed. Other hand shaking where it was fisted at his side. "Wolf..."

Wolfram let out a shaking breath. Kept his eyes closed. "It's fine," he said again.

Yuuri's pout deepened to a frown. "It's not fine, Wolfram. I know I'm not very good at this but-- but I want to be." He kept his eyes on Wolfram's chest, waiting for green eyes to open. "Please."

Wolfram moved his right hand to his face-- covered his mouth-- short breaths hissing through his nose. He didn't open his eyes.

"Wolf..." Yuuri whispered again. Wondered what he had done so wrong. Wolfram must still want him somewhat-- he was still so hard. Yuuri looked at him again, saw the damp spot where the head was-- the curve. He couldn't know what Wolfram was thinking-- what he needed. "You have to tell me what to do," he breathed. "What you want." Yuuri tugged him closer, transfixed, needing a better look. He brought up his other hand to rest on Wolfram's hip-- pressed against strong hipbones with both his thumbs.

If Yuuri leaned forward he would be able to touch it with his mouth. Feel the heat on his lips. Yuuri paused. Shivered. Realized he wanted it so much it scared him.

But could he really do that?

Wolfram had done it to him. Wolfram had done it to him and it had been so impossibly good. So good that Yuuri knew he would never be able to give Wolfram the same experience no matter how
badly he wanted to. He wanted to--

God, he wanted to so badly he could feel the blood moving back into his own cock.

Yuuri looked up at Wolfram once more. He still hadn't moved. Hadn't spoken.

And so Yuuri took a shaking breath and leaned forward.

Just one soft kiss and both of their breathing seemed to stop. Yuuri's heart was racing. Pounding in his ears. If he didn't have both his hands gripped tight on Wolfram's hips to keep him in place he was sure they would be shaking. Even though it was so tightly trapped Wolfram's cock moved away from him with the pressure of the kiss. Yuuri forced himself to breathe, and with that breath--he had to let out a soft moan at the smell of him. The way it made him feel.

Yuuri kissed him again. Lingering this time. Pushing forward with his mouth until there was nowhere for Wolfram's erection to escape. Yuuri opened his mouth a bit to push out his tongue. Tasting him through cloth. Slick even through the fabric. His first real taste. Strong. Shocking. Wolfram. He closed his eyes to memorize it.

He could do this. It wasn't so scary. He hadn't really thought about it before but-- but suddenly it made so much sense.

Wolfram didn't seem to be going anywhere so Yuuri moved his hands-- in from Wolfram's hips--fingers toying with the edges of cloth where the pull of Wolfram's cock kept it from being flush against his skin. Touching what was underneath. Soft sparse hair. Damp heat.

Yuuri sucked lightly, as if to keep him in place while he pushed his way beneath Wolfram's underwear from both sides-- tips of his fingers brushing the edges of his shaft-- lower-- feeling how tight and drawn his balls had gotten. Feeling Wolfram twitch against his lips as he touched him. Moving his mouth down to meet his fingers through the cloth.

He could do this. Still-- he kept his eyes closed-- kept tasting-- learning him with his lips for just another moment as he worked up the courage to do what he really wanted. Slowly he pulled the top edge of the underwear over Wolfram's cock, pushed it down his legs with one hand while he used the other to guide the tip of Wolfram's now bare flesh against his lips.

Wolfram let out the tiniest of sounds and it made him taste so much better. So good. Yuuri mouthed the head-- licked-- lower and lower and up again. Breathed him in with every breath. Wanted more. Wanted more and took it. Sliding his lips around Wolfram's too hard cock and pushing forward until the entire head of it was in his mouth. Running his tongue along every curve. Pushing lightly at the slit. Tasting like want and sex and Wolfram. Yuuri moaned against the heat in his mouth and it was all he could do not to touch himself.

Yuuri sucked him gently-- so afraid-- so scared to do anything wrong. Wanting desperately for Wolfram to want him. To need him. To lose himself in the feel of his mouth. To feel him. To touch every part of him with his tongue. His lips. This silky hard want and taste and--

Wolfram's hands were in his hair-- shaking-- breath sharp and quick and audible. Yuuri tried to take more in. To cover everything he was missing with his hands-- an impossible urge to feel Wolfram everywhere-- in his throat-- but much too scared to ever try. Because what if he hurt him? What if he had to stop.

His jaw was aching and he had no idea what to do about all the saliva that seemed to be filling his mouth-- but all he could think about was the possibility that finally finally he could make Wolfram
feel anything like what Yuuri already had.

********

********

Wolfram was lost.

Lost in hot and lips and oh gods this couldn't be happening...

Yuuri was-- Wolfram's fingers tightened on black hair as he tried to breathe-- to keep himself from thrusting forward into that heat-- that-- that heat.

Oh how he had dreamed of this. Of Yuuri on his knees-- wanting him in a way he never--


Yuuri moaned again, his mouth full of Wolfram's cock and Wolfram couldn't-- he couldn't-- he had to look. Had to watch Yuuri suck him like he wanted it. Like he enjoyed it. As if there was nothing he would rather do than touch him. Yuuri's eyelashes were dark, fluttering but never fully open. He pulled back so that just the very tips of his lips brushed his head-- a flash of tongue--

Wolfram heard himself gasp. Voice caught on his breath. Yuuri would never. Yuuri would never but he was he was and oh. It was so good. Yuuri was so good. Looked so good. Brows tense in concentration. Determined. Learning as he went. Yuuri's mouth opened around him-- lips red. Hot red. Blushing cheeks. Lips stretching around his flesh as he lowered his head again-- made a small sound of his own.

Wolfram gripped black hair even harder and Yuuri made an appreciative noise. Moving faster. Remembering his hands. An accidental brush of teeth.


So many fantasies flashed in his mind. Long forgotten images of want-- of Yuuri's mouth. His cock. Fucking him. Bending the wimp against his will until he screamed. Until he lost himself in something only he could give. Begged him for more. Because he knew that if he was only given the chance he could make Yuuri come a thousand times. A thousand ways. Wolfram had dreamed for so long of pounding into him. A different kind of flesh stretching eagerly around his cock. Yuuri's legs and arms around him-- clinging-- sweet sounds against his ear.

He had told himself a thousand times that it would never happen. Forced himself to believe it. Made himself believe that Yuuri would never want him-- never touch him-- never love him-- never make that sound as he tried to fit Wolfram's cock into his throat but couldn't. One hand working his shaft. His balls. Squeezing and sucking and running his tongue along--

It was too much. Too much offered for him not to take--

Wolfram growled. Pulled at Yuuri's hair. Heard the sound of his cock leaving that perfect mouth and crushed his lips against his wimp. Pushed him down on the bed. Holding him down. Finally, finally his. Yuuri's lips were so hot-- wet-- tasting himself-- his cock rubbing against Yuuri's-- lower-- Sliding his cock under Yuuri's sack. Between his cheeks-- finding the hot crease to press inside. His. Oh how he wanted-- he wanted-- Kissing-- thrusting-- fingers digging into hair-- flesh-- Forcing. Taking. Needing-- needing more--
He came.


Then the world came rushing back. Solid and cold and what had he done?

Wolfram froze. Fear filled his veins and for a few terrifying seconds he believed he had just done the unthinkable.

Yuuri shifted beneath him, just enough for Wolfram to be able to tell for sure that he hadn't just-- "I'm sorry," he whispered into Yuuri's neck. Still too scared to raise his head and look at him. "I'm sorry..." He had lost himself. Completely. The knowledge of what he had almost done welled in his throat and Wolfram bit his lip. Hard.

Yuuri touched the back of Wolfram's head and made a sound that was far too happy-- too satisfied for the wimp to have any idea of how close Wolfram had come to--

Yuuri licked his ear. A tiny bite. "Why are you apologizing, Wolfram?" A kiss-- arms circling his waist-- shifting-- making Wolfram role off of him so that they were both curled, facing each other on the bed.

Wolfram was suddenly aware of the come drying on his stomach. Yuuri's come. He had been so caught up in himself that Wolfram had missed it.

Wolfram forced himself to look at Yuuri's face only to see the wimp grinning madly-- lick his lips. "Yuuri..." he breathed. Tried to make him understand how truly sorry he was. He couldn't lose him now. Wolfram couldn't lose Yuuri now that he finally finally was starting to feel as though he had him. Wolfram couldn't risk doing anything that might make Yuuri's feelings change and yet he had lost himself completely. Wolfram had lost-- if only for a moment-- that careful hold on the desperation-- the desires that were sure to only push Yuuri away.

Yuuri's grin faded and he touched Wolfram's cheek. For a while he only looked at him, ran a thumb lightly over Wolfram's skin. Concern faded to sleepy curiosity, lip worried distractingly between his teeth.

It only made Wolfram want to kiss him. So red still-- swollen-- Wolfram could still feel-- still remember where that mouth had been.

Yuuri must have caught him looking because seconds later he had shifted forward. Was kissing him. Soft and warm. Slow and content. Hazy and precise.

Yuuri made the cold fear warm. The panic slow. What he hadn't even known he needed...

Eventually Yuuri pulled back, eyes half closed, voice heavy with sleep. "So much for my bath."

Wolfram blushed. He could feel the stiffness on his stomach where Yuuri's come had almost dried. It must be even worse for Yuuri. Come drying in other places. "I'm Sorry," he said again.

That lazy smile was back. "I'm not. I liked it-- finally making you lose control a bit." A happy sigh. "Maybe I'm not so hopeless after all."

"Wimp," Wolfram breathed. Allowed himself a moment to bask in the feel of Yuuri's gaze. Then he forced himself to stand. Clean himself off and give Yuuri a damp towel of his own. The maids might wonder how they all had been used so quickly, but Wolfram was too tired for propriety.
Too tired to think about what Yuuri had said. What it had meant. What Wolfram had come so close to doing. Yuuri had changed so much, so quickly. What if Wolfram was too busy worrying about the day when Yuuri's attention moved away from him to enjoy the time he had him?

Wolfram had spent so long in the dark. Alone with his thoughts and fears that somewhere along the way he had forgotten how impossibly good Yuuri was. Why Wolfram had loved him so much to begin with. Had he become so addicted to his own misery that when the chance for happiness arose he could do nothing but brush it aside? Nothing but try to make himself more miserable?

He should be happy. He should feel something other than fear and desperation. Darkness looming in every corner.

Yuuri had fallen asleep during Wolfram's brooding and Wolfram sat on the bed beside him and ran his fingers lightly through his hair. So straight. Black and soft between his fingers.

Since Yuuri had proposed the second time he had given Wolfram no reason to doubt him. But a month could only do so much against years of habit. Against years of telling himself he didn't have a chance.

But his habit-- his stubbornness and fear had almost cost him everything tonight. If he hadn't held back so hard and so long he wouldn't have lost himself the way he did.

Wolfram had to force himself to trust Yuuri. A simple and yet seemingly impossible task when Wolfram couldn't trust himself.

Wolfram still didn't know what to think about what Shinou had said. About Ethne.

He knew he had always been hot-tempered. Gwendal had told him a thousand times not to allow himself to be ruled by his emotions. And yet he was. Time and time again.

What would happen if he lost his temper now? When he lost his hold on his new gift? The Maou had his Justice-- and Yuuri had remarkable control even when the Maou unleashed it-- but the Maou had always been the justice of the crown. Even when the power had belonged to his mother. A terrible power to be sure, but with its own clear sense of right and wrong.

Ethne however, was unknown. Unpredictable. Ethne was fire and destruction. Flame.

Wolfram still hadn't told Yuuri-- hadn't told anyone. The Maou had always held the power-- had been able to unite the demon nations because of his unsurpassed magical strength.

What would happen to that unity if the Maou's power were to be matched?

Of course, Wolfram still didn't know if he truly did possess that kind of power. But the warmth inside that he had always felt-- his fire-- he had always been close to it. Known its strength. Wolfram had never felt a fire like the one he bore. Nothing even close. Wolfram couldn't be sure-- about any of it-- but he couldn't keep his mind from weighing the political ramifications of that possibility. Shinou had created the Maou-- or trapped him, the same way he had trapped Ethne-- before he died to ensure the unity of the demon nations after his death.

Wolfram's family in Belefield-- Voltaire-- the older countries still mistrusted Yuuri and his alliances with the humans.

Wolfram would sooner die than do anything against Yuuri. Especially now that Yuuri had this insane need to protect Shou Shimeron, Yuuri would have more enemies than he knew once they returned to the capital.
Wolfram continued to run his hand through Yuuri's hair. Watch his sleeping face. Wolfram would protect him from everything.

Including himself.

********
********
Caloria
Royal Palace
The following morning

********

When Yuuri woke he was alone. The bed beside him was still warm though, and it made Yuuri smile in spite of his disappointment. Wolfram must have snuck back to his room so as not to give away their improper behavior. He sighed. Yuuri wished Wolfram had stayed long enough for them to wake up together.

Yuuri stretched but stayed beneath his sheets. Soft on bare skin. A grin spread on his lips as he remembered the night before. Wolfram's growl. Caught breaths against his ear. Finally getting to hear the way Yuuri was able to make him feel. It had been so good to have Wolfram pressed against him with such violent need. Satisfying in immeasurable ways. Yuuri remembered the way his erection had felt trapped between them-- that slide between his stomach and Wolfram's-- Wolfram's cock, hard-- sliding under his balls-- friction in entirely new places.

Knowing that he had finally been able to make Wolfram feel anything close to what Yuuri had made last night different from anything they had done before. Wolfram's panting-- desperate grabbing-- pushing them together so tight that Yuuri could hardly breathe. All of it combined to give Yuuri a sense of blissful accomplishment that was so much more than he had ever felt. It had been enough to push him over the edge a second time.

They were still uneven. Four to two... or really, six to two counting everything. Next time Yuuri would begin making his comeback. Having Wolfram's cock in his mouth had been... better than he could have ever expected. He would do it again. Get better. Make Wolfram lose control of his intimidating stamina. Next time Yuuri would touch him until he begged.

Like Yuuri had.

Yuuri's grin remained as he made himself ready for the day. He would have to say his formal goodbyes to Flurin and the court... accept more gifts. The date that had been set for the wedding was still a month away but Yuuri felt like it had already begun. In truth, the date would likely have been set sooner if the time it would take for Yuuri to retrieve his family from earth hadn't been taken into consideration.

Yuuri felt his smile fade. His mother would be thrilled of course, and his father would be happy as long as he was, but facing Shouri was a different matter entirely. Shouri's mind was trapped on earth. He couldn't understand how different things were here.

Shouri's heart was in the right place, but most of the time his words and actions weren't. Especially when it came to Yuuri being engaged to-- marrying another man. All that Shouri could see was how hard it would be for Yuuri to be with Wolfram had they been on earth. In Japan. Once Yuuri made Shouri understand how different this world was he would have to accept it. He would have to.
Yuuri sighed. There was nothing he could do about that now. He did his best to force his thoughts back to the day ahead.

He would get to see Wolfram at breakfast but it was unlikely he would get to again before their departure this afternoon. While Yuuri would be saying his goodbyes, Wolfram would be scouring the markets by the docks a final time in search of more presents for Greta. No matter how much Yuuri reassured him, Wolfram still seemed to be worried about how she would receive them. They had both sent her letters when they had reached Caloria, but the single reply that they had received this morning had been too formal for Wolfram's liking. It was one of Wolfram's more ridiculous concerns in Yuuri's opinion. Hadn't Wolfram always been the one who had instructed Greta to be as formal and proper as a real princess?

Yuuri supposed that Wolfram was just nervous about the fact that he had been gone for so long, and so Yuuri did his best to humor him. It didn't hurt that Yuuri loved to watch Wolfram spoil her. Besides, presents for Greta and Wolfram were constantly on his mind now that his trip to earth was drawing closer. Yuuri still hadn't given Wolfram the picture he had taken from his mother's photo album, and now it had gotten travel-worn and creased. It was just as well really, it gave Yuuri a nice excuse to simply keep it for himself.

Yuuri ran a hand through his unruly hair and left his royal guest room. Conrad was waiting for him and offered a careful smile.

"Good morning, Your Majesty."

"Conrad," Yuuri warned, shaking his head. He let his friend fall in step behind him as he headed toward the dining room. He sighed. "Is everything ready for this afternoon?"

"Yes, Yuuri," Conrad answered. "We should be able to leave according to schedule."

"Thank goodness." He shot Conrad a grin from over his shoulder. "It's been ages since we were all home."

"Indeed it has."

Suddenly Yuuri felt guilty. "Flurin is alright though? We don't have to leave right away if she still needs Gisela. I mean, I suppose Gisela could come back later when Flurin comes for the... the wedding... but with everything that's happened..."

"Everyone is in agreement that Gisela should stay with Wolfram. You don't have to worry about that. Lady Flurin seems to have made a full recovery," Conrad explained.

"Good," Yuuri sighed in relief. "I'm glad she's feeling better. Do we know what made her so sick?"

"No," Conrad said. "Though I have a feeling there is no cause for great concern."

Yuuri was about to ask why, but was distracted by Flurin who was waiting to greet him by the dining room.

"Good morning, Your Majesty." She curtsied.

"Good morning, Lady Flurin." He answered with a small bow of his own. "I'm glad to see you are feeling better."

"Thank you for your concern." Her cheeks were flush, and her eyes seemed brighter than Yuuri had ever seen them. "I am feeling much better."
They walked into the dining room together. Everyone else had arrived before them, and stood as they entered. Yuuri blushed and gave Wolfram a half-smile as he went to take his seat beside him, Flurin on his other side. Wolfram smirked at him as the rest of the group took their seats.

It only made Yuuri blush harder. He hoped that no one would notice. Following the protocol of their newly reinstated engagement seemed to be important to Wolfram and Yuuri didn't want to let him down.

Thankfully Murata seemed to be too busy buttering his toast to comment. Yuuri let some of the tension out of his shoulders and started on his breakfast. Yozak was sitting with them this morning and he and Flurin began discussing the ship and other preparations for their journey. Things seemed to be proceeding nicely. There had been a steady wind from the east since last night that promised to continue and they would be leaving with the tide. Everything was in their favor and it was possible that they could make the trip in a few days rather than the expected week.

Even though Yuuri had insisted that Yozak accompany them back to the capital his Plan showed no signs of falling into place. Yozak and Conrad acted pretty much the same as they always did, and if anything Conrad seemed quieter, more withdrawn than Yuuri had ever seen him, since the Shimeron Incident at least.

Yuuri hoped that it had nothing to do with him.

He took a large gulp of his tea and watched Yozak talk. Yuuri knew that Yozak was a spy, was well trained at hiding things. If Yozak didn't want Yuuri to notice something he knew he probably wouldn't. Maybe things weren't quite so hopeless for his two friends. Yuuri had heard them that night in Habalouge after all, and so there had to be a chance.

Yozak and Conrad were best friends. They had done That. And yet Yuuri didn't know how to define their relationship. Were they boyfriends? Lovers? And if so why didn't they act like it? Yuuri had been watching both of them since they left Habalouge and he had yet to catch a glance or a touch between them. Nothing that held the answer to his question.

Or was the answer obvious? What if they were already together like that and no one had ever told him because of how obvious it should have been? But if that were the case than Wolfram wouldn't have been so convinced that Conrad had feelings for him.

And that was really the heart of Yuuri's concerns. Before that conversation with Wolfram Yuuri wouldn't have hesitated to simply ask Conrad about Yozak. Now Yuuri felt so strange about all of it. If what Wolfram had said was true then-- then what? Yuuri knew it shouldn't change anything and yet it did. It made Yuuri feel terrible because he really did love Conrad as his friend. Conrad had been his first friend in this strange new world. Conrad had done so much for him, had probably given up more than he would ever know to protect him. Conrad was an irreplaceable part of Yuuri's life and yet now he was afraid to even talk to him.

Part of Yuuri was afraid it wasn't true-- that Wolfram had caused himself so much pain over an imagined threat. But Yuuri was more afraid-- had a growing, creeping feeling that it was. And he was afraid of what it meant.

It meant that he had hurt Conrad. That he was hurting Conrad. That anything he could possibly say would only make it worse.

And so Yuuri tried not to let himself really think about it. He tried to act like everything was alright between them. Because after all, there was still the possibility that it was.
It helped to think of Conrad and Yozak being together. That they could be happy. As happy as he was now with Wolfram.

Thinking about Wolfram helped most of all, but the guilt never went away completely. The fears and frets.

Yuuri let his foot touch Wolfram's beneath the table.

* * *

It was noisy down by the docks. It seemed like half the kingdom had come to see them off. The smell of the ocean was strong and damp and Yuuri could feel it on his cheeks as they set sail for Shin Makoku.

Once he could no longer make out the faces of Flurin and the others he stopped waving and put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder. "Don't worry it will be less than a week."

Wolfram only nodded. Already pale. He steadied himself on the edge of the boat and retched off the side.

Yuuri blinked. Well, that was fast. Usually Wolfram was able to last an hour at least. He kept his hand on Wolfram's back and rubbed him gently as he tried not to gag at the sound of Wolfram emptying his stomach into the waves. Yuuri couldn't help but send Gisela a worried glance.

It took a few moments for Wolfram to finish, and when he did he slowly slumped forward until his forehead was resting on the wooden edge of the boat. Body bent though he was still standing.

Yuuri rubbed his back. "Are you alright, Wolfram?"

Instead of answering Wolfram shivered-- then gagged uselessly over the edge again. "What does it look like," he wheezed. Then he all but crumpled onto the deck.

Yuuri barely managed to catch him in time, giving a startled cry that had both Gisela and Conrad running to his side. Even as Yuuri held him he could feel the sweat beginning to soak through Wolfram's new uniform. See it beading on his cheeks and forehead. Wolfram's eyes were closed and Yuuri realized with growing worry that he must have passed out. Thankfully, Wolfram half-opened his eyes as Gisela knelt by his side.

"I'm fine," he insisted and tried to stand, gripping the railing with white knuckles to pull himself up. "I just need to lie down..."

Gisela reached for him, but Yuuri beat her too it. "Where?"

Wolfram let Yuuri and Conrad help him to the bedroom closest to the deck, but only barely. Even his lips were pale and sometimes his head rocked forward and Yuuri was sure he was going to faint. When they reached the bed Wolfram fell on it easily, not even taking off his boots in his need to curl into a ball above the sheets.

Gisela moved beside the bed and touched his forehead.

"Just seasick..." Wolfram panted, eyes closed. "Same as always. Don't fuss."

Gisela frowned. "I'll fuss if I like." The tips of her fingers glowed green. She sighed.

"What is it?" Yuuri asked.
"Seasickness," she stood. "I'll get some lavender tea to help him sleep. That and a bucket." She looked back to Wolfram. "Try to keep it down as best as you can." Then she hurried from the room.

Wolfram gave a small grunt in answer and shivered. Yuuri sat next to him on the bed and pulled off Wolfram's boots. Then he moved to rub a hand on Wolfram's damp back.

"Don't." Wolfram whispered. "Boat's... moving enough as it is."

"Oh" Yuuri took his hand away. "Sorry." He worried his lip. There had to be something he could do.

"I'm fine," Wolfram said again. "You should go. Enjoy the trip." He paused, catching his breath. "This is..." he swallowed thickly. "Disgusting."

Yuuri shook his head even though Wolfram had closed his eyes. "Not disgusting," he reassured. "Never that. I like taking care of you for a change."

Wolfram's snort turned into a gag. He swallowed again and shuddered.

Yuuri shifted and started undoing the buttons of Wolfram's jacket, blushing as he realized that Conrad was watching him. Gisela reentered the room without comment and Yuuri maneuvered Wolfram out of his jacket as Gisela made him sit so he could drink his tea. Yuuri stood to hang the jacket on the back of a nearby chair.

Wolfram gave him a thankful half-smile over his teacup before he swallowed. Then swallowed once more before vomiting into the freshly provided bucket.

It was going to be a long journey home.

*******

Somewhere off the coast of Spitzburg

Four Days Later

*******

Gisela had traveled on ships with Sir Belefield a number of times. When he had been nothing more than a toddler and Her Majesty had insisted on sea picnics, Gisela had sat with Julia as the older medic had made this same lavender tea for the young prince.

At first Gisela had been sure that the boy's seasickness had been caused by the child's desire to escape another one of his mother's dates. However, as Sir Belefield grew, so too had his stomach's disagreement with the sea. The only time Gisela had ever seen him not spilling his meals into the waves for the majority of a journey was when she had helped steal him away from the capital so that he could search for His Majesty.

Though at the time Sir Belefield had been distracted by his fears, he had also spent a good portion of the trip as sick as always. And now that she found herself looking back she remembered that he had also been too sick to eat enough to vomit.

This time Sir Belefield wasn't eating much either, and yet it wasn't the same. He couldn't even sleep most of the time since he was so busy choking up bile and spit every other moment. His second day in that condition he had fallen into a deep sleep that neither Gisela nor His Majesty could wake him from. There had been less than an hour of panic before Sir Grier had sought them
out and admitted to slipping some Papaver Dreams into Sir Belefield's tea.

Gisela let out a sigh. It had been a merciful decision and one that spoke more than Yozak often did about his affection for Sir Belefield. None of them wanted to see him suffer and the use of Papaver Dreams was harmless on rare occasions, but Gisela and most other medics tended to only use it when their patients were beyond help, or to aide in surgical procedures. Papaver Dreams was highly addictive, and as Sir Belefield's seasickness would end the moment they were on dry land... As much as she didn't want to see him suffer, Gisela still believed that such a strong medicine was unnecessary.

At the moment Sir Belefield greatest risk was dehydration. Water-- even the lavender tea, never stayed down for more than a moment. So much water had gone out of him that he no longer sweat and his lips had become so cracked that he had almost gone through her supply of beeswax cream.

Besides the cream the only thing Gisela could do was force him to drink. She had started bringing him new tea and sugared-water every hour during the day. At night His Majesty, Conrad, and Sir Grier took turns forcing him to drink.

Gisela was in the middle of making more lavender tea and the smell of crushed petals steeping was enough to make her drowsy and wistful. She sighed and took a moment to finger the necklace beneath her blouse. It was warm on her skin. Gisela could feel the blush spread across her cheeks. It was too much. Much too much, but Flurin had insisted. Gisela could remember her smile as she had fastened it around her neck. Her lips...

Three weeks seemed so long to wait, and even then there would be so much going on. The hustle and bustle of other guests. Silly injuries that would require her attention. Who could say how much time she and Flurin would be able to steal for themselves? The days they had spent together at Flurin's castle already seemed years gone.

Like a dream.

Gisela sighed. The tea had finished steeping and so she poured a cup and placed it with the water on a tray and headed to Sir Belefield's room.

The smell of sick was hidden under the scent of lavender and the salt air from the open window but it was still there. Sir Belefield was pale and curled into himself in the middle of the bed, blankets pulled up under his chin. His Majesty was reading in a chair beside the bed.

He smiled at her when she entered and whispered, "He's asleep."

Gisela set the tray down gently beside the bed. "I'm sorry, but he needs to drink all he can."

His Majesty frowned.

Gisela sat lightly on the bed and reached toward Sir Belefield's shoulder--

He sat up straight before she could touch him, green eyes brighter than she had ever seen and magic burning in the air around them.

And then it stopped.

Sir Belefield looked as sick as ever but his eyes had gone wide. He looked as startled as she was.

"What happened?" His Majesty stood.
"Nothing," Sir Belefield croaked. Desperate. "Nothing... I'm-- I'm just not feeling well is all. My blessing is still new and--"

"What happened?!" His Grace bellowed from the doorway. He was out of breath, cheeks red and splotched with anger.

Sir Belefield fell back against his mattress with a groan and pulled his covers over his head like a child. "Nothing," his muffled voice said again. "Can we do this later? I feel like death."

"That you do." His Grace's voice was cold. Hard. "That is exactly what you feel like." He approached the bed with hurried footsteps and yanked the covers away.

"Murata! What are you doing?" His Majesty jumped to his fiance's defense.

Sir Belefield slowly drew himself up into a sitting position, back resting against the bed's small headboard. He pulled a pillow against his chest and glared at the sage. His cheeks were pink for the first time in days but it only made the rest of him look more pale, skin blending in with the dull white of his pajamas. "I was going to tell you eventually," he said to the sage.

"Tell him what?" His Majesty asked, gaze switching rapidly between the two of them. "What's going on?"

"Don't ask me, Shibuya," the sage hissed, unflinching as Sir Belefield turned slightly green and spit more bile into his bucket.

"I was going to tell you eventually," Sir Belefield said again. "I promised him I would."

"Who?" His Majesty stammered.

Sir Belefield looked from His Majesty to the sage before he answered. "Shinou."

"Shinou..." His Majesty echoed slowly. "But Shinou is--"

"Dead," the sage finished. Silence fell.

"Shinou said," Sir Belefield licked his lips, voice hoarse, "He said to tell you that he was sorry, Your Grace, and that he had been needed elsewhere. That he still was..."

The sage sat heavily on the edge of the bed. Anger slipping away into something else. "Impossible," he murmured, "And yet... And yet it is the only explanation..."

"I didn't want it to interfere," Sir Belefield continued hastily, "If my uncle knew-- If anyone found out the political consequences would be--"

"Yes," the sage interrupted darkly, "Your silence was well-intended. Stupid. You should have told me when it happened. It's only two days to the capital and there is much thinking to be done." He stood.

"Wait!" his Majesty snapped, "No one is going anywhere until I know what you two are going on about!"

The sage let out a heavy sigh and sat. "Sir Belefield was blessed with a trifle more than we expected in the mountains, Shibuya."

"Shinou." Sir Belefield swallowed a gag. "Shinou had suspected that Ethne wished to use my capacity for magic to walk. He said he laid a trap-- the same way he--" Sir Belefield's explanation
"The same way he was able to harness the Maou's power," the sage finished.

"The Maou?" His Majesty blinked.

"Shinou... After we won the war and untied the Ten Nations he was concerned about who would rule after him. I didn't know it then but he was already suffering Shoushi's corruption." The sage let out a heavy sigh. "Coincidentally, there was trouble with one of the spirits around that time. Gallu, or power, was tired of being tied to one place and found a particularly powerful mazoku to host her strength. She caused a fair bit of trouble before Shinou was able to contain her power within the mazoku who bore her, thereby creating the first Maou, or demon king. These days only four of the spirits deliver blessings to mazoku, but in Shinou's time there were eight."

"How..." His Majesty's voice was small. "How could Shinou control the power of the gods-- spirits-- whatever they are?"

"Shinou's power is also from one of the eight. He got his first blessing from Bruadar, he was one of the last mazoku to do so before her eastern resting place was over run with the humans. It was in the early days of the great war when she called to him again using her realm of dreams. She knew that it would be many a year before another mazoku would be able to receive her gift and so she gave more of herself to Shinou, thereby gaining the ability to see with his eyes even as he made use of her strength. She is the only one of the eight to give so much of her power willingly."

"But..." His Majesty stammered. "I thought there were only four? And now you're talking about eight? Why are there only four now?"

"Only four give blessings now, Yuuri." Sir Belefield answered softly. "Soushi's power has long been sealed. As the sage explained Bruadar's resting place is far to the east, beyond Subaralia and vast human lands. Even if she were to call, it is too dangerous for mazoku to take her gifts. Your power is the same. Gallu no longer calls because her place lies beyond the Shimerons. As for Iechyd--"

"The western wind," Gisela heard herself finish. Taking pity on Sir Belefield's labored speech. "Iechyd's place is on an island to the west, beyond Gael. The lost island. Ships often disappear when bound for that place and so Iechyd weeps for her lost children. Her power comes to us by her tears, carried by the western wind. That is the reason all mazoku are blessed with healing, even when they are not individually called."

"So even though they have given their power-- the one I have and Shinou's-- it's only some of their power? It would still be possible for others to receive the blessing as well?"

"It would," The sage answered. "Shinou was wise to use Gallu's power for the Maou. Her magic is exactly that. Power. Raw strength that can be enhanced by other gifts but is not dependent upon them. You wield Gallu's power through water but it has not been the case with other Maous."

"When Mother was Maou she used it with fire," Sir Belefield said, still green.

His Majesty brought his hands to his head and ruffled his hair with a groan of frustration. "This is so complicated! Why haven't I heard about any of this before?"

"Because it's so complicated, Wimp" Sir Belefield mocked weakly. "And with all of the other, more relevant things you needed to learn the history of magic wasn't particularly high on the lesson plan."
His Majesty gave a pout. "Well you still could have said something... And you still haven't explained what's going on! Why did you come in here and yell at Wolfram!" he said to the sage.

"The gods get tired of staying put every now and then," the sage's glasses caught the light. "Shinou's solution has been much more useful and much less destructive than earlier attempts."

"But..." His Majesty worried his lip. "But that's good then? Shinou saved Wolfram and now Wolfram--"

"Has more magic than ever before," the sage finished for him. "Perhaps even as much as you, Shibuya."

"Well then, that's good. Right?" His Majesty sent his fiance a hopeful look.

Sir Belefield flushed.

"It's complicated," the sage answered. "It could create political... unrest if anyone were to know." His gaze darkened. "That is if we live long enough to see the capital." He directed his gaze at Sir Belefield. "Do you think you can control yourself for the rest of the trip? Keep that fire of yours in check while we're on a wooden boat in the middle of the sea?"

His Majesty glared. "Wolfram didn't do anything. He was only sleeping!"

"Oh," Gisela squeaked. Surprised by the sound of her own voice as the realization came upon her so quickly. "Oh!" she said again. Why hadn't she realized it before.

Everyone was looking at her.

"It's just," she said almost to herself. Her thoughts were moving so quickly she could hardly keep up. "Sir Belefield's magic. Fire. The sea has always disagreed with him... Could it be so strong... Strong enough to make him sick? And now that his connection to Ethne has increased so has his sickness... I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner."

The sage rubbed his chin in thought. "Nor I."

"Does that sort of thing happen? Do fire users get more seasick?" His Majesty asked.

"No," the sage answered for her. "But Sir Belefield has always been an exceptional case."

Gulls cried in the sky outside the tiny window and the boat rocked in the waves.

"I think," Sir Belefield said weakly, "that Gisela is right." A swallow. "It is worse now... since Ethne..."

The sage nodded as he moved to lean against the wall beside the door. His glasses caught the light. "Ethne still wishes to walk. Her power's restlessness surrounded by the sea in combination with her unexpected... predicament within Sir Belefield... It would make sense if her need for escape would manifest as a physical symptom. The fire wishes to escape the sea and Sir Belefield's lunch escapes his stomach. Doubling as a way of depleting his ability to hold her in check."

"I... It means I can't even sleep." Sir Belefield's fingers dug into the mattress beneath them. "I thought I only had to worry about my temper but now I can't even sleep..." Green eyes met hers in exhaustion and despair. A shadow of pain. "I'm too much of a risk."

The sage shook his head while His Majesty moved to take his fiance's hand in his.
"Once we're on land again we can try to figure out more for certain. In the mean time..." The sage rubbed his chin in thought.

"He slept when Yozak put that stuff in his tea." His Majesty's voice was hopeful. "He was asleep then and nothing bad happened. Could we just give him more of that?"

Gisela gave Sir Belefield a careful look. "If we do this now you will have difficulty sleeping without it. A week for every day you use it at least."

Sir Belefield gave a curt nod before turning green and making use of his bucket.

"A small price, considering." The sage mused.

"And..." Sir Belefield added once he was done, "Besides, Gwendal is sure to have enough for me to see to that I might be glad for a bit of insomnia."

The sage sent her a quick nod of approval and Gisela sighed. She didn't like it, but there was nothing else to be done. She would have to dose him with magic as a substitute for proper sustenance while he was out. It was exhausting work but she had done it for soldiers before when they were too injured to feed themselves. "I'll prepare at once," she said with a small bow before leaving.

It wasn't until later that the magnitude of what had happened began to truly sink in.

Two demon kings of such terrible power living at once...

Gisela fingered the necklace at her breast and longed for the simplicity of silken sheets and Flurin's smiling eyes.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
Two days later

********

Greta made herself sit still while Doria brushed the tangles from her hair with gentle fingers covered in oil. She wrinkled her nose, knowing the smell of it would linger until her next bath. The oil made her hair less of a monster though, and now that it had grown past her shoulders there was nothing else to be done if she didn't want to scare the horses.

A few times Greta had thought to cut it, but after re-braiding Wilfrido's hair one day she had decided that she should have a braid of her own. The stable boy had teased her about it and called her a boy, so later when they had played at swords she knocked him to the ground and told him that at least she was a better boy than him.

The memory made her mouth twitch but she didn't smile. It hardly mattered. Doria was chatting away and smiling enough for them both.

The maid held her hair in one hand while she reached around her to the box of ribbons and lace ties filling the box on Greta's lap. "Now Princess, which color would you like for this special day?"

Greta blinked, choosing a green ribbon from the bunch. Doria tied it into a large bow to hold the end of her braid. Green like Wolfram's eyes.
Greta selected another ribbon and dragged it absently along the rug until Wolri bounded out from under her bed to pounce on it. The little cat had gotten so big. She wondered if Wolfram would recognize him.

Greta watched the cat play with the ribbon and she didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry.

"There, don't you look like such a little lady?" Doria cooed as she held up a second mirror so Greta could study the back of her own head.

The braid was different than the ones that Wilfrido and his father wore. It started high up on her head and was so tight she could feel every hair as it pulled. "A little lady," Greta echoed and worried her lip. She didn't feel like a little lady. Her dress itched and was too tight for her to play in. It made her chest ache and she couldn't raise her arms very high without the sleeves digging into her shoulders. When she complained Doria only smiled and told her that she was old enough to wear proper dresses now. Little ladies didn't need to raise their arms higher than to dance.

She was tempted to change back into one of her older dresses as soon as Doria left, but if she did that then the maid would have to tell Gwendal or Anissina on her and both of them were busy enough with preparations for her father's wedding as it was. Both of them were too busy for her.

Greta started to bite her lip harder but forced herself to stop. Making her lip swell up wouldn't solve anything and would only make Wilfrido say something rude the next time she saw him. She sighed and tugged the ribbon Wolri was playing with sharply to the right, freeing it from the cat's paws for just an instant before it was claimed again by teeth and claws.

She refused to let it bother her. Any of it.

Greta knew how it was to be alone. She had grown up alone. The trick was to manage her expectations. She knew that Wolfram and Yuuri would be glad to see her for an hour or two, but then they would get busy and forget about her just like everyone else had forgotten about her. As long as she knew the reality would hurt less. It had to.

Greta could feel tears welling in the corners of her eyes but she blinked them away. None of them deserved to see how lonely she was. She scooped Wolri up into her lap along with the ribbons and gave him a squeeze. His black fur was warm against her cheek as he rumbled and let out a tiny *Meh* in protest.

"Princess, you'll get fur on your dress," Doria chided.

Greta put Wolri down and mumbled an apology. Doria clicked her tongue and shook her head as she stood and headed for the door. "That reminds me of more washing to be done." She paused beside the door. "Ohh and Princess, do try to keep yourself presentable for your fathers. They'll be so proud to see what a pretty young lady you've become." Another smile and she was gone.

Greta waited for the sound of Doria's footsteps to fade before throwing the box of ribbons at the door. It hit the wood with a loud thump, startling Wolri back under the bed even as dozens of ribbons spilled across the floor. She stared at the mess she had made for a moment before crossing the room to clear up the evidence of her tantrum, but by the time she reached the door the guard had swung it open.

"Princess, is everything all right?"

His blond hair and blue uniform reminded her of Wolfram and Greta almost screamed at him.

Instead she lowered her eyes. "Everything's fine," she lied and waited for him to leave. Greta didn't
look up even as the awkward moment stretched. She didn't want him to see the sadness in her eyes.

Finally the door closed again and it took all the strength that Greta had not to go running to the stables. If it wouldn't have gotten Wilfrido in trouble she would have hidden there and stayed until the whole stupid castle forgot about her.

********

********

The ride from the harbor to the castle seemed to take longer than Wolfram remembered. He was still a bit groggy from the Papaver Dreams, but he was so anxious to get out of this carriage and see his daughter that he could hardly keep himself still. It felt like he had been gone for years instead of months.

Once again the wimp had decided to sit beside him in the carriage, though this time it was to make room for Gisela and the sage. There was space enough for them to sit without contact but Yuuri insisted on being close enough to touch. A distracting line of heat down his left side.

"Do you think Gwendal will be mad?" Yuuri asked far too close to Wolfram's ear. Then he worried his lip.

It made Wolfram want to kiss him, and so he made himself look out of the window instead. "What does he have to be mad about, Wimp?"

He could feel Yuuri's blush as he stammered for words. "Nothing," he said as though to convince himself. "Right. Nothing."

Wolfram shifted again and glared hard at the stone buildings of the city as they passed. Only a few people were out on the roads. Gwendal must not have announced their return. At least that explained why he hadn't sent the royal carriage.

Wolfram could feel the sage watching him. Gisela and Yuuri too. He crossed his legs and longed for the comforting blackness of his two day sleep. Dreaming was so much easier than this constant scrutiny.

They passed the city's inner gate in silence, carriage jerking over uneven stone as Grier called the horses to a halt. Wolfram sat up stiffly in his seat and wished that he was facing the other way. As it was he could only guess who was waiting for them by the palace gates.

Weller opened the door for Yuuri and Wolfram clenched his fists until it hurt. Waiting. It had been so long since he had seen Greta. He had missed months of a life that was already painfully short. Would she ever forgive him?

Once Yuuri had climbed down Wolfram waited for the sage to move. Wolfram's knuckles were white with tension. Soon. Soon Wolfram would never have to wait for the sake to move again. Once he married Yuuri no one but the Maou would come before him. An anxious heat fluttered in his chest, but before Wolfram could give it another thought it was time for him to step out of the carriage.

It was surprisingly bright. Wolfram squinted against the sun as he stepped into the courtyard.

"Wolfie!" His Mother's voice was full of tears as she crushed his face into her breasts. "I'm so glad you're alright! We were all so very worried! And now my baby is not only safe but getting married!" She squeezed him tighter. "When I got the bird from Gwendal that you would be coming home I set sail at once!"
As soon as she released him Wolfram gasped for air. "I'm sorry to have worried you, Mother."

She was already advancing on Yuuri and in seconds his fiance was captured in a tight grasp of his own. "I couldn't dream of having a more handsome son-in-law," she cooed.

Jealously rose in his gut but Wolfram forced it away, scanning the assembled crowd for Greta instead. It was all wrong. If Greta was here surely she would have been the first to break decorum and hug him. And if not him then Yuuri.

Gwendal fixed him with a heavy gaze and Wolfram forced himself to meet his brother's eyes. What must Gwendal think of him now? After everything?

But then Wolfram's eyes found Greta and all thoughts of Gwendal disappeared. Greta was standing quietly at his brother's side, gaze unfocused in the direction of the carriage. She had gotten so tall, almost up to Gwendal's elbow, and her hair was tied back into a long braid. She was wearing a woman's dress. A tight bodice against her waist and chest making her look no longer a girl.

Without thinking Wolfram took a step toward her. Then another. Only stopping when she finally looked at him, large brown eyes trembling as she worried her lip.

"Greta?"

For a moment Wolfram thought that he had been the one to say it, but it was Yuuri.

"We're home," Yuuri smiled, stepping to Wolfram's side and kneeling, arms out for a hug that didn't come.

Their daughter lowered her eyes from them and curtsied. "Welcome home, Father." Another curtsy, this time for him, "Father."

Wolfram felt Yuuri's shock as sharply as his own.

"Greta... " Yuuri said again, barely a whisper.

Greta's eyes stayed down. "My apologies, Father, but I'm not feeling well. May I please be excused to my chambers?"

"Yes," Wolfram answered quickly before Yuuri could say anything to make it worse. "Yes, you may." He reached out to grab Yuuri's hand. Squeezing tightly in warning.

Greta turned on her heel and without looking up walked back up the palace stairs. Wolfram knew that she would run the moment she turned the corner.

He would have.

Yuuri gave Wolfram an odd sort of look before tightening his grip on Wolfram's hand.

The warmth of Yuuri's trust kept Wolfram's anxiety from tearing him apart as they headed into the castle, listening to Gunter talk about color schemes and fabric and flowers as they went. The conference room seemed over-hot and Wolfram could feel sweat beading on his forehead as Gunter's pitch grated against his senses. Once again Wolfram found himself struggling to keep himself still. He needed to speak to Greta. To reassure her. To make her stop feeling the way he had so many times when he was young, left behind while his mother searched for her next lover or when Weller went hunting with his father.
Wolfram had never known his father. It was something he didn't think about much, but he supposed it was one of the many reasons he felt so fiercely protective of Greta.

Wolfram knew that if either he or Yuuri had tried to reach out to her by the gates it would only have made it worse. She had been trying so hard to be brave and strong and yet Wolfram could tell by her eyes that she had been holding back tears. Wolfram didn't want to do anything that would have broken that careful resolve in front of everyone. It would only make her want to strengthen herself more. Push her farther away from them while she tried to keep the hurt from getting in.

He needed to talk to her. Alone.

Gunter had moved on to his plans for the wedding feast when Grier made a subtle gesture and left the room. Gwendal followed a few minutes later. It was likely both of them were eager to leave this tedium and discuss more important matters. Wolfram suspected that no small portion of their discussion would be concerning his recent acquisition of Ethne's powers, but that could be dealt with later. With Gwendal gone he could make his escape without getting trapped by a longer, more draining conversation.

Slowly Wolfram started to stand, trying not to catch Gunter's eye as the grey haired man spread yet another parchment covered in his tight script before Yuuri. Seating arrangements. Yuuri noticed him at once and Wolfram mouthed their daughter's name and looked to the door.

"This is just so wonderful, Gunter!" Yuuri praised at once. "I don't know what I would do without you!"

"Ohh! Your Majesty, You are too kind-- It is my greatest honor to please you, Your Majesty! The most kind and illustrious of Maous! Your Majesty is too kind--"

Wolfram sent Yuuri an impressed smirk as he slipped from the room.

From there it was a simple matter of reaching his daughter's chambers. His man gave him a salute when Wolfram came in sight of the door.

"Sir! It's good to have you back!"

"Thank you." Wolfram paused. "My daughter?"

"Inside, Sir."

"Good. I'll expect a more comprehensive report later. For now, do not permit anyone entry besides His Majesty." Wolfram knew it was only a matter of time before Yuuri managed to disentangle himself from Gunter's over-zealous attentions.

The man gave him a salute. "Yes, Sir."

Wolfram knocked and waited for a soft voice to bid him enter before he turned the handle and stepped into Greta's room.

She was sitting on the large rug between her bed and the door, ribbons spread around her in disarray as the retreating end of a black cat disappeared beneath the bedskirts. Greta looked at his boots and worried her bottom lip. "Hello."

"Hello," he answered and closed the door softly behind himself. He moved to sit beside her on the rug. It was then that Wolfram noticed that she was wearing the bracelet he had sent her, loose against her slender wrist. He reached out to touch it. "Yuuri and I brought you a good portion of
Caloria's markets, you know. Dresses and baubles from every corner of the seas."

"Ohh," she said, taking away her hand. "Thank you."

Wolfram sighed. "I know it's not what you want. It's not what I wanted either, you know. It would have been better if this whole mess had never happened. If Saralegui had never come... the plague... any of it. I wish that I could have stayed. Taken care of you and the wimp but--"

"I know it's not your fault. I'm not a little girl anymore, I understand." She twirled a bit of ribbon on the ground and the little cat bounded out from under her bed to pounce on it.

"No. You're not a little girl anymore." The words saddened him more than he had ever thought they would. Hearing them aloud. In his own voice. For a while he watched her twirl the ribbon for her pet, not trusting his voice enough to speak. Then, "I'm glad he made it." He forced himself to smile as tiny fangs chewed at a tangle of pink lace. "He's grown a lot since Lucien and I pulled him from the riverbank."

Greta smiled a bit and pulled the cat into her lap. "Wolri is wonderful. He's the best present you've ever given me! He keeps me company and even sleeps with me at night and he gets along well with the horses even if he keeps eating Wilfrido's father's stupid birds."

Wolfram listened to her talk and for a moment it was like he'd never left. "You've been with that stable boy a lot, my men tell me."

Greta blushed. "He's just my friend. That's all. We play at swords and I always win. It's not because he lets me either, it's because he's too slow." She looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes. "Please don't get him in trouble, Wolfram. When he gets in trouble his father won't let him play with me! The servant children treat me like a princess or a human and Wilfrido is my only friend!"

Wolfram put a hand on her head. "I won't get him in trouble." He would have to give the boy a talking to though. Let him know just whose daughter he was playing at swords with. "I should thank him for distracting you from my failure as a father."

"You're not a failure," Greta said, but she didn't look at him.

Wolfram took his hand away. "You shouldn't have to protect yourself like this Greta. From me. From Yuuri. We both love you so much. It's our job to protect you."

Greta pulled her knees against her chest. Cat forgotten.

"I thought I was going to die too," he continued carefully. "But I'm safe now and Yuuri and I are back and--"

"But for how long?" she whispered as a single tear slid down her cheek. "How long until the next time you leave or something even worse happens?"

"Greta..." his voice nearly cracked. "I can't promise you that nothing bad will ever happen again. The future isn't up to me. But I can promise you that Yuuri and I will always love you no matter what." It was his turn to look at the ground with unfocused eyes. "It's too short. Things happen that no one can control. It may seem easier to hide away but... I know I'm not the perfect father. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you these past few months. I'm sorry I hurt you and made you worry. But please, Greta, don't... You're growing up so quickly as it is. Let me be your father while I can. Don't grow up to be like Gwendal, like I would have if it hadn't been for you and Yuuri."

The room seemed awfully quiet once Wolfram had finished speaking. His mouth felt too dry and
his throat ached with withheld feelings. But then Greta put her arms around him and Wolfram knew he must have said something right. Her tears were hot and wet on his neck and Wolfram was surprised by the strength of her grasp as she clung to him.

"I was so scared," she sobbed against him. "I was so scared, Wolfram."

"I know," he soothed, hugging her back. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry I was bad before. I was just..." another bout of tears interrupted and Wolfram held her tighter.

"It's okay, I understand." He kissed her hair. "Gods, I understand."

They stayed like that for a while. Passing back and forth apologies and hugs until Wolfram had come close to tears and back a dozen times himself.

Greta pulled away from him eventually though, and gave him a red-faced grin. "Did you and Yuuri really bring me back half the markets of Caloria?"

Wolfram blinked. And then he was laughing. Laughing while Greta laughed and falling back to lie on the rug in the tangle of ribbons-- And then Yuuri opened the door and gave them a look that only made him laugh harder-- stomach screaming as he tried to catch his breath and tears ran down his cheeks, chest aching from the joy of it all.

It was good to be home.

********
Shou Shimeron
Third Ring
Later that day

********

The sky was a dull grey.

Fernan wrinkled his nose at the smell of piss and filth as he made his way along the narrow alleyways that bordered the white walls of the capital in a rancid maze. He stepped around a rotten barrel of fruit and cursed as a ratty tom cat jumped into his path, hissing before taking off down the alley.

Fernan's job as a guard wasn't all perks and he found himself walking through alleys and markets with the half-mad third class on most of his days. Men, women, and naked children who only saw what they wanted to see.

Numbers manifest the chosen.

The words were half-faded but there, scrawled across the door of an inn. Fernan's stomach rumbled as the smell of stew wafted from the open windows of the ground floor. He had been patrolling since dawn. It was high time he took a break for his midday meal.

The inn's tavern was sparsely filled. A group of men were huddled around the far end of the single long table, but none of them bothered to look up at him as he entered.

Fernan walked to the bar and ordered a bowl of the day's stew, along with a chunk of bread and
mug of roggin to make the rest of his day go easier, from a thin man with thinner hair before taking his seat at the end of the table farthest from the group of men. If he was lucky enough he would be able to finish his meal without interruption. He was nearly done with his rounds and now that Fernan had left the outer ring behind to live behind the pristine walls with the others of his kind he didn't relish his time spent in places like this.

His stew came quick enough and wasn't spoiled. A blessing. Fernan had been to more than a few taverns in the city only to find the food rotten or speckled with mold. Fernan took a swig of his roggen and belched. Good food and strong roggen was a fine thing.

"Numbers manifest the chosen."

Fernan froze as a young man in a dirty tunic sat beside him on the bench. His face was pinched with pain beneath a weary smile and as he folded his hands on the table Fernan could see that his right forearm was covered with a white scar. The burn mark was twisted around his wrist as if fire itself had grabbed a hold of him, refusing to let go.

"You're a guard." The boy licked his lips. Full lips. "I came to market... selling pigs with mother--but it's everywhere." He leaned closer. "Can you tell me what it means?"

Fernan could feel a wicked smile curling on his lips. Such a pretty thing. Dark hair and dark eyes. This one had come from outside the city and was likely to be untasted. Today really was full of blessings. The gods themselves had given him a gift.

Fernan reached forward to cup the boy's chin. "And what do you think it means?" he asked, blood already rising as he studied the young man beside him.

"I think..." Dark lashes fluttered as the young man leaned against his touch. "I think it means I'm special. Mother doesn't see the words-- none of them do- but I can. Please." He licked his lips again. "I don't want to go back to the pig farm with Mother. I want to see the city. The real city beyond the walls. Please."

Fernan slid his hand from the young man's chin to cup his cheek. Such smooth skin. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Fernan had received his numbers from the guards in Tono's old place on the other side of town. A tavern so much like this one. He gave the boy a nod. "Yes. You're a clever one, as you said."

The young man grinned. Lovely teeth. A rare treat indeed. "Really?"

"Yes." Fernan returned the grin. "If you're very good I might be able to make all of your dreams come true. Would you like that, boy?" Fernan's other hand reached over to give the boy's thigh a squeeze.

The boy whimpered and thanked him, biting his lip at the touch and Fernan could hardly keep himself from pushing him down onto the table at once. His cock was hard in his britches and that sound-- it made it so easy to imagine this boy squirming under him.

Fernan could hardly believe his good fortune. "What's your name, boy?" he asked already tasting the kiss that was to come.

"Lucien," the young man whispered and closed his eyes.

********

********
The train car was packed and silent as it rushed through the city's bustling center. Yuuri was pressed close to one of the windows but at least this way he could see the apartments and restaurants and stores rushing by outside in a sullen monochrome. Once night fell everything would be color and flashing lights, but now everything just seemed grey beneath the cloudless sky.

The car slowed to a stop and Yuuri had to shift his balance to keep from bumping into the group of students beside him. The bells chimed and a woman's voice announced the stop in both Japanese and English, urging them to be careful as they exited the train.

Shinjuku. Shinjuku.

Humidity coated his face as Yuuri was swept out with the rush of the crowd. He missed the air conditioning of the train car at once. He had forgotten how humid the city could be in August. As hot as the other world could be it was a dry heat, not this stiflingly heavy wet.

By the time Yuuri made his way from the platform and up the stairs into the main station he was tempted to give up and go home. Instead he grit his teeth and let the tide of people carry him past the coin lockers, shops, and endless stream of advertisements. As the station gate approached Yuuri fished in his bag for his entry ticket and got ready to stick it in the machine. His mother had taken the plastic one this morning when she headed out to do her own shopping.

Yuuri glanced at his watch as he wove through the underground tunnels, reluctant to climb the stairs to the street until he absolutely had to. He was sure there had to be a way into the department stores above without having to suffer the heat. There were plenty of shops at the level he was at, but he was supposed to be meeting his mother in the coffee shop on the second floor of Marui at three. He had caught an express train coming in and so he still had half an hour before then.

Yuuri sighed.

It seemed like everyone around him was in a rush. That or standing waiting for someone. It was a beautiful summer Saturday and everywhere he looked he could see fashionable couples walking together. The underground was full of girls in skirts that fluttered teasingly above smooth thighs and socks that climbed well over their knees. The prowling boys were equally stylish with their spiked hair, tight jeans, and pointed boots.

All of it only made Yuuri feel out of place. He hadn't put anything in his hair and his loose jeans and faded shirt were years old. A far cry from the latest fashions.

To his right a group of teenage boys were talking loudly as they purchased cigarettes from a vending machine. From the look of them they were probably hosts and would be spending their evening in kabuki-cho having tea with rich older women. One of the boys had bleached his hair and Yuuri couldn't help but wonder what Wolfram would look like trussed up in the latest trends.
Tight jeans would suit him, Yuuri decided with a blush. They would make his legs look even longer.

Yuuri could picture it easily. The way the fabric would cling to him. The bulge that his cock would make in the front. Even soft everyone would be able to see a hint of what only Yuuri would ever get to have. He could imagine Wolfram's face when Yuuri knelt in front of him to undo the zipper and free him from the stiff fabric. The scratch of denim against his cheek. Wolfram's taste. The noise he would make when Yuuri finally sucked him--

Suddenly the air in the underground felt thick. Too hot to breathe. Yuuri rushed into one of the stores to feel the fresh blast of an air conditioner on his skin and began his search for an escalator as he did his best to will away the tightness in his crotch. Maybe he would have time to buy Wolfram a pair of jeans before he had to meet his mother.

The up escalator was toward the back of the store, and as he rode it up to the street level of the shop Yuuri's cell phone buzzed in his back pocket. He flipped it open to read the text:

------------

\textit{Yuu-chan! It's Mama! (≧▽≦)/} \\
\textit{Mama is looking for something for you and Wolf in Ni-chome! Why don't you meet me here instead?!} \\
------------

The message was followed by two male symbols and a glittering rainbow. Yuuri nearly choked. He had never set foot in that infamous corner of Shinjuku, but the idea of his mother surrounded by gay bars and any number of seedy establishments... What on Earth could she mean to buy them in Ni-chome?!

Yuuri's hands were shaking as he wrote her a hasty refusal, along with the likely futile request for her not to purchase anything.

What was she thinking? Wolfram would burn him alive if he showed up with anything from a place like that!

Yuuri barely noticed the heat as he walked out of the store and onto the main street. There was a large department store nearby and he wandered in, trying to think about anything other than what his mother might be up to. Yuuri had left the majority of the present-buying up to her and he was beginning to wonder if it had really been the best idea.

Yuuri's pocket buzzed again. His mother would meet him for lunch an hour from now in the same place they had agreed upon before. He put the phone back into his pocket and sighed. At least now he really would have time to buy Wolfram those jeans.

* * *

Once Yuuri was satisfied with his impulsive purchase for Wolfram he found himself wandering again. He walked by a variety of shops, most of them filled with women's clothes, twisting the ring that Wolfram had given him all the while. The shop attendants yelled for his attention in cheery voices, urging him to come and take a look at their merchandise. Yuuri ignored them. More absorbed in his own thoughts than he was at really looking at anything.

A few sparkling hair-clips caught his eye for Greta, along with a silver necklace. The same shop
had a huge selection of stuffed toys and so he picked a particularly cute one for Gwendal as well as one for his daughter. Maybe if he got something sufficiently cute Gwendal would feel less inclined to castrate him for going near his precious little brother. Yuuri hadn't really had a proper talk with Gwendal before he had left for Earth this time and whenever Yuuri thought about the Impending Conversation he felt a chill.

When he went to the register he had to break a large bill in order to pay. It felt strange to be carrying around so much money. Yuuri had cleared out his bank account this morning. Money he had saved from part time jobs. Birthday presents and money for college. A future he had given up somewhere along the way.

He had taken out so much with a purpose though. He needed to get something for Wolfram that he would really appreciate. Something better than an old photograph or a pair of fancy jeans.

The woman at the counter handed him his neatly wrapped purchases with a smile and Yuuri found himself back where he had started. Wandering the department store.

The next time he came back here he would be married to Wolfram.

Yuuri could feel his cheeks redden at the thought. He hadn't even been able to puzzle through Gunter's grand descriptions enough to have a clear picture of what the ceremony would be like. The other world was full of strange traditions and Yuuri was half afraid he'd find himself wrestling a sand bear or having to consummate his marriage in front of half the court. The only comfort was that Yuuri knew that Wolfram wouldn't put up with anything that was too dangerous or embarrassing.

What was he supposed to get Wolfram as a wedding gift? What if there was some traditional something that no one had told him about? But Murata would have said something if there was... Wouldn't he?

Yuuri pulled out his phone to send Murata a message but remembered he didn't know his number. It hadn't been programmed into his temporary phone. Yuuri made a frustrated noise as he shove it back into his pocket.

He twisted Wolfram's ring on his finger for another minute before the obvious answer struck him. A ring. Wolfram had given him one. A king's ring. Once they married Wolfram would be a king too! He would need a king's ring of his own.

It wasn't difficult to find an appropriate jewelry shop once Yuuri had his goal in mind. The man standing by the shining metal doors was wearing a tuxedo and he bowed low as he welcomed Yuuri inside. Everything was white. Shining and clean and covered in glass. A well-dressed couple was being helped toward the back of the room, but otherwise the store was empty. The air-conditioning was strong and it made Yuuri shiver and realize how under-dressed he must look to be in a store like this.

"May I help you?" A woman wearing a crisp uniform and a shiny name-tag smiled at him.

"Well..." Yuuri could feel his blush getting worse than ever. "I... Well... I-- I need a ring." He could hardly look her in the eyes. Was he really doing this? It felt like he was buying an--

"An engagement ring?" The woman practically squealed. "Could that be it?"

The couple across the room gave him an odd look as the shop woman urged him closer to where they were standing to look at the rings. Yuuri wanted to crawl under a rock and hide.
"Don't be embarrassed!" The woman cooed. "Ohh you're so adorable! Your girlfriend is a lucky one!"

"Lucky..." Yuuri managed. *Girlfriend.* Of course. This was Japan! There was no way they would expect him to be buying a ring for anyone other than a girl.

All of the rings under the glass counter that she had brought him to glittered with diamonds or other colorful stones. Some were even in the shapes of hearts or flowers and none were remotely suitable for Wolfram.

The female clerk must have been able to see his discomfort. "It's a hard decision, right?" She gave him a comforting smile. "What kind of girl is your sweetheart? Does she like cute things or is she more sophisticated? What brands does she like?"

"No." Yuuri finally managed to find his voice. "I'm sorry-- There's been a misunderstanding... The ring is for..."

"Oh! You're not getting married--" 

"I am!" Yuuri was shocked by the strength of his voice. "But... I'm not really looking for an engagement ring..."

"Oh," The woman exclaimed. "Wedding bands then? I'm sorry I got so carried away!"

"No, no. Don't be sorry," Yuuri stammered. "I wasn't clear. It's my fault. I'm actually looking for something a little different..." How could he explain it without really explaining it? "I'm using this." He put his hand on the glass to show her the ring. "And so now I just need something to match it..."

The saleswoman hid her disappointment well. "I see. In that case let me show you these." She brought him over to a different part of the show room. "What kind of metal would you prefer?"

Yuuri studied the selection of rings beneath the glass. Even though they lacked any jewels or embellishments, no two were quite the same. The thickness, the way they caught the light. Yuuri didn't know how he would ever be able to make the right choice. He twisted his own ring and worried his lip.

"Is it an heirloom?" The woman asked.

"What?"

"Your ring." She gave him a patient smile. "If you want the new one to match it, it might help if you could tell me exactly what it is you're looking for." Then she held out a hand. "Do you mind if I take a closer look?"

Yuuri blushed as he reluctantly handed her the ring. "It's silver. I think."

"I see."

He grimaced as she held it in her palm, then up to the light to study it. Something in his gut hated that she was touching it. Without it his finger felt naked, and the burn scar it covered almost tingled.

"So old!" She said in awe, handing it back to him after what felt like ages. "It does seem to be silver... but not the way we make things these days..." She gave him a puzzled look. "I've never
seen anything quite like it."

Part of him wasn't surprised. The ring had come from another world after all. Still, the revelation gave him an idea. "Which kind of metal is the rarest here? That's still the same silver color. I want to give-- them-- something special."

Something that, with a bit of luck, might only come from this world.

* * *

Yuuri's entire body ached by the time he made it home. His feet throbbed as he stepped out of his shoes and into his slippers in the entryway and his head pounded as his mother's unyielding voice assaulted his ears.

"... but Yuu-chan, don't you think we should be getting more? Mama has hardly had any time to prepare and there are so many things--"

"Tomorrow," he groaned for the thousandth time. "We're going back tomorrow." He didn't think he would be able to last another day.

His mother sighed. "I suppose you're right, Yuu-chan. We can't have you being late for your own wedding after all." She set down the mass of bags she was carrying with a squeal. "My Yuu-chan is getting married! I'm so proud of you! Such a fine man you've become!"

Yuuri placed his own bags down at the base of the stairs and blushed. All he wanted to do was sleep. He would need his rest to be able to take everyone back.

"Yuu-chan." Shouri's voice was hard. "I need to talk to you."

It took all of Yuuri's remaining strength not to groan aloud.

"Welcome home, Shou-chan!" His mother gushed, wrapping her oldest son in a hug. "You should visit more often! That Bob makes you work too hard--"

"Mother!" Shouri whined in protest. "I have to complete my training--"

Yuuri took his chance to run into the living room where his father was busy wrapping the things they had gotten yesterday in layers of plastic.

"Welcome back," his father smiled.

Yuuri collapsed face down on the tatami covered floor beside him and sighed. "I'm home..." he managed, belatedly.

His father reached over to give his head a sympathetic pat. "Rough day?"

Yuuri only grunted and closed his eyes. He took a few deep breaths and felt his heartbeat everywhere at once as his body punished him for the day’s activities. How was it that shopping could make him feel worse than a day of riding? Yuuri supposed he really had gotten used to the other world.

"Trying to kill the boy before his own wedding, Jennifer?" His father asked with a laugh when his mother and Shouri entered the room.

"Oh, Papa don't be mean!" His mother huffed. "Mama is just making sure everything is ready that's all!"
His father was saved from further scolding by a loud beeping sound that suddenly drifted in from the kitchen.

"The rice!" His mother darted after the sound. "Perfect timing! I'll re-heat the curry."

Yuuri could feel his brother's footsteps as the older boy came to sit beside him on the floor. He knew Shouri wanted to talk to him, but Yuuri also knew that he wasn't looking forward to hearing what his brother was going to say. Shouri was the only one that worried him. Their parents had been fine, accepting that he was marrying Wolfram with hardly a blink. But Shouri-- Shouri was so bull-headed about the whole thing and Yuuri was so tired.

"It's been a while, little brother." Shouri's voice was close.

"We could say the same to you, Shouri." Their father smiled. "Bob's been keeping you busy."

"I'm to be the next Maou!" Shouri said defensively. "There is a lot to be done. Now that I'm done with college Bob keeps me close so I can observe all of his most important business. I was supposed to meet the Prime Minister of Britain tomorrow but now... Well now, I don't know when we'll get around to it."

Yuuri frowned without opening his eyes. "You don't have to come, Shouri. No one's making you."

Shouri sputtered in indignation. "What are you talking about, Yuu-chan?"

Their father cleared his throat. "I'll just go help Mama in the kitchen. Why don't you two try to work this out like civilized people before dinner is on the table?"

Yuuri opened his eyes to watch his father leave the room, but was distracted by the splotchy flush covering his brother's cheeks as he glared at him.

"Yuu-chan. I had to come! Why would you think I wouldn't?"

Yuuri blinked and sat up. "I'm sorry... I guess after everything you've said before... I didn't expect you to be happy for me."

"All I want is for you to be happy, Yuu-chan." Shouri reached out to touch his shoulder, holding him tight. "Which is why you don't have to worry anymore. Now that I'm here I'll take care of everything. You can just tell me what's going on and I'll take care of all of it. I promise."

"What?" Yuuri furrowed his brow. "What are you talking about, Shouri?"

Shouri lowered his voice as he leaned closer. "What did they say? I know the politics might seem like there's no other choice, but you're the king, Yuu-chan. You've done so much for them. They can't make you do something like this--"

"Something like what?" Yuuri's blood went cold.

Shouri put a hand on his forehead. "It's worse than I thought! Is that pervert Shinou in your head again? Poison? One of that crazy woman's tricks?" Tears were running down his cheeks. "It's okay, Yuu-chan. Big brother will make it all okay."

Yuuri nearly hit him. "Because I'm marrying Wolfram? Because I want to--"

"But you don't! I've known you your whole life! You're not--"

"Not what?" He struggled out of Shouri's grasp to stand. To look at him. "What are you--"
"You're not a queer!" Shouri wheezed, barely breathing. "You're not. You're not."

"No," Yuuri growled. "I'm your brother." He would have said more but Shouri started to cry. Face in his hands as his shoulders shook with silent sobs.

"I know," he said a dozen times beneath his breath. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it-- I didn't..."

The anger went out of him, only to be replaced by numb shock. Pity. Yuuri swallowed thickly and hurried to the door, ignoring his brother's pleas for him to stop.

In the kitchen his parents gave him a worried look.

"Yuu-chan, is everything alright?" His mother was stirring a large pot of curry on the stove.

"Fine," he muttered. "I'm going to take a bath before dinner. Quickly... but if you don't want to wait you can start eating..."

His mother opened her mouth but it was his father who spoke first. "That's fine. Just don't go anywhere without us." He smiled.

Yuuri nodded quickly and all but ran up the stairs. Locking the bathroom door as quickly as he closed it behind him.

He needed to think.

It wasn't until he was scrubbed, rinsed, and sitting in steaming water that he managed to make any progress though. Not until he was fairly certain that Shouri wasn't about to come into the bath with him to continue their conversation.

Yuuri hugged his knees to his chest and sighed. He couldn't blame Shouri for thinking the way he did. Not really. Yuuri had thought that way too for most of his life. Shouri hadn't... he hadn't seen a world where it was really possible.

There was nothing in this world to change Shouri's mind. Nothing that Yuuri knew of at any rate. And Shouri had always been playing those stupid dating sims. After that, even his views on "normal" relationships must be broken.

Yuuri hoped that part of Bob's training for Shouri would involve teaching him to be more open-minded. Although... for some reason Yuuri had the feeling that Shouri's problem with it was more because it was him than anything else. Shouri had always been overprotective... Always acted like Yuuri was still six years old.

Now it seemed like Shouri was the one who was six years old.

Yuuri let out another sigh. He had promised his parents that he would be quick. If he stayed in any longer it was likely he would fall asleep. The heat was doing wonders for his aching body and so leaving the tub to rinse himself again was a struggle. He had forgotten to bring in new clothes and so Yuuri just put back on the same jeans and shirt he had been wearing earlier before unlocking the door to peek into the hallway.

Empty.

Or at least that was what Yuuri thought before Shouri came around a corner to surprise him. He jumped. "Shouri!"
His brother's eyes were red, and in the dim light of the upstairs hallway, the dark patches beneath them were black as shadows. His cheeks were still damp with tears. "I don't know when it happened..." Shouri pulled his hands from his face along with his glasses and looked at the wetness on his fingers with puzzled disbelief. Without the glass covering his eyes it was impossible to ignore the way the corners of his eyes drooped with exhaustion. "I'm sorry, Yuu-chan... There's no way for me to explain this without sounding like an utter ass."

Yuuri blinked at him. "Well... You could try."

Shouri gave a half sob, half chuckle and looked up to meet his brother's eyes. "I thought about it the whole way back here. On the plane." He paused again to lick dry lips. "Everything's different now... You may not believe it, but there was a time when you looked up to me. When everything was simple." He was quiet for a while, but then he looked down at the floor again and continued. "I had everything planned. I would go to a good college and get a good job. And I suppose I have done that... or I will if I keep working hard. But there was this picture that I could never really bring myself to let go of... Once we were both grown up. That one day you would look up to me again. And that when you did it would be for more than just the fact that I was your older brother, it would be because I had grown into someone worth admiring. Worth respecting. And that even after you settled down and had a wife and children... it wouldn't change us. We would be brothers and friends..."

Yuuri couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "What does saying things like that... about me... about Wolf-- How could you possibly think that saying something like that would do anything to--"

"Because if you had a wife-- I could still be your best friend." This time Shouri did laugh. A high sound that was more creepy than anything else. "But now I'll never stand a chance, will I?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I won't deny that I can't stand the thought of-- of him touching you. He could hurt you. I don't want to see you hurt. He came on to me, you know. He gave me the water that woke my magic. Came into my room at night and--"

"That was Shinou!" Yuuri sputtered. "Wolf wouldn't--"

"You think he hasn't had others? I don't even like men and I can see how good he looks. How do you know he won't... won't hurt you someday? What if someone else comes along and--"

"Stop." Yuuri could almost feel the air begin to crackle with his anger. "You don't know him. If anything I'm the one who's hurt him, brother. Wolfram has gone through more than anyone ever should-- He's a better man than me. Than anyone I've ever known." The fear in Shouri's eyes helped Yuuri to bring himself back under control. "And anything he might have felt for anyone before... it doesn't matter now. He's proven it more than once."

Shouri still didn't look at him, but he replaced his glasses with a stiff nod. "Fine. I don't understand... I won't lie to you about that, but that doesn't give me the right to say the things I did. You're my brother, and god knows I'll love you whether you like it or not."

Yuuri sighed and managed a tired smile. "You'll always be my brother, Shouri. Marrying Wolfram won't change that."

Shouri looked at him then. Gave a sad smile. "I know. And I promise I won't say anything stupid like that again. I'll behave."

"Thanks." Yuuri hadn't realized how worried he had been about what Shouri might do or say until the relief hit him. "I appreciate it."
Shouri sighed loudly and leaned heavily against the darkened wall behind him. "At least maybe now I'll be able to get some sleep. It must be at least a week since I've gotten more than four hours. Do you have any idea how many treaties Bob oversees?"

Yuuri snorted. "Try signing your name on papers you can hardly read until you can't hold the pen anymore."

Shouri gave a weary laugh and closed his eyes.

Yuuri couldn't help but smile. Maybe there was hope for his brother after all.

* * *

Even beneath the water the sun felt warm on his cheeks as Yuuri pushed his way through to the fountain in Shinou's temple, magic tingling around him. And then he was through. Soaked and grinning as Conrad handed him a fluffy towel to dry himself.

"Welcome home, Your Majesty. Your Grace. And welcome, Shibuya Family, we are honored to have you." Ulrike's voice was full of courtesy. "Fresh clothes have been prepared for all of you. Please let us know if there is anything that isn't to your liking."

Yuuri gave Ulrike a smile and turned to check on the rest of his family just in time to see Shouri lose his footing and fall backward into the fountain with a yell and a splash. He came up again seconds later, red-faced and sputtering. It was hard not to laugh, but somehow Yuuri managed, walking over instead to lend his brother a hand up.

Luckily his parents had an easier time of it, and it wasn't long until everyone and their luggage was safely from the fountain.

"Where's Wolfram?" Yuuri asked.

"Sir Belefield is at the castle assisting in the preparations for the wedding, Your Majesty," Ulrike answered.

Yuuri had expected as much, but he couldn't help but feel disappointed anyway.

"Sir Belefield sends his regrets for not being here to meet you in person," Ulrike continued, this time looking at his parents. "I assure you that no offense is intended."

"Please, don't be so formal!" His mother insisted. "We're just glad everyone here has taken such good care of our Yuu-chan. A mother only wants to see her child happy."

"It is His Majesty who takes care of all of us, Lady Miko." Conrad smiled.

"Oh Conrad, you know you should call me Jennifer," his mother gushed, "You're too kind! And as handsome as ever! I must seem like an old maid after all this time."

"Never," Conrad assured.

His mother giggled. "Careful, Papa." She gave his father a teasing smile. "I might never want to go back to Tokyo."

"I'll be careful." It was his father's turn to laugh. "It's good to see you again, Conrad."

Greetings were exchanged for a few minutes longer until Murata sneezed and reminded them all of the dry clothes waiting for them inside the temple. After they had all changed it wasn't long until
Yuuri found himself warm and dry and seated between his mother and father in the royal carriage. Shouri and Murata were seated across from them, and even though Shouri was visibly uncomfortable sitting so close to the "friend of his brother" he had been doing a good job keeping out of any arguments so far. Yuuri hoped he would be able to keep it up.

As they rode his mother could hardly keep her eyes from the window and commented happily on everything they passed. They had arrived early in the day and the sun was rising steadily into a blue sky filled with white clouds. While his parents made comments on the scenery, Yuuri did his best not to be lulled to sleep by the soft cushions beneath him and the steady rocking of the carriage. From the way Murata's head was nodding every other moment it seemed like he was fighting a similar battle.

Still, it hadn't been nearly as difficult as Yuuri had feared to bring all of them through to the other world, even with all the presents his mother had insisted on bringing. Murata had said something about his body finally getting used to the additional magic he had absorbed from Shinou but Yuuri had only half-heard.

It had been one thing to be away from Wolfram in Japan, where he was used to not having him close, but now that Yuuri was back in Shin Makoku his body seemed to hum with impatient energy.

Soon.

Soon all the complicated things would be over and he could just have Wolfram.

********

********

Lately Wolfram wished he could spend all his time hiding in Greta's room, but he had barely started to outline the Wincott family history when one of Gwendal's men came to interrupt them. Wolfram had done his best to find time for Greta, but as the wedding approached his spare moments had all but gone. The lingering insomnia the Papaver Dreams had provided had gone as well, and now even his body seemed to thwart him, stealing time better spent going through documents and planning this political circus of a wedding for useless sleep.

He sighed and apologized to Greta before standing to follow the man from the room.

"His Majesty and his family have arrived," the guard informed him once they were in the hall. "The princess and yourself are needed down by the gate to meet them at the earliest convenience, Your Highness."

"We will be there shortly." Wolfram nodded before sending the guard on his way.

He paused before reentering his daughter's room, relief flooding him. He knew it was stupid, but a small part of him had been so... certain that Yuuri would abandon them again.

Stupid.

Wolfram shook his head to clear it before pushing open the door.

***

By the time Wolfram and Greta reached the gate his mother was already subjecting Yuuri's brother to one of her traditional hugs.
"Ohh haven't you gotten handsome," she cooed, pressing against him. Shouri was close to his mother's height in her heels and his face was glowing red as the older woman fawned over him. "Your parents have given the world such handsome sons. Do you have a lovely lady missing you at home or would you be interested in--"

"Mother!" Wolfram's cry of outrage drew the attention of those already at the gate.

Lady Cheri only laughed and let go of Shouri. "And here is my own handsome son!" It was Wolfram's turn to suffer a hug as she continued, "Our boys will be the most stunning kings that any world has ever seen! Don't you agree, Lady Jennifer?"

"Why yes." Yuuri's mother confirmed with a laugh. "I hope my camera has survived the trip. I can't wait to start taking pictures!"

"Just be careful not to let Anissina see it," Yuuri cautioned with a nervous laugh.

Wolfram gasped for breath when his mother finally released him.

"Greta!" His mother knelt to give the girl a hug. "Don't you look lovely!"

For an instant Wolfram was finally free to catch Yuuri's eye. Yuuri was standing between Conrad and his father and when he noticed Wolfram's gaze he returned it with a smile that made everything feel warm. Safe.

Wolfram smiled back before turning to save Greta from his mother's fussing. "Greta, let me introduce you to Yuuri's mother and father, Jennifer and Shoma Shibuya."

Greta stepped forward to curtsy. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Thank you so much for all the dresses... Lady Jennifer."

Jennifer let out a little squeal at the sight of her and rushed forward to capture the girl in a hug of her own. "Ohh think nothing of it, Greta! You're such a beautiful little lady! And so polite! Though I'm sure that's more Wolf-chan's doing than my son's." She pulled away to look Greta in the eyes. "You can call me 'Mama' or 'Jennifer'... or maybe 'Grand Mama Jennifer'." She smiled. "But you never have to be formal or be afraid to ask for anything. You're a part of the family, Greta. You have been for a long time. It's so good to finally meet you!"

Wolfram smiled at the way his daughter's face lit up. It was easy to see where Yuuri had learned his gift for kind words.

Later, when the formalities were complete, they headed inside for a lunch that was to be served for them in the grandly decorated East dining hall. The East hall was much smaller than the West, which would be host to tomorrow's wedding feast, but Gunter had outdone himself as usual in preparation for the royal family's meal. Yuuri's mother cooed and complimented every flower and linen while Gunter apologized for not having done more.

The more Gunter talked the more wrinkles Gwendal's forehead seemed to acquire. As grating as Wolfram found talk of the intricacies of the wedding celebrations, he knew that Gwendal had been getting an earful for weeks longer. Wolfram liked to imagine that his return had helped lessen his older brother's workload, especially now with the wedding plans official he could begin signing documents on Yuuri's behalf. But lately he feared that this business with Ethne had only caused Gwendal more stress. Part of Wolfram wondered if Gwendal had been keeping him close so he could watch him, rather than because he truly needed Wolfram's help.

And to make matters worse, his uncle and cousins would be attending tomorrow's celebrations as
well. Now that Yuuri looked as he might actually marry him, his "family" had become particularly
eager to send him their regards. Gwendal had assured him that their recent show of interest in his
happiness was to make certain that Wolfram had no intention of meddling in the internal politics of
Belefield now that he would have a king's claim to all the realm.

There had been a time when Wolfram had dreamed of Belefield. Of making his name more than
meaningless letters on parchment. That one day he would prove himself in some war to be worthy
of the lands and titles that had been denied him due to his childish decision. His ignorance.

But that was back when Wolfram had blamed Weller for his disinheritance. Weller had hidden the
truth of his blood from him, but Weller had been a child then too. His Mother should have told him.
His uncle should have explained...

Matters long past. His uncle and kin would come and smile and wish him happiness. They would
judge him, test him, to see if they could use him. If Wolfram would be willing to use his influence
over Yuuri to promote their motives and traditional pure-blood politics.

Wolfram sighed and took a bite of his lunch. Dark thoughts. He let his eyes travel to those sitting
around the lavish table, hoping to distract himself.

Directly across from him Yuuri's brother was a wall of stony silence, and once or twice Wolfram
catched his eyes on him. Shouri had always been less than accepting of their engagement and
Wolfram wondered how he had taken the news of their wedding plans. Another thing for him to
worry about.

All in all it was exhausting, and Wolfram found himself wishing more than once for the whole
thing to be over. Things would be so much simpler once Yuuri was his. Simply his. No
celebrations or wars or politics. Once he was allowed to touch him.

Wolfram flushed and shifted in his seat, but that only brought his knee in contact with the wimp.
Wolfram could feel Yuuri looking at him but he refused to return his gaze. If he looked at Yuuri,
Wolfram wouldn't be able to stop himself from wanting him. And if he looked at Yuuri... wanted
him... everyone would see the weakness on his face.

Wolfram took a long sip of his tea and moved his leg away.

********
********

Wolfram was avoiding him.

Yuuri could hardly keep from touching him and Wolfram wouldn't even look at him. It wasn't fair.

Had he done something wrong? What if Wolfram didn't want to marry him anymore?

The thoughts scared him enough to risk putting his hand on Wolfram's beneath the table. Just
touching him. Just touching him would be enough to make the panic stop, he was sure of it.

Wolfram didn't look at him, but his hand shifted, fingers twining against his own to give a
reassuring squeeze.

Warm.

Yuuri smiled and let the conversation fade and swell around him. He could do this. He could.
Holding Wolfram's hand had gotten him through lunch, but when it came time for Yuuri to give his family a tour of the grounds and gardens Wolfram had to return to his duties and Yuuri found himself missing his fiance all the more. For a while his hand tingled with remembered touch, but eventually that was gone too.

At least Greta had decided to come along. Having her here made everything feel less... strange. Less like he was only visiting this other world along with his family and more like he should. Like he was showing them his home.

"... and later you can meet Wolri," Greta was saying as she walked at Yuuri's side, holding his hand. She was getting more comfortable with his family by the minute and was being a better tour guide than he was. "Wolri usually comes down to the stables with me when I go, but now that things are so busy I've been keeping him in my room."

"Wolri?" his mother asked.

"A kitten," Yuuri explained. "Or I guess he's grown into a cat now. Wolfram sent him to Greta as a gift when he was... away... was traveling."

"I thought he was always here," Shouri probed. "Guarding you."

"He is!" Yuuri snapped defensively. "Most of the time."

Sensing the change in his mood his mother urged them all to sit beneath one of the garden's flowering trees. "It reminds me of cherry blossoms," she sighed.

"Indeed it does," his father agreed.

When his mother looked at him again her eyes were almost sad. "Yuu-chan, I know that something happened to Wolfram. You hinted before... and were so upset I didn't want to pry. I was so relieved to see him looking so well today, but... everything's fine now, isn't it?"

Greta scooted closer to him but kept her eyes down, concentrating fiercely on pulling out blades of grass one at a time.

Everyone was looking at him. Yuuri could even feel Conrad's eyes on his back. Murata probably could have done a better job explaining, but he had rushed off to speak with Gwendal almost the moment they had finished with lunch.

Yuuri took a deep breath, but after that there was nothing left to do but tell them. Not everything of course, but Yuuri explained the best he could about Wolfram's magic running low. His brief engagement to Sara. Wolfram's capture on the road to Lesser Gael and his rescue. The so called plague and how Murata had finally discovered it was nothing more than a bit of moldy rye. Yuuri tried to keep it as simple as he could. He was vague about what exactly had happened to Wolfram during his capture. The way all of it had made him feel. He left out everything about... their relationship, except for the fact that he had decided to propose again.

For the most part the others were content to listen. Occasionally Shouri would jump in to ask a question or his mother would comment on how terrifying it all must have been. How brave her future son-in-law must be.

Even with the simplifications and minimal questions the sun had crept below the trees by the time he was done, and the fireflies had started to emerge. Yuuri was tired of talking by the time Shouri cleared his throat.
"So who exactly took him? What did they want?"

Yuuri clenched his hands into fists. He hated thinking about it. "They're dead."

Shouri studied him for a moment. "The ones who did it are dead, but who sent them? Things are never so simple. They probably only took him to get to you. What if they try again or take you next time--"

"They won't," Yuuri growled, trying to end the conversation. "They're dead."

Shouri looked at Conrad. "Is it true? Has the danger passed?"

Yuuri could see the conflict on his friend's face. "It is true that the men who captured Wolfram are dead."

"But who sent them?" Shouri was getting angry. "I can tell there's something you aren't saying."

"Go ahead, Conrad," Yuuri sighed. There was no way to avoid the argument now.

Conrad gave him an apologetic look before speaking. "It is likely that the orders came from Shou Shimeron."

"The king that showed up and proposed to you? Saralegui?" Shouri asked.

"Yes, but we don't know that he was involved. It could have been someone else." Yuuri looked at Conrad, pleading. "Even if Shou Shimeron was behind all of it, that doesn't mean that it was Sara."

Conrad gave a grudging nod, his jaw tight.

"What if it was?" Shouri's glasses caught the light of the setting sun, reminding him of Murata. "What if it was Sara? What if he admitted it?"

"He wouldn't! He didn't!" Yuuri glared at his brother. It was just like Shouri to jump into a situation he didn't understand and start asking infuriating questions.

"You have always been quick to defend your friends, Yuuri," Shouri sighed. "It is part of what makes you such a good king. Part of what makes you just. But not everyone is kind. Not everyone will choose to do the right thing, even when the opportunity is offered. What will you do when someone betrays your kindness? You say that Saralegui had no part in what happened to Wolfram. But the reason I am asking you these questions is because your answers are concerning..." He reached up to adjust his glasses. "You sound like you would forgive Saralegui, even if he had been a part of what happened to Wolfram. And if he wasn't... If you would forgive a friend, why not forgive those you never had the fortune to befriend? You can't forgive everyone for everything." He looked at Yuuri hard. "Bob says there are times when kindness becomes a fool's cruelty. When forgiveness only leads to worse suffering later. I'm only trying to warn you, that's all. If not because of Saralegui, because of the possibility of some future threat."

Yuuri opened his mouth and closed it.

"You couldn't forgive him, could you?" Greta looked up at him with big eyes. "If that... that stupid Saralegui had anything to do with what they did to Wolfram?"

Again, shock stole Yuuri's words.

"They almost killed him!" Anger rose in Greta's eyes.
"Wolfram is fine!" Yuuri reached for her. Tried to calm her down. "Wolfram is safe now--"

Greta slapped his hand away. "You would, wouldn't you. You'd forgive him!" She stood. "Just because they didn't kill him doesn't mean they didn't try!"

"Greta..." He reached for her again.

"HE'S NOT FINE!" Greta shouted at him, stepping back. "Don't you ever... don't you ever forgive whoever did it! WIMP!" And then she was running barefoot back toward the castle, fancy shoes left empty on the grass beside him.

WIMP.

This time it was Wolfram's voice shouting in his mind.

********
********
Blood Pledge Castle
Two Hours Later

********

With the rest of the castle covered in silks and linen and flowers, Gwendal's office was a welcome escape. Its crisp, sensible, decor only broken by the row of knitted creatures lining the top of the bookshelf behind him.

Wolfram spread another map on top of those already covering the small table, pinning down the curling edge with stone weights. The lamplight flickered, a gust of wind from the open window dancing with the flames. He glanced at his brother. Watched as the wrinkles in his forehead deepened as he squinted at the letters spread across his desk.

"It will not be a matter of ships," said Gwendal when he noticed Wolfram watching him. "But men to fill them."

Wolfram nodded. They had suspected as much. "Flurin will give us Caloria's merchant vessels then?"

Gwendal rubbed the bridge of his nose. "All but three."

"More than enough."

Along with the ships of their own fleet that they would send back as Flurin's escort that would commit over two dozen ships to their plot. Even though they were still in the planning stages Wolfram could feel the excitement thrumming through him at the thought of revenge. They would take Shou Shimeron by surprise. Simply landing on their shores would hardly be a difficult task as the country had no military fleet to speak of. The real trick would be slipping under the nose of Dai Shimeron.

Though Dai Shimeron had suffered huge fatalities from their neighbor's bread they still refused to believe the "plague" had been anything other than a demon plot. They would be glad to come to the defense of the smaller country, and gladder still to place the blame of war on the shoulders of Shin Makoku.

It would be a much more time consuming way of doing things, but if their plan worked then there would be no need for open war. They would take the capital and be done before Dai Shimeron
could assemble their army to meet them. Shin Makoku's soldiers would slip from ships onto Shou Shimeron's coast at night. Trading galleys and smaller merchant boats. Their men would enter Shou Shimeron at a trickle and blend in with the farmers and townsfolk until the moment was ripe.

Only the guards and soldiers who stood against them would be harmed. No civilians unless they rebelled, and even then, Wolfram would instruct his men to take captives when they could. They would find the ones who had poisoned so many with their deadly crop. The ones who sent Valesco and the other one to take him and lock him in the dark.

If Wolfram had his way he would be there to do the deed himself.

The biggest task would be finding men to fill the ships. Men who could be trusted. It would be impossible to send mazoku who had no experience with enduring the constant pain that would be present on human soil. They would need to rely upon humans and halfbloods. But all of the seasoned halfblood troops had died in Ruttenburg, leaving them with green men and boys, and the humans that could be trusted were few and far between. The plague had ravaged the human lands, and men of fighting age who had survived were needed at home to help farm and rebuild the abandoned villages that had been struck by looters and outlaws.

Lucien had two dozen men back at the camp in Habalouge. Those would be the first to slip past. Traveling by land across the mountains that sheltered Shou Shimeron to the north and east.

Gwendal had gotten a bird this morning containing an early congratulations from Lucien and the rest of the men in Habalouge. The letter had also informed them that all was well and that they were ready to move at the command.

It still stung that Wolfram had been forced to leave the small band of humans. He had felt proud of his accomplishments there. Proud of his men. It should have been Wolfram there with them, preparing for the march. But the wimp had ordered him home.

Yuuri had...

Wolfram pulled out a nearby chair to sit. To brace his elbows on the map-covered table and bury his face in his hands. His breath shook as he pushed it from his lungs.

They were getting married. Yuuri had proposed to him again... He had meant it. Kept looking at him with black eyes full of want.

And Yuuri had even said he loved him.

Sometimes Wolfram was sure that it was all a dream. That he would wake up, alone in that dark wooden cell. Naked and full of pain. That all of this happiness was nothing more than a cruel trick of his poisoned mind, teasing him in his last moments before death.

"I need to tell him before the wedding." Wolfram's voice was soft, muffled by his palms, but he knew that Gwendal would hear him. "About all this... Otherwise he'll think--"

"That we're planning a war behind his back."

Wolfram forced himself to sit up straight and remove his hands from his face, though he kept his eyes fixed on the table before him. He nodded.

Wolfram could hear the scrape of Gwendal's chair against the floor as his brother stood, crossing the room to stand behind him. "His Majesty will be exhausted after bringing his family through the portal. Are you sure this cannot wait?"
When he didn't answer Gwendal sighed and seated himself in the chair to Wolfram's left.

Wolfram studied the wrinkled parchment covering the tabletop. "My uncle... There are other things that Yuuri should be told before the ceremony. The wimp doesn't handle surprises well and so it might be best if I just took a moment to--"

He stopped when Gwendal put a hand on his shoulder. "Alright."

Wolfram looked at his brother in shock. Blinked. He had been sure that Gwendal would deny his request.

"I will have something arranged." Gwendal gave Wolfram's shoulder a comforting squeeze. "I do not expect His Majesty to react childishly to our plans for Shou Shimeron. If not for this the other nations would insist upon open war for their retribution. His Majesty should trust that we support him in his desire to prevent needless bloodshed. But..." Gwendal looked toward the window then, a cloudless sky sprinkled with stars. "If it will ease your mind I will allow it. It is your wedding and despite our plans for Shou Shimeron and the meddling of your Lord Uncle, I fully intend for you to enjoy it."

Wolfram could feel the smile spread across his lips. Color rising to his cheeks. "Thank you, big brother."

Gwendal only gave Wolfram's shoulder another squeeze and stood.

* * *

Yuuri was wearing his pajamas when Gwendal's man escorted him into the small conference room. His hair was wild from bed and all at once Wolfram felt like a fool for waking him. The wimp would need his rest. They would have a busy day tomorrow, and a busier night... Wolfram blushed and stood from his seat at the head of the table.

This was stupid. He was acting like some... simpering virgin.

But then Yuuri grinned when he saw him and Wolfram couldn't remember why he had cared.

"Sorry to steal you from your bed." Wolfram smirked at his husband-to-be, reassured by the way it made a blush spread up the other boy's neck. "There were a few things I thought you should know before tomorrow's formalities."

"Oh..." Yuuri was looking at him. He licked his lips and took a half step closer, then paused. He turned to look back at where Gwendal's man stood beside the door.

"We're not married yet," Wolfram explained before Yuuri could ask. "Gwendal was kind enough to let me speak with you, but he made it clear he would not be condoning anything... inappropriate before the ceremony."

Yuuri was still looking at the guard. "Well, Gwendal didn't say anything like that to me." He shuffled his feet before forcing himself to stand up straight. "Um... I'm king so you have to do what I say. Leave."

The man's mouth fell open in shock before he managed a stammered reply. "Sir Voltaire instructed me to chaperon--"

"But I'm king," Yuuri said again, voice stronger this time. "So go away. Please."
Wolfram blinked. He had expected the wimp to pout and give him heated looks, not... He almost laughed. Gwendal would have a fit.

The guard gave Wolfram a pitiful look before taking his leave.

Once he was gone Yuuri crossed the room to Wolfram in a few quick strides, looking at him all the while with those dark eyes. *Wanting.*

Wolfram could only watch his approach, still too shocked by the wimp's sudden abuse of his authority to form a proper thought. "Yuuri," he managed when the other boy reached him. "Wait."

Yuuri pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, but he did as he was told. "Why?"

The wimp had stopped, but he was still so close that Wolfram could feel the question on his lips. Wolfram tried to move back, but the conference room's long table was behind him, digging into the back of his thigh. What if Yuuri kissed him now? Pushed him back onto the table and-- "I..." Wolfram forced his mind to function. There was a reason they were here. Damn the wimp for being so distracting! "I wanted to talk to you about some things... before tomorrow."

"What things?" Yuuri asked softly, before moving forward again, wrapping Wolfram in a tentative embrace and burying his face against Wolfram's neck in a way that made him have to fight a shudder. "Has something else happened?"

Wolfram swallowed thickly. Yuuri was warm against him. Warm and solid and already **hard** where his cock was pressing into Wolfram's hip. "No."

"Mmm, you smell good." Yuuri's hands pressed against his back, squeezing them closer together. "I missed you."

"Wimp," he snapped. "Are you going to listen or paw at me?"

"Can't I do both?" Yuuri's lips were bare and hot against his neck as the words left him in a whisper.

Wolfram sighed, mustering every ounce of his self control. "I suppose." Until then he had kept his arms stiffly at his sides, but now he reached up to return his wimpy king's embrace. When he did it Yuuri sighed and melted into him. Yuuri seemed so sleepy and content and happy to be touching him. Would he still be so happy after he heard what Wolfram had to say? "Yuuri," he said again, voice serious. "It's about Shou Shimeron."

Yuuri tensed, but still clung to him as tight as ever. "War?"

"No," Wolfram answered quickly. "Not as yet... but we have to do something. And we are-- but not war. We're doing everything we can so that it won't come to that."

Yuuri pulled away a bit to look at him. "I guess that's the best that can be done then." His gaze lowered from Wolfram's eyes, "Is anything going to change in the next twenty four hours? Nothing happening that I can't hear about later? Can we please-- Wolf..." He leaned forward.

Wolfram turned his head and so the kiss landed on the corner of his mouth. "Yuuri..."

"Please," Yuuri whispered, kissing him between words. "Is that it? I don't care. I haven't had you alone in--"

"You'll have plenty of me tomorrow," Wolfram forced himself to say. It was so hard not to give in.
He was so hard... Yuuri's kiss moved over his jaw to his neck, wet and eager and... "Just one more thing. My family from Belefield-- they might say things to test you-- us-- provoke you to make you look unfit. I might have to say things to placate--" The sentence stopped abruptly when Yuuri's tongue pressed against his neck and Wolfram made a shameful noise and forgot what he was saying. "Yuuri..."

Yuuri's lips moved from Wolfram's neck then. His mouth--

Wolfram's hands found Yuuri's shoulders and pushed, but only hard enough to keep the kiss that would surely steal his senses from landing. They were still connected at the hips. Lower. "Gods," he gasped. "Yuuri--"

"I thought about you so much while I was gone. Couldn't wait, couldn't wait to--"

"I know," Wolfram interrupted. "I did too--"

"Did you?" Yuuri's eyes-- his voice-- Dark. "When I bought you your present I couldn't stop picturing..." Yuuri licked his lips. Color rose on his cheeks as his words faded.

"Present?" Wolfram's mind raced. "Why?"

Yuuri blush only reddened. "For the wedding... or really, one was for that. The other was so I could take you out of them--"

Wolfram sighed. The wimp always had the best intentions but sometimes Yuuri's earth customs seemed only to exist to vex him. "We don't do that here."

"Really?" Yuuri's eyes were big. "But... why?"

"A wedding doesn't need gifts between the two being joined. You are my gift." He smiled. "And I'm yours."

"Oh..." Yuuri grinned. "I like my present."

"You had better," Wolfram teased. "I don't intend to tolerate any complaints."

Yuuri shook his head, but otherwise ignored the jibe. "Does that mean I can give you the other one early? Well, I only have one with me now..."

Wolfram raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And where are you hiding it then?"

Yuuri gave a nervous laugh as he took his arms from Wolfram's waist. "I just put it on next to mine... I assumed the size would be the same..."

"What?" Wolfram managed before he saw Yuuri pull the ring from his finger. Yuuri shuffled nervously on his feet for a moment before he reached for Wolfram's left hand. "What?"

"A... A king's ring," Yuuri answered softly. "You gave me one... before... and I thought that since now we were getting married-- Well, you would be a king too and so... I wanted to give you one." He tried to slide the silvery ring onto Wolfram's first finger but Wolfram stopped him.

"Wait, we're not married yet... If I wear it before the ceremony-- I can't until--"

"Then here." Yuuri put the ring on a different finger instead. The one between the middle and the pinky. The one the sage had told him meant so much on earth.
"Yuuri..." he breathed. He had wanted to give Yuuri a ring like this a lifetime ago-- But then that perverted prince had come and ruined everything and Wolfram had lost his courage and given Yuuri a king's ring instead. And now-- It was true that Yuuri had slapped him a second time. Proposed. But this was-- This was how it was done on earth.

Once the ring was on and Yuuri let go of his hand Wolfram couldn't stop himself from grabbing him. Kissing him. Feeling the wet heat of Yuuri's mouth and swallowing every sound he made. Yuuri pressed against him eagerly. Wantonly. Hands fisting in Wolfram's hair as Wolfram put his thumbs against Yuuri's hips and let himself drown. Yuuri made a louder noise then. Spoke words into his mouth.

Wolfram was turning them then. Shifting. The table was empty. Waiting. He would push the wimp against the polished wood and lick him until he sobbed.

Yuuri went willingly-- eagerly-- Wolfram's body was on fire and he wanted so badly just to--

CRASH

The door swung open, hinges screaming before the solid oak slammed against the stone wall.

Wolfram looked up in shock and shame to see both his brothers standing in the doorway. Gwendal's face was a stone mask of angry wrinkles and disapproval. "Your Highness," he said coldly, "Wolfram, tomorrow will be a long day for us all and I think it's time you both went to bed. Separately."

For a moment it looked like Yuuri might protest and so Wolfram forced himself to step away. Soon, he promised the wimp with his eyes.

And Yuuri nodded.

********
********
Shin Makoku
Shinou's Temple
The Following Day

********

Ulrike was waiting for him before the heavy oaken doors that led to the temple's inner chamber. Her robes were formal, layers and layers of silk in alternating colors that reminded Murata of Heian era kimonos. In a few hours she would be leading the ceremony.

Murata smiled and dipped his head in greeting when he reached the top of the stairs.

The high priestess did not return the greeting. "This is folly," she hissed at him, voice a low whisper that seemed to echo endlessly against the bare marble walls and high ceiling. "He has no place here! Why did you allow him too--"

He lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. Murata should have seen this argument coming. As wise as Ulrike was, her faith was to Shinou, the man turned god that both the Gaels had scorned. Murata had underestimated her mistrust of the old ways. "Do you have so little faith in me?" he asked, forcing the smile to stay upon his lips. "The Taibhsear has promised his silence in return for his small... participation in the days events."

"He means to pay us with our own secrets," she complained, smooth cheeks pale, "Anyone who
shares Ethne's blessing will be able to feel it. All of them will know once they are close to him!"

"Sir Belefield has been in the castle for weeks, surrounded by those who are so blessed and none of them have--"

"Children! All of them," Ulrike interrupted. "They have never felt a reaffirmed one before. They do not know the difference. They assume his power is no more than a lingering echo... " She crossed her arms over her chest. "The Lords will feel it. They will know soon if they do not already."

"The Lords will assume the power they are feeling is the Maou. Sir Belefield will not go far from Shibuya's side," he soothed.

Ulrike was unconvinced. "I do not trust this man. He will tell his fellow Masters and they will seek to crown him-- It will destroy the unity that The Lord Shinou has given us! The Ten Nations will shatter--"

"Sir Belefield will never leave Shibuya's side. And we will be giving him his crown. The Gaels may seek to crown him later, but Gael is a small seat compared to the combined strength of the allied nations. If you are so concerned about Sir Belefield's thirst for power, let that ease your mind." He sighed. "You should have more faith in Sir Belefield. Even if he is revealed as Gael's True King he will always belong to Shibuya. Shibuya will soothe him. I know you trust Shibuya."

"The Lord Shinou chose His Majesty. It is not His Majesty's abilities that I do not trust. Sir Belefield--"

"--Has Shinou's blood running through his veins. He has grown up. Sir Belefield is no longer the spiteful, selfish child he was."

Ulrike studied him coldly. "Have you forgotten what they did to him? No matter how much he loves His Majesty, Sir Belefield's need for revenge could easily destroy us all."

Murata frowned. "Then what do you you suggest? If anything happens to Sir Belefield there will be the Maou's Justice to contend with."

Ulrike sighed, for a moment looking all her years. "I only wish it could be simple for them. That they could be happy. Without all this... There is so much at risk..."

"As well as potential reward." Murata tried to smile for her again. "There is always the other prophecy to remember. Only one road leads to darkness."

"And only one road leads to light." She closed her worried eyes, voice sad. "They are only children. If Sir Belefield is revealed as Gael's True King there will be those who try to use him, as well as those who will seek to do him harm. Sir Belefield already bears much pain. Much fear and anger. If he knew his potential for destruction it would only lay more worry on his shoulders. Worry that is likely to burn us all if it becomes too much."

Murata held his tongue. Ulrike had insisted that it would be too dangerous to inform Sir Belefield of the full significance of his newly acquired power, but Murata still maintained that it would be more dangerous to keep him in the dark.

After the wedding, he promised himself again. *The morning after, when his blood no longer runs so hot.* Then Sir Belefield would be too content to rage and Shibuya would be there to soothe his fears. The trick would be keeping the secret until then.

By now the husbands-to-be would be finishing their circuit of the city. The castle had helped
provide the townsfolk with wine and food for the occasion and the street had been filled with happy townsfolk waiting to shout their well wishes and throw flowers for the royal couple when Murata had made his escape to Shinou's temple.

Soon it would be time for the wedding ceremony, followed by a more formal reception for the nobles back at Blood Pledge Castle.

Murata assured Ulrike as best he could before entering the inner chamber to speak to the Taibhsear himself. The heart of the temple was dim and cool despite the heat of the day outside. His footsteps echoed loudly, but as he approached the dais the sound faded beneath the roar of the waterfall as it rushed into the sacred pool.

The Taibhsear stood to greet him when Murata reached the edge of the intricate circle of sand he had been spreading along the floor. "Your Grace."

Murata nodded his head before squatting to examine the Taibhsear's work. The sand was fine and soft, smooth and unbroken as the lines of black and white crossed and uncrossed, tying themselves in knots. "It's very pretty," he said at last. "What does it say?"

"Two versions of one future," the Taibhsear explained. "White for peace and black for ashes."

Murata had suspected as much. "And what do you intend to do when the path that fate has chosen for your king is revealed?"

The question hung heavy in the air, echoing faintly in the chamber's dark corners. Murata lifted his eyes from the sand-written prophecies to see sadness in the Taibhsear's eyes.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Know. Prepare." His face had aged since the first time Murata had seen it. Eyes sunken. "I have learned the cost of interfering with the gods' plans. I do not intend to pay it again."

Murata stood. "Unless you've hidden another Faithe under your bed you don't appear to be a man with much to lose."

The Taibhsear's face hardened.

"I allowed you to do this for two reasons," Murata continued, "The first was my own curiosity, but the second..." he let his words trail away.

"You are judging me," the Taibhsear finished with narrowed eyes. "If you do not trust me you should have had me killed when Saralegui's dog killed my Frith."

"His Majesty would never have allowed it." Murata tilted his head to let his glasses catch the light. "Not to mention the trouble it would have caused for our relationship with Lesser Gael. The most important reason, however, was that you know things that I do not. I have a great deal of respect for you, whether you choose to believe it or not." A pause. "I believe in many things. Sir Belefield and Shibuya. In the future of this world no matter what your circle of sand might reveal." He smiled. "It is my hope that once this is over the Ten Nations will truly be ten. It has been too long since all mazoku have been united. Even when your king is crowned it will be hard to reconcile the old ways with the new. I will need your help to do it."

Murata watched the older man consider his words. As dangerous as the Taibhsear was he also had the potential to be of great help to them. Murata remembered Master Eion and the others back in Lesser Gael and he considered himself lucky that Tai had been the one to come. He seemed younger than the rest. More likely to see truth instead of being blinded by tradition.
Murata had always been skeptical of prophecy. Every word had a thousand meanings and each of those was tainted with nuance. Once he was fairly certain that Sir Belefield was Gael's king, he had managed to puzzle out the prophecy that had so vexed him and the other masters of Lesser Gael. Sir Belefield had given Shibuya that blasted ring infused with his magic. Shibuya had accepted the gift... The prophecy implicated Saralegui as the one who "ordered it done" and Murata was fairly certain that "it" was Sir Belefield's abduction from the road to reaffirm his rites with Ethne. Murata had already known that Saralegui was the one who "must die". The young Faithe had confirmed that when she came at him with the dagger during her fire dance.

The king must die, to save Our King.

But Saralegui was still alive and Shibuya had managed to save Sir Belefield anyway.

Murata was pulled from his thoughts when the Taibhsear finally spoke, holding out his hand as he did so.

"It is important to do all we can to help Our King's peace spread across the realm. If the white words stay you have my promise that I will do all I can to help you."

Murata didn't move. "And if it does not?"

"I will not try to kill him, if that is what you fear. You have my word." The Taibhsear sighed deep. "Call it my own... curiosity." Then he tried to smile. It only made his face look more tired and old.

Eventually Murata reached out to take the Taibhsear's hand. "No harm must come to Sir Belefield or Shibuya."

"We are two of the same mind." Tai's grip was firm. "Thank you for your trust."

"I am merely offering you the chance to earn it," Murata clarified as he gave the man's hand a solid shake. "See that you do."

The Taibhsear bowed as he released Murata's hand. "I do not intend to disappoint."

After that Murata left the Taibhsear to his work. The sand-written prophecies were certainly beautiful and mostly finished, and Murata had other things to see to. Ulrike was probably still less than pleased about the barbarian's "desecration" of Shinou's altar.

Murata sighed and shook his head. He had known Shinou as a man. Shinou would always be a man in his mind, no matter how much power and influence he gained over this world.

"A troublesome man," he muttered to himself as he walked the empty hallways and tried not to feel alone.

********

********

Shin Makoku

Meanwhile

********

The uniform Wolfram wore now was a pale blue. The same one he had always worn to formal occasions, with elaborate white patterns in contrast to the black of his epaulettes and cuffs. But instead of wearing the collar up, he wore it with a cravat and a silver clasp that his mother claimed had been his fathers. A sheer silver cloak had been hung beneath his epaulettes and was long
enough to cover Hildefuns' back and haunches. As much as Wolfram had enjoyed wearing the black that Flurin had given him it really was inappropriate before he and Yuuri were officially wed. The paleness of his current garb would only highlight the blacks he would be wearing later, as well as contrast the regal black uniform that Yuuri wore now.

Wolfram hadn't realized how much he had missed riding his horse. Wolfram felt so comfortable with the slow rock of the saddle, the way his muscles moved to counter the motion without him even having to think about it. Hildefuns had snorted angrily at him when he'd first entered the stables, punishing him for being gone for so long, but Wolfram had been prepared for that. A few sugar rocks later, the white stallion had forgotten his animosity and was happily licking Wolfram's fingers clean of any remaining treat.

It reminded him of how hopeless Yuuri had been on a horse when he had first come to this world. Even though Wolfram missed the excuse of sharing a saddle with his wimpy fiance, it made him proud to see Yuuri riding so much better now. Their daughter was still better at riding than her other father to be sure, but at least Yuuri no longer looked like he would fall off his horse if left alone for half a moment.

The thought made him smile and steal a sideways glance at Yuuri. For once Yuuri wasn't looking at him and Wolfram allowed himself a moment to enjoy the sight of him. Cheeks flushed from a day in the sun, smiling, waving and accepting flowers from the cheering commoners. They had only just left the city, making their way to Shinou's temple with a small entourage of honored guests. He and Yuuri were leading the column and Yuuri was currently too busy watching the temple as it loomed larger in the distance to notice Wolfram's gaze.

Yuuri had spent so much of their recent time together devouring him with his eyes that Wolfram found it unnerving.

"What is it?" he heard himself ask, edging Hildefuns closer to Ao as they walked.

Yuuri blushed. "Thinking. Remembering..." He looked down at Ao's neck. "I was thinking that it would have prevented so much... so many terrible things... I should have known sooner that I... That I could love you. That in some way I already did... back when Shinou took your heart. Killed you. I should have noticed something was wrong. That Shinou was using you. Greta noticed. Looking back on it I remember that... looking back... I was such an idiot. It all happened so fast-- but I should have been able to save you." His knuckles had gone white where he held the reins.

"You did save me though," Wolfram managed, his throat tight. "Twice."

He would be dead without Yuuri. Yuuri had gotten his key-- his heart-- back from Shinou and healed him when those bastards had tortured him to the point that death was inevitable. To the point where he had given up. But somehow... somehow Yuuri had saved him. Yuuri had saved them all so many times.

That was what Yuuri did. He saved people. He saved everyone and loved everyone, and yet...

And yet.

Yuuri had proposed again. Given him a perfect silver ring to wear in a place that meant so much on his earth. Wolfram touched the metal with this thumb. Even the best artisans in the kingdom could never have made a ring so flawless. Wolfram didn't know what kind of silver it had been made from but the metal kept its shape miraculously and seemed unlikely to mould itself to the shape of his finger over time by the heat of his hand.
And that wasn't even the only gift that Yuuri had given him. Wolfram had instructed the tailors to sew the silver button that Yuuri had given him onto the new uniform that had been made for the ball following the ceremony. The second button. Over the heart.

Yuuri who loved everyone, who saved everyone, who he had wanted more than anything for so long...

Had chosen him.

Yuuri looked at him and smiled. "I'm just happy that you're safe. I would never have been able to stand it if anything had happened to you, Wolf."

"You better not have been," Wolfram quipped, looking away as he felt his cheeks begin to heat. "Wimp."

Yuuri chuckled at him. "For some reason I'm starting to like it when you call me a 'wimp'."

Wolfram didn't know what to say to that.

They were quiet for a while and Wolfram tried to lose himself in the sound of the music drifting from the column behind them. He looked over his shoulder to smile at Greta, looking beautiful in the white dress covered in lace and ribbons that Mama Jennifer had brought for her. She hadn't been happy about riding side saddle to accommodate the volume of the underskirts, but when she smiled back and stuck out her tongue at him Wolfram knew she would forgive them for the discomfort soon.

Weller was close behind Greta as the Royal Family's chief protector and was followed by the rest of the guests by order appropriate to their rank and station. When Wolfram looked back he did his best to avoid his younger older brother's eyes. It still hurt that Yuuri could so easily have been Weller's. Weller still wanted Yuuri, just like Wolfram would have if the situation had been reversed. Weller wanted, but he was too... too Weller to take. Weller would always put the happiness of others before his own. And Weller loved him too. Had always tried to protect him like an older brother should.

Somehow it still made Wolfram angry. Made it seem like his happiness was only a result of Weller's inability to take Yuuri for himself. That without Weller's charity he never would have been given his chance for happiness.

Wolfram sighed. He was brooding again. Brooding was useless and would give him Gwendal's wrinkles and then what would Yuuri see in him.

It all seemed so surreal. He and Yuuri were going to be married.

Five years ago, before Yuuri... Wolfram would never have recognized the man he had become. He had changed so much. Yuuri had changed him. For the better of course, but...

Seeing his uncle again made it seem like the last five years had only been an instant in his life. He couldn't remember a time he hadn't done anything he could to gain the man's approval. His decision to stay with his mother in spite of Dan Hiri Weller's human blood had lost him his crest, any inherittance beyond his father's name. As a child he tried to make things right and had done everything to be like his uncle. To disapprove of humans. To be learned and proper beyond anything Julia or Gunter could teach him. He had practiced and read and been so fucking proper and it had never been enough.

His uncle might smile at him and promise to speak on his behalf to the rest of his family for the
sake of his father, but Wolfram knew the man would never see him as anything other than his mother's pretty son. Would only see in him the magical abilities that his natural daughter lacked.

This morning’s activities had kept Wolfram from having to speak to his uncle and cousins for any extended period of time, but after the ceremony Wolfram knew he would have to face them.

Another thing he shouldn't be worrying about now.

He and Yuuri were going to be married. He loved Yuuri so much, but... but that had hurt so much for so long that loving Yuuri without the pain attached seemed somehow terrifying. More likely that something would happen... That when the pain came back it would be worse than it had ever been.

"What is it?"

Wolfram blinked and looked at Yuuri. "What?"

Yuuri worried his lip, looking as worried as Wolfram felt. "I just... I'm not saying I don't want to do this-- You know I do. But... it's just..."

"I know." Wolfram gave the wimp a smile. He could do this. As long as he was being strong for Yuuri he could do this. "Me too."

Yuuri smiled then too, lip still caught between his teeth. "Really? But you... you always seem so sure about this. About us. I'm so scared I'll do something wrong and ruin it... And..." Yuuri looked away. "You could have anyone. Someone better than... better than me..."

Wolfram almost laughed. "You're the Maou!" Was Yuuri serious? "There is no one better than you."

"So it's just because I'm the king?" Yuuri joked, still not looking at him.

"Of course not! Gods don't be an idiot, Wimp!" Wolfram realized he had shouted and lowered his voice. "You know how much I want you, Yuuri. How much I've waited and wanted you. Don't you ever doubt it. Not after everything."

Yuuri licked his lips and nodded, eyes bright as they met his. "I'll do my best. And... and please... try not to-- to doubt me either. I know it must be hard after everything I've done, but I'll keep trying to make you believe in me. In how I feel-- about you. Every day I'll try to show you, Wolfram."

Wolfram cursed his pale skin. Yuuri was sure to see his blush. "Wimp."

"Wimp," Yuuri echoed, and grinned.

* * *

Wolfram could feel the eyes on him the moment he entered the inner sanctum of Shinou's temple and it made him hold his back just the slightest bit straighter. The guests had already been assembled in the customary circle for the ceremony, and there were so many that even standing shoulder to shoulder some of their backs were nearly against the wall where the room was longer than it was wide.

At the far end from where he stood the sacred water rushed into the pool. The only sound in the silence. There Ulrike was waiting for him, and for Yuuri who would be permitted to enter the chamber once Wolfram had reached his place within the circle. They would enter separately to
Forcing himself to remain calm, Wolfram began to walk toward the circle. He kept his eyes focused on his destination, but that didn't keep him from recognizing the faces as they loomed closer. His daughter and mother and brothers. His uncle and cousins. Yuuri's family. Flurin. The lord of Cabal cade and his daughter Beatrice. The aristocratic members of the great council were there as well. Great mazoku from Voltaire and Karbelnikoff, Christ and Wincott, as well as the human kings of Habalouge and Frankshire. Even a Taibhsear of Lesser Gael was present.

Wolfram could not recall having seen the Taibhsear before, but his checked robes identified him as a Master of Lesser Gael. Wolfram had been told of the Taibhsear's Fai th's failed attempt to kill Saralegui. If only it had not failed. He had even tried to seek the Taibhsear out once or twice while Yuuri had been away on earth to see if the man could tell him any more about what had happened with Ethne, but every time some duty or other had come up or the Taibhsear had been away from his chambers. Maybe once the confusion of the wedding was over he would finally have his chance.

When Wolfram reached the edge of the circle Ulrike announced him and the ring of guests parted. The edge of his shift brushed against a dignitary from Spitzburg and Wolfram swallowed a shiver, reminded that he was naked beneath the soft black silk that hung down to his ankles. The sleeves were equally loose and long, falling well beneath his fingertips. Wolfram had hated it on sight in spite of tradition. It made him look younger than he was, and pale. The collar was lower than he would have liked, but that was probably only because he was so used to wearing a cravat or high collar that it was strange to have his neck bare.

Somehow his feet brought him before Ulrike and the elaborately pattered circle of black and white sand that was at her feet, surrounding the place where he and Yuuri were supposed to stand. Wolfram did not recognize it as a part of the usual tradition, but he suspected the mark had something to do with Lesser Gael's theory that Yuuri was their prophesied king. If Yuuri was that king, then it would mean that some of the old ways of Gael and Lesser Gael would need to be incorporated into newer mazoku traditions in order to preserve political unity, and so Wolfram stepped carefully over the patterned sand and assumed his proper place without hesitating.

The room was strangely silent considering how many people were occupying it. Wolfram's heart pounded loudly in his ears as he waited for Yuuri to make his entrance. It didn't help that Wolfram knew the chamber where his husband-to-be was waiting was host to at least a dozen temple priestesses. Pretty girls every one, though they had devoted their lives to the temple and celibacy. But pretty girls were always prettier when you couldn't have them and it still wasn't too late for the wimp to change his mind.

AhhHoooooooooooooom~

Morgif's moan of excitement echoed from every corner as the outer door opened and Yuuri entered. He was wearing the same black shift as Wolfram and carrying the magic sword blade down in his right hand. Where the loose silk seemed to swallow Wolfram's pale skin and golden hair, the regal color only added to the black depths of Yuuri's eyes and the luster of his hair. Yuuri was doing his best to stand tall and look like a proper king, but Wolfram could see his fiance's nerves clearly in his tense steps and too-tight jaw.

Wolfram caught Yuuri's eyes to offer him a smile when the circle of guest parted for their king. Yuuri's lips curved up and for a second it was only them. No ceremony. No guests or spectators. There was love in Yuuri's eyes and for once Wolfram couldn't make himself feel ashamed of the blush that spread across his cheeks or the flutter of his heart.
When the second passed Yuuri took his place at Wolfram's side and Ulrike began the ceremony, small voice straining to shout over Morgif's pleased hums and haws. They stood side by side, shoulders almost touching. Wolfram could feel the cold of the stone floor seeping into his bare feet and he had to suppress the urge to grab Yuuri's free hand where it hung between them.

But then warm fingers threaded between his own, sneaking up loose sleeves to hold him tight. Yuuri leaned against him slightly, just enough to share each other's warmth and Wolfram couldn't help it. Yuuri was moments from being his. Finally and forever.

He grinned.

********

********

Yuuri's heart was beating so fast that he was sure that everyone must be able to hear it. His hands were sweaty. He was holding Wolfram's hand because it had just happened, but his hand was so sweaty. What if Wolfram let go because it was disgusting? Yuuri's knuckles were white on Morgif's hilt as the sword squirmed happily in his grasp. Yuuri was sure he was going to drop him. Yuuri's sweaty palms were going to ruin the whole ceremony and Wolfram would be so ashamed of him that he would call the whole thing off and if they didn't get married today-- if they didn't get married right now-- Yuuri would have to wait even longer to touch him. To kiss him. To do more than that. And Yuuri was sure that if he had to wait any longer then he would die.

At least he wasn't hard. His robes wouldn't have been able to hide anything. Yuuri was too cold to be hard though. Too anxious. Too terrified. His palms were too sweaty!

Ulrike's voice seemed so far away. Yuuri found it hard to breathe. He was going to ruin the ceremony and then Wolfram wouldn't love him anymore.

He was panicking again.

Yuuri forced himself to breathe, exhaling shakily. Wolfram must have heard because the hand holding his tightened almost at once.

Yuuri was being stupid. Wolfram loved him. Wolfram would love him no matter what he did and even though that was the most terrifying thing of all; Yuuri had to keep himself together. He had to do this right. Yuuri concentrated on Wolfram, on his heat and presence. He had to do this right.

"Before the final steps are taken, we ask that any who do not approve of this union will raise their voices now; or forever offer their support." Ulrike's voice cut through Yuuri's thoughts. He knew that this was a normal part of the ceremony, but it still made him nervous and squeeze Wolfram's hand.

Long seconds stretched but thankfully no one had anything to say. Yuuri let out a small sigh of relief when Ulrike spoke again.

"In preparation for the joining of these two in the bonds of marriage I ask that those assembled now join hands."

There was a collective rustle as the guests followed the high priestess' instructions. Yuuri could feel his heart beating quickly again. It was time for the part that worried him the most. Ulrike reached for the high stemmed chalice that was almost taller than she was; that until now had been standing beside her on the dais. Yuuri knew that it would be full of hot spiced wine, but that wasn't what worried him.
Yuuri had to let go of Wolfram's hand so that Ulrike could step between them and place the chalice on the ground.

MaaaaaaaaaaHaaaaaaHaaaaaaaaaaooooooooouuuu!

Morgif twisted in his grasp, more excited than ever. Yuuri barely had to use any effort to shift the sword so that the blade was facing up. Then he turned to face Wolfram, Morgif moaning between them. Yuuri could barely hear Ulrike's voice. The only thing that mattered was how green Wolfram's eyes were. Looking at Wolfram was what got him through it. Slowly Yuuri brought up his left hand and slid his fingers between Wolfram's right as Wolfram's other hand came up to hold Morgif too. Yuuri knew that he was shaking, but Wolfram wasn't, and it was Wolfram who made sure the sword was directly above the cup. Wolfram who squeezed, bringing their joined hands in contact with the blade.

Yuuri hissed when the pain hit him. Blood. Hot and dark as it slid down the blade. Over the hilt and their joined hands. He could hear Morgif smacking his lips and the \textit{plunk plunk plunk} as drops of heavy blood fell into the high chalice of spiced wine. He kept his eyes on Wolfram though. Never looked away.

Wolfram had explained earlier how the mixing of blood would be necessary to complete their marriage, but it still made Yuuri uncomfortable. He had already hurt Wolfram enough, and even though the cut would be relatively small compared to all that, it still made Yuuri's gut twist. Finally Ulrike instructed them to remove their bloodied palms from the blade, fingers still twined, and he sighed in relief as the warm-cool tingle of Wolfram's magic healed the wound. Yuuri let his own magic flow as well, until skin was unbroken beneath the remaining blood.

Once Ulrike was satisfied that they were both healed and the last of their blood had dripped into the chalice Yuuri handed Morgif to the tiny priestess, who took the blade with silent reverence. Morgif was taller than she was, but was thankfully less loud and fidgety now that he was... full. Yuuri grimaced. Ulrike gave him an encouraging smile and Yuuri tried to push all thoughts of a vampire sword aside.

Ulrike placed Morgif into the pool atop the altar and instructed Yuuri and Wolfram to seal their union. They lifted the chalice together, Yuuri with his right hand and Wolfram with his left. The mixture of wine and spice and blood smelled strong, and it reminded him of the time Wolfram had tried to push the wedding forward by serving him wine; back when he had returned to Shin Makoku for the first time after battling Shinou. A lifetime ago.

Yuuri and Wolfram were standing so close and Yuuri couldn't resist the urge to slide his arm around Wolfram's waist and pull him closer, pleasantly surprised when Wolfram did the same. They would both have to drink from the chalice at the same time and while it was necessary to be close to do so, Gunter's instructions hadn't mentioned mutual waist holding. Yuuri was relieved that his actions didn't appear out of bounds and that everything seemed much more manageable with Wolfram so close.

When they drank, their cheeks touched and some of the hot contents of the chalice spilled down between them, soaking the front of their robes and pooling around bare feet. Each swallow was unexpectedly thick and seemed to only get thicker as he went. Near the end he almost gagged, but somehow he made it without retching anything up. As they lowered the chalice Yuuri looked at Wolfram, saw the red staining his lips and chin. Red. Yuuri thought he could stand the taste of the wine and blood a moment or two longer if it meant he would be allowed to lick Wolfram clean. The wine had made his head light and the room spin and he wanted to kiss Wolfram so badly his blood was roaring in his ears.
Only it wasn't the sound of blood rushing through his ears. The crowd was cheering-- filling the room with a roar of sound that only died when Ulrike raised her hands.

"The two have become one," she said, small voice booming in the cavernous room. "His Majesty the twenty seventh Maou, King Shibuya Yuuri and now King Wolfram von Belefield, warrior of Spitzburg and son of Lady Cecelia, the twenty sixth Maou, are forever home in one another."

And the chamber erupted with cheers.

* * *

Yuuri was a married man. A married man married to a man. He should feel... different, but...

Yuuri still felt as awkward and nervous at formal events as he always did. It only seemed to make his stomach flutter more that the ball was to honor his marriage to Wolfram, which meant that when it was time for them to have the first dance he would be even more the center of attention than he usually was.

After the ceremony had finished Yuuri had been too happy and dazed by the wine to notice much of anything. Before he could protest he and Wolfram had been separated to be rinsed of wine and dressed in their formal attire for the ball. Yuuri was wearing a new uniform that was almost identical to the ones he had always worn before with his red robe held in place over one shoulder by a heavy medallion. The broach that Wolfram had given him when he had first accepted his role as Maou was pinned over his heart. His new uniform was made of smooth, fine cloth, but it was also stiff, heavy and unworn. The tailor must have made it tighter too, and the black finery seemed to hug his skin even tighter. He was more scrawny looking than ever like this, and the robe over his black only made him feel like a high school student playing a king in a festival. His crown was the most uncomfortable thing of all. The metal edge dug into his temples and the weight of it was already making his neck ache.

Yuuri sighed. He was sure he was going to trip all over himself when it was time to escort Wolfram into the ballroom, never mind getting through all the dancing without humiliating them both.

"Try not to worry, Your Majesty-- Yuuri. Wolfram shouldn't be long now." Conrad smiled at him from his place beside the door to the grand ballroom, but the expression didn't reach the older man's eyes.

His older brother's eyes, Yuuri realized, and had to look at his feet. "He loved that uniform that Flurin gave him so much he hardly took it off. He's probably found a mirror--"

"What do you take me for, Wimp," a familiar voice snapped behind him. "I'm not some primping bride."

"No," Yuuri grinned, turning toward Wolfram's voice. "You're..."

Words died in his throat. Yuuri had thought the uniform that Flurin had given Wolfram had been made for him, but this... It was almost indecent. Dark black fabric clung perfectly to the smallest part of Wolfram's waist, making his shoulders look broader, decorative epaulettes only adding to the effect. Yuuri wanted to touch that narrow place-- rest his thumbs on solid hip bones-- lower. And the pants... Wolfram's pants fit every part of him, down to the shiny black boots that came to his knees. Higher... there was nothing too telling, but the slightest bulge where Yuuri knew the other boy's cock was hidden was altogether unmistakable. Even when he wasn't hard that part of Wolfram was unmistakable.
Yuuri swallowed, throat dry. He realized he was staring at Wolfram's crotch and forced his eyes to move again. Wolfram really did have long legs. So much longer than his own. Yuuri seemed all torso when he looked in the mirror, but Wolfram's legs went on and on-- They would feel so good, those legs wrapped around him while Yuuri buried himself in heat. Over and over and over again while Wolfram pleaded in his ears-- broken whispers of more and harder and yes--

And then there were warm fingers cupping his chin, bringing Yuuri's gaze back up to green green eyes. "You look good too, Yuuri."

Yuuri nodded dimly. He wanted to kiss the smirk from Wolfram's lips. Full, pink, lips... still faintly stained by wine... "You look... you look... good, too." Yuuri swallowed thickly.

Wolfram chuckled, light catching on something sliver in his hair. It was then that Yuuri noticed that Wolfram was wearing a crown too. A simple band of spun silver that looked much lighter and more comfortable than Yuuri's own, but still... a crown. Yuuri reached a hand up to feel it, smiling when Wolfram seemed to lean against his touch.

"I like it," Yuuri said after a moment. "It suits you."

Wolfram's grin widened further, "Of course it does, Wimp." Then he stepped away from Yuuri just the slightest bit, cheeks red. "Now let's get on with it. It's hardly proper to keep everyone waiting."

Yuuri had to laugh. Wolfram could be so... Wolfram at times. "Fine, fine." He tried to reach down and adjust himself as covertly as possible before he handed his new husband his arm and nodded for Conrad to open the doors to the ballroom.

"You do realize you're stuck with me now," he whispered nervously as Wolfram took his arm and the sound of the orchestra and crowd doubled as the doors open. Even as Gunter called for silence to announce them it took a while for all of the guests to quiet. "You can't change your mind after the dance. I haven't had a chance to practice in ages and--"

Wolfram squeezed his arm. "Stop worrying. And stand up straight."

"I can't," Yuuri hissed, realizing all at once and all too late that seeing Wolfram had made his pants even tighter... He wasn't completely hard, and tucked up as he was it would be slightly less obvious but... but...

Wolfram leaned closer to straighten Yuuri's back and hissed words against his ear. "The sooner this is done the sooner I can get you in bed and show you exactly how far I am from changing my mind about this. Perhaps you should rethink your warning, Yuuri. Perhaps it is you who is stuck with me."

Yuuri shuddered. "God. Wolf," his voice nearly cracked, barely a whisper. The hall was nearly silent, Gunter would start talking any moment. "Don't say things like that now. It's hard enough--" He blushed further. "Everyone is looking at us. They'll see."

The crowd hushed as Wolfram tugged him forward, walking slowly to the center of the ballroom. Gunter's voice rang sobbingly throughout the lavishly decorated hall, announcing that the newly married couple was to start the dance. Yuuri felt like he was going to die of embarrassment.

Then Wolfram turned to face him pulling Yuuri close enough that their hips touched and if the music hadn't started at that very moment then everyone was sure to have heard his whimper. "Wolf--"

"Don't worry, Yuuri. You're the king, remember. No one will say anything."
"Don't say that! It's humiliating!" he hissed as softly as he could, even though the music swelled around them.

"What's humiliating about wanting your husband?" Wolfram growled, rocking his hips just enough that Yuuri could feel him. An answering heat. "Now that we're married I can lead the dance, so relax," Wolfram huffed, ending the conversation.

The dance began, and even though Yuuri tried to relax, Wolfram was dancing so much closer than he ever had and Yuuri wanted him so much that it was difficult to even think, let alone remember that he was supposed to be moving. Somehow Wolfram managed to cover any steps that Yuuri forgot though, and after a while the dance floor filled with other couples. Once he was hidden in the crowd Yuuri was finally able to retreat from the edge of panic and he became less and less aware of anything but all of the places where Wolfram was touching him.

Wolfram smelled so good. His collar was high and stiff and decorated similarly to his epaulettes, which was good. Yuuri wasn't sure he would have been able to resist pressing his lips to skin had it been an option. There was something about Wolfram's neck that always tempted him. Probably because Wolfram kept it covered most of the time. Yuuri could barely keep his feet moving. Wolfram was so warm and solid-- every other count the waltz caused their groins to brush. It was almost impossible not to forgo dancing all together and rut himself to completion against Wolfram's leg in the middle of the ballroom. "Want you," he breathed, his thoughts escaping his lips. His cock seemed to throb to the music. "I can't--"

"Yes, you can," Wolfram assured him softly. "Soon." The promise was hot against his ear. How could all of Wolfram be so hot?

And somehow Yuuri waited.

********

********

Greta tucked herself closer to one of the pillars as she watched her fathers dance. If she was taller she might have been able to see more than bits and pieces of them at a time, but if she was taller it would also have been harder for her to hide.

It wasn't that Greta didn't like Yuuri's family. Mama Jennifer was sweet and always smiling and had bought at least half of the dresses in Greta's wardrobe, and Papa Shoma had Yuuri's kind eyes. Yuuri's family had been wonderful, but they all had so many questions about this world that by the time they had made it back to the palace from Shinou's temple Greta had been exhausted. It hadn't helped that Greta didn't have answers for a lot of the things they had asked.

Even though Greta was a mazoku princess now and Wolfram and Gwendal and Gunter had done their best to stuff her head with history and customs, she was still a human girl. Her fathers' wedding ceremony was the first she had ever seen. Whenever someone got married Greta had only ever been allowed to attend the receptions, and even then only if she was good.

Greta smiled, remembering the way the red wine had splashed all over that awful woman's gown at the ball for Yuuri's last birthday party. More than a year ago. Things had been so crazy lately that this wedding ball was the first one they had thrown in ages. At any rate she would have to remember to make Yuuri a belated birthday cake... Greta could remember how happy he and Wolfram had been when she and Beatrice had made them a Father's day cake. How happy they had been before the strange men had come to take Wolfram away.

Greta shivered. Wolfram was here now. He was safe. Yuuri wouldn't let anything bad happen. He
wouldn't. Even though Greta had told herself a thousand times that Wolfram was safe now, the uneasy feeling never really went away. They had done terrible things to Hube when he had been trapped in her uncle's dungeon. Greta had heard him screaming... She didn't want to think about her father ever screaming like that.

Greta shook her head to get rid of unhappy thoughts. This was her fathers' wedding ball. She should be happy. Beatrice had come all this way and she hadn't gotten to see her friend since they had shared breakfast hours ago. They had hardly been able to eat for all their talking and now Greta could feel her stomach beginning to churn as it tried to eat itself. She hadn't told Beatrice the most exciting news though, that she was saving for a surprise. Greta could feel her cheeks get hot. Well, maybe some of her secrecy had been because she wanted to be the first to take advantage of her father's unexpected kindness.

The crowd pressed in toward her and Greta had to retreat to the other side of the pillar to avoid being squished by an older woman's hoop skirt. On the other side she nearly ran face first into Yuuri's older brother where he stood talking to Flurin and Gisela. Luckily they were too busy arguing about something to notice her and she scurried off in the direction of the curtains framing one of the balconies to escape.

Of all of Yuuri's earth family, Shouri had been the worst about asking questions that Greta couldn't answer. She had even had to explain some things to him twice! How the joining of blood solidified the bonds of marriage. How now Wolfram could use Morgif too because his blood had mixed with the Maou's power. Shouri had frowned about that until Greta had explained that Yuuri would always hold the most power over the sword, and that Wolfram could only use it in his defense if something were to happen. She had also had to assure him that Yuuri would always hold the highest place in demon society.

Shouri had asked about absolutely everything! What was in the chalice? Why the guests needed to remain completely silent unless instructed otherwise by the high priestess? If her parents were really naked underneath their robes? Greta had known the answers to some of the questions, but even though she had studied mazoku wedding rituals in a book that Wolfram had given her, she couldn't explain the pretty circle of black and white sand that Yuuri and Wolfram had stood inside.

The circle had taken up most of her attention during the ceremony for the parts where Yuuri and Wolfram hadn't been doing anything. When Greta unfocused her eyes it almost looked like the black and white sand was twisting around and making new shapes. Other than that the circle hadn't done much other than be pretty, and when it was time to leave a final glance had assured her that it was unchanged from the first time that Greta had seen it.

There was a slight breeze over by the windows and it made the long silvery curtains ripple like water. Once she was right up against them Greta realized that the door to the nearest balcony was open a crack and when she peeked outside she saw a couple outside enjoying their own private dance. It took a second for her to recognize them as they swayed slowly to the music. Elizabeth's hair was still as beautiful as ever-- almost as long as Cheri's. Elizabeth was smiling as she danced with her husband, but then they were kissing and Greta found herself in search of a new hiding place.

Maybe later tonight she would get to enjoy a dance like that too. Only without the kissing part. Again, Greta found herself blushing and trying to ignore the fluttering in her chest.

Greta willed away the silly thoughts and kept her senses sharp as she slipped her way between the taller guests as they danced and stood in their circles to talk. She made sure to smile and curtsy politely when she was recognized by someone as the grooms' royal daughter. She was especially
careful to keep out of sight of Yuuri's earth family though, and to keep her eyes peeled for her most important guest.

Greta could hardly believe it when Wolfram had told her. Even though she and Beatrice had snuck Wilfrido into the winter formal, the Maou's wedding would be filled with mazoku aristocrats of the highest standing. Greta had known better than to try to smuggle her human friend to such an event. When Wolfram had told her that he had extended a formal invitation to Wilfrido and his father, Greta had been too shocked for words.

She had been surrounded by seamstresses at the time, standing as still as possible so that no more pins would find skin instead of cloth, which is what always seemed to happen when she got fidgety. Greta was wearing the finished dress now, an altered version of something her grandma Jennifer had bought that made her feel like a frilly doll and was so tight it made her chest ache. Although these days nearly everything she wore made her chest ache. Wolfram had smiled when he saw her in it though, and said he couldn't wait to see how pretty she would look at the reception. He had stood at the door for a minute looking uncomfortable and muttering something to himself about her growing up too fast. Then he had moved to sit on the very edge of her bed.

"I suppose I don't have to ask that you keep any frogs you might have found away from the guests." His smile was crooked and forced.

Greta only humphed at him, crossing her arms and wincing when she poked herself on a pin.

Wolfram studied his hands where he had folded them in his lap. "I've spoken with the boy. And his father."

Greta blinked. "Wilfrido? But-- but he hasn't done anything wrong! You can't punish him papa, you can't!"

Wolfram held up a hand to quiet her. "No, he hasn't." A sigh. "I was thanking them for keeping you... entertained in my absence. And... And I didn't want you practicing with sticks or broom handles or whatever you've been using. I asked Anissina to make another one of those lighter training swords for the boy to use, though he really should be using something heavier at his age..." He coughed. "In a year or so proper military training will be made available to him if he chooses to be something other than a stablekeep for the rest of his life. I won't have my daughter spending all her time with a servant. My lord uncle will have enough to say about how I've been raising you as it is, and..." Wolfram shook his head. "Anyway, after the wedding, we'll see about enlisting him in one of the half-blood squadrons."

Greta hardly knew what to say. She stood there, mouth open like a fish, until Wolfram continued, looking more uncomfortable than ever.

"And I've seen to it that the boy and his father have received invitations to the wedding ball, so I don't want you and Beatrice sneaking in and out. There is to be a double guard and I don't want you leaving the ballroom without my express permission for any reason. Is that understood?"

She nodded and remembered to close her mouth. "I-- Thank you, Papa."

Wolfram muttered something to himself and stood. "Just don't make me regret it. I told the boy I'd burn him if he touches you and I mean it."

"Not even dancing?" Greta blushed.

Wolfram's face was red then too. "I didn't mean-- of course-- appropriate dancing will be..."
appropriate, but nothing else."

Greta made a face even as her blush deepened. "Wilfrido is my friend, Papa. Not my... Not anything else."

"Right," Wolfram snapped, heading for the door. "Best keep it that way."

And then he was gone.

Even now Greta could hardly believe that Wolfram had invited Wilfrido, or that he had made such a fuss over it. Wilfrido was her friend. It had taken Greta so long to get him to like her even that much, there was no way he would ever like her more than that.

Not that she wanted him to. Maybe if she told herself so enough times this ridiculous feeling would disappear.

The blush was back, staining her cheeks as she made her way through the guests. Circles of talking aristocrats made up most of the obstacles along the outside edges as the center of the ballroom was now completely filled with dancing couples.

Eventually Greta spotted Anissina’s red hair and made her way closer. Anissina had been busy lately perfecting her latest invention and it had been a while since Greta had really had time to talk to her. When Greta got closer she noticed that Anissina was talking to Gwendal and some other people she didn't know in a serious tone and so Greta held back to approach more carefully. She didn't want to interrupt and have either Anissina or Gwendal get upset with her, but her curiosity kept her from moving on completely.

The three people Anissina and Gwendal were talking to were all beautiful and blond, and their aristocratic features told her that they were probably Wolfram's family from Belefield. Greta knew that Wolfram's family had arrived late last night, too late for her to have been formally introduced. This morning Wolfram had told her that the formal introductions would have to wait, and so Greta was careful to stay out of their sight as she crept her way closer.

Wolfram's evasiveness about his family in Belefield had only made her more curious about them. One of the people talking with Anissina was a man close to Gwendal's height who was wearing what looked to be a more elaborate version of Wolfram's blue uniform. Beside him were two women, both beautiful and young, probably close to Elizabeth's age. For a moment Greta thought they must have been twins, but then one of the ladies' hair caught the light and seemed to shine with a touch of red where the other girl's hair was simply golden.

And then Anissina saw her.

Greta blushed and started to turn, but Anissina excused herself from the conversation and caught her before she could get very far. "Greta--"

"Sorry," Greta squeaked, "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all." The older woman smiled at her. "You gave me an excuse to get away. Will you escort me to the buffet, Princess?"

Greta grinned. "My pleasure, Lady Anissina."

The buffet table was all the way on the other side of the great hall, but they made it there quickly enough. Anissina seemed like she really was happy to spend time with her, and wasn't simply ushering her away like a small part of her had initially feared.
"I hate attending these formal things," Anissina complained as she placed a few pieces of fruit onto her plate. "My time would be much better spent in the lab."

Greta swallowed her bite of the pastry she had chosen and frowned. "Can't you just stay there if you want? If you hate it so much..."

Anissina shook her head and studied the selection of chocolates. "Gwendal would be lost without me. Sometimes the politics of formals requires a feminine touch."

Greta didn't understand. "But Gwendal's really good at politics all the time. What makes a ball different?"

Anissina looked back in the direction they had come from, but Greta didn't think Anissina would be able to see Gwendal from here, even with her added height. "Gwendal's never been the best when he gets flustered, and only two things can do that."

"Two?" Greta blinked. "I thought Gwendal's weakness was cute things."

"It is," Anissina answered. "But sometimes cute ladies try to... distract Gwendal. He's a very important person and has been offered quite a few marriage alliances in the past. Poor Gwendal's never been very good when it comes to matters of the heart."

Greta remembered the pretty ladies from Belefield. "Are Wolfram's relatives trying to make a marriage with Gwendal?"

Anissina laughed. "No. Gwendal has nothing to worry about from those two. And I was on his arm earlier, so he should be safe for the rest of the evening."

Finally things were starting to make sense. "So you stay with Gwendal so it looks like... the two of you are a couple... and then other ladies don't try to ask Gwendal to marry them?"

"More or less." Anissina's smile was somehow sad. "No one could possibly compete with the most ingenious mazoku inventor after all!"

Greta put more of the pastry into her mouth, glad to finally have something to eat. She had thought about Gwendal and Anissina being a couple before, but that was mostly because they acted like a second... mother and father to her when both her Papas were away. "Anissina," she asked and paused, afraid of asking something stupid. "Why... Why don't you and Gwendal just get married? You're the greatest, just like you said, and that way Gwendal wouldn't have to worry about getting proposed to by anyone else." There was something about both Gwendal and Anissina that always seemed lonely somehow. If they got married then maybe they could both be happier.

But then Anissina shook her head. "No, little Princess." A sigh. "Things are more complicated than that." Anissina's smile was gone completely now and something about it made Greta feel like she had said something wrong.

"I'm sorry, Anissina." Greta studied her feet. "I didn't mean to make you upset."

Anissina put a hand on Greta's curls. "You didn't, Greta. Don't worry." Then she took a deep breath and grinned, looking for all the world like her normal self. "Now, enough sweets. A stable boy was looking for you earlier. You should go and find him before he makes himself a fool in front of some diplomat and your Papa Wolf has an excuse to give him a singe."

Greta forgot about finishing her pastry and scanned the crowd again. "When did you see him? Can you see him now?" Greta stood up on her toes to look, wishing she were taller.
Anissina chuckled at her. "No, I don't see him. But you're free of me. Go look for your stable boy."

Greta gave Anissina her biggest grin and was off, searching the crowd and dancers for Wilfrido.

Now the great hall was positively full of dancing couples. Greta spotted her Papas again, as well as Hube and Nicola and Elizabeth and her husband. She even found Gunter fussing over one of the flower arrangements, talking to himself and pausing every so often to blow his nose on a sopping wet handkerchief.

After a while Greta started to think that Wilfrido must be looking for her and that with all her moving about she would be all but impossible to find. She turned, looking for a place where she could hold still for a while and still have a good view of most of the dance floor when she bumped into someone who had been right behind her.

"Excuse me!" she blurted, curtsying at once.

"That's quite all right," Beatrice's father smiled down at her, removing his hat and letting the light reflect off of his perfectly smooth head. "I would have expected you to be off with my daughter and that boy the two of you are so fond of tormenting."

Greta blinked. "Wilfrido?" She had wanted to surprise Beatrice. "Did Beatrice already find him? I've been looking for them both!"

The older man nodded and laughed. "They were looking for you as well. Try the other side of the dance floor. You might have more luck."

"Thank you!" Greta managed a hasty curtsy before she was off. She really shouldn't be running. It was highly improper, and running made her chest ache.

Her chest was aching.

It was worse when she found them though. So happy. Dancing without her.

It made her want to cry.

She shouldn't be feeling this way. They were both her friends. Greta had fun with both of them. It shouldn't hurt so much to see them spending time together without her. She had eaten breakfast with Beatrice, and saw Wilfrido almost every day. She shouldn't cry. She wouldn't.

Why did they have to look so perfect together? Beatrice was an inch taller than Greta and a year older and she was so beautiful in her ballgown. Beatrice actually had something for her bodice to push up and she looked like a real young lady, instead of a little girl in a young lady's dress and she didn't have the beginnings of a pimple beside her nose like Greta did. Wilfrido was looking at Beatrice with his pretty brown eyes and they were laughing and Greta wanted to scream.

Wilfrido looked so handsome in his new uniform. Wolfram must have gotten him something to wear because she had never seen Wilfrido in anything nearly so nice before. Wilfrido was so handsome with his long braid tied with a white ribbon and Beatrice was so beautiful. They looked perfect together.

It wasn't fair! Greta had only wanted a friend to share her days with. Wilfrido had been close to her age and human and she had only wanted a friend. She wasn't supposed to feel like this. She wasn't supposed to be jealous of Beatrice.

But she was. She was jealous. She wanted Beatrice to go back to Calbacade and for Wilfrido to
look at her like--- like she looked at him.

Greta pinched her arm, forcing back tears. She wouldn't cry. This was stupid. She wasn't some weak stupid little girl. She didn't want to grow up and think about falling in love and hurting and all those things that grown ups did. Greta had hurt so much. She had been so alone... She wouldn't let herself ruin everything she had now. She wouldn't be jealous. She wouldn't... she wouldn't like Wilfrido the way she did. Doing that would just make her into a silly, stupid little girl and Greta was determined not to let that happen.

And so when Beatrice and Wilfrido noticed her and stopped their dancing Greta put on her biggest smile and rushed to join her friends.

********

********

Conrad watched as the royal couple danced from one of the darker corners of the hall, remembering the smile on Susannah Julia's face on the night of her wedding to Adelbert.

Julia must have known how much he had wanted her for himself. Julia always knew people's hearts better than they knew their own. But Julia had never wanted him back no matter how good a man he had tried to be for her.

On some level Conrad understood. He wasn't worthy. His hands were too bloodied. And so he had made himself content to be her knight, ready to fight for her and die for her.

But then she had agreed to Adelbert's proposal and Conrad's entire world had shifted. Adelbert had killed. Adelbert was gruff and hard and quick to anger and the mere thought of those hands on her was enough to make him rage.

Of course, Conrad had never done anything but watch. But fight the urge to feel the other man's blood hot on his hands with how painfully happy Julia was to have Adelbert at her side.

Julia couldn't even see the man that she had married and yet the way she looked at Adelbert with those clear grey eyes made Conrad sick with envy. With Grief.

If only he had been a better man then maybe he could have been worthy of that look.

But he wasn't.

Just like he wasn't worthy of Yuuri, the boy born with his beloved Julia's soul.

Once there had been a time when Conrad had almost convinced himself that fate had given him another chance. That this time, in this body, that perfect soul would be for him. Would choose him to love most of all. There had been times when Yuuri had looked at him that Conrad had been almost sure of it. But Yuuri had been so young, and then fate had taken him to Dai Shimeron and false betrayal and Conrad had lost his chance.

And now all Conrad could do was watch in shadow while Yuuri looked at Wolfram with all the love he had.

Conrad's baby brother returned the look, of course. Wolfram had never loved anyone like he loved Yuuri. Had never looked as happy as he did now, leading his new husband across the dance floor. Bodies close enough to resemble another dance entirely.

Wolfram had been through so much. He deserved to be happy. Conrad was happy to see it. He was.
And yet it hurt more than he could say that Yuuri hardly looked at him at all anymore. Conrad still saw everything that Yuuri did. The way he had reacted to seeing Wolfram before their dance. The way Yuuri's new uniform clung to him. Tempting.

Conrad watched as Yuuri and Wolfram exchanged blushes and low words, mouths barely shaping whispers. Almost touching.

There were times, usually only when he was very drunk, that Conrad slipped. Allowed himself to indulge in things he shouldn't. Fantasies. Images in his mind's eye of Yuuri flushed and panting beneath him. Kissing him. Folding that young, lithe body in his arms and protecting him from everything at the same time Yuuri clung to him, writhed and cried his name.

But now his brother would take that place. Touching Yuuri. Being touched. Their bodies would fit so well...

Conrad wanted both of them to be happy so badly it hurt, but he also wanted...

He wanted.

Conrad dug his nails into his palms with too-tight fists, realizing what he had done. How disgustingly hard he had become watching his king and younger brother touch.

He needed a drink.

The air shifted behind him and Conrad had a hand on his sword before a familiar voice ghosted against his ear.

"Enjoying the show, Captain?"

Conrad released the hilt of his sword and turned to face the other man.

Yozak was wearing a dark strapless gown with a glittery bodice that only accentuated the enormity of the muscles in his arms. He was wearing shoes that made him uneasily taller than normal and his hair was done up. Lipstick covered his smirk.

Conrad glared, shame coloring his cheeks. "Is there something you wanted to report?"

Yozak shook his head, smirk only widening as he lay a hand on the padded bodice of his ballgown with a wink. "You looked like you could use some company is all."

Conrad narrowed his eyes.

The hand moved to the top edge of the bodice, to where cleavage would have been had Yozak had breasts, and produced a flask. "You also looked like you could use some of this."

Sometimes Conrad hated the way Yozak could read him so easily. That and the way his eyes twinkled when he was up to something.

But Yozak was always up to something.

Conrad took the flask.

********

********

Yozak waited until his captain was mid-swallow before he touched him, making sure that the angle
and position of his skirts would block any eyes that happened to look their way. Conrad was as hard as Yozak had known he'd be.

The move had the desired effect and Conrad swallowed more of the flask's contents than he'd likely intended. His Captain's look of reproach was expected as well, along with the wince as the strong liquor burned its way down his throat. When Conrad stepped back Yozak followed, keeping his hand where it was, squeezing just enough to promise.

"What do you think you're doing?" Conrad hissed, grabbing Yozak's wrist to wrench away his hand.

Yozak let go without a fight. "Just helping you take the edge off." He lowered his voice. "You know how very good I can be at that, Captain."

Conrad's jaw was tight. Muscles clenching and unclenching with anger and inner struggle. Anyone else would have retreated under that look, but Yozak knew by the widening of his captain's pupils that he had already won.

"No one will miss us," Yozak continued. "I've made sure of it."

One brisk nod and a hasty exit later, Yozak had his captain panting and pressed against the wall of a deserted hallway, cock halfway down his throat. Conrad's hands were buried in his carefully constructed updo and Yozak could feel pins coming loose-- falling to the ground as Conrad jerked Yozak's head forward again and again. Fucking his mouth.

Yozak relaxed his throat and let him. Swallowed. Body numb with the pleasure pain of it. Enjoying the blissful taste of sweat and precome and Weller as it forced its way inside him. Thrusting.

Even like this-- It was always so much better with Conrad than anyone. Always.

And Yozak hated him for it.

The way brown eyes looked through him. Lost inside his own mind. His own pain. The need to forget. Hurt and be hurt.

Yozak knew he shouldn't encourage it like he was, but everyone had a weakness and as much as he was loathe to admit it, Conrad Weller was his. He always had been.

It had started when they were only children. Conrad was Dan Hiri's son. A hero and a prince and as trapped between two worlds as Yozak had been. They had grown together, trained together, and once they had reached a certain age they had touched themselves together.

For Conrad things had never changed. They were friends. They helped each other relieve tension. They fucked.

Mostly they fucked when Conrad was drunk and mooning over his precious perfect Julia. It was his own fault that Yozak had let it become more-- if only within his own mind. An adolescent folly. Conrad had started out as someone so much greater. Untouchable. Unbeatable with a sword in his hand. Yozak should have been content to be his friend and nothing more. He should have been...

He should have known that Conrad would never change. Never want him beyond the convenience of flesh. They way Yozak's cock could make him feel when he was buried inside him. Conrad would never change. Never fuck him back. No. Conrad was saving that pretty cock of his for
Susannah Julia's perfect cunt.

He was such a fool.

The only time that Conrad had ever put his cock in him had been a complete disaster. His own fault. His own stupid plan gone terribly wrong.

It hadn't been long after Julia's engagement to Adelbert had been announced. Conrad had been beside himself with jealously and hurt and Yozak had seen it as just the chance he had been waiting for. Before that, Conrad had been able to hold on to real hope that something would become of his fixation, but Julia was not the type to sway from commitment, and nothing short of Adelbert's death would make her even consider another.

When the engagement had been announced Yozak had been silently gleeful as he watched Conrad's face go pale. Finally, he had thought. She's finally done something to put an end to it.

Of course Julia had known how strongly Conrad felt for her. Everyone had known. Julia was the only one who could ever tame him. Mold the wild and angry adolescent into the young man he had eventually become. But Julia was a woman grown. A woman who wanted things that Conrad could never give her.

Adlebert was her age. Could give her children. She would smooth his rough edges the same way she had for Conrad, only this time she would really let Adelbert love her. As much as she loved him. Yozak didn't know the how or the why of it, but it was plain. There on Julia's face for everyone to see.

Even Conrad couldn't ignore it. Julia loved Adelbert. Conrad's beloved Julia had chosen someone else.

Yozak's had seen it as his chance to show Conrad that he could choose someone else as well.

Yozak had planned everything. He had been careful and patient. He had obtained the perfect supplies. The time they would need. All of it and more. The stupidest thing he had done was to have given Conrad an out. The perfect excuse to blame it all on the ale.

And the dress.

Yozak had been over confident. He had been so damn sure of himself. The dress had been a mistake.

It had been the first time Conrad had seen him in a dress. Yozak had worn lots of dresses before, but at that time he had only ever done so in the privacy of his own chambers. For a boy who had spent his childhood in rough-spun wool, silken underskirts were the first decadence that he had been able to afford after a few years in Shin Makoku's controversial half-blood troops. The barracks were in the castle, but being the favored companion of the middle prince had its benefits. For the first time in his life Yozak had been given a room of his own. He had been given pocket money to spend and time to work on improving his unique skill set.

Yozak had always been good at reading people. At getting information. He had already been sent on a few solitary missions and was an expert in the dialects of the major demon and human nations. He had even created his own make up techniques, adding age and facial hair to make his disguises all the more convincing. But he was always improving. Always looking for that extra edge.

Yozak had expected dressing as a woman would have its advantages. Silk on his skin. Breeze. He
imagined it would allow him into places and situations that would otherwise have been impossible. And so one day, in the privacy of his room, he had first fastened the underskirts and laced up the colorful cotton bodice of a simple gown.

Yozak had expected dressing as a woman would have its advantages, but he hadn't expected it to feel so good.

He had thought about surprising Conrad with his new cross-dressing talent before, but he had been unsure of how his friend would react. Yozak hated not knowing how Conrad would react to something before he did it and so he had been putting it off. Yozak's plan to finally win Conrad over presented an opportunity to take care of two things at once.

It was two days after Julia's engagement to Adelbert that Yozak finally had his stage set. Conrad would be coming over that night for their customary drinks, but this time Yozak had something a little extra in mind. This time Yozak would be wearing a dress. And this time Conrad would be the one to fuck him.

Maybe Conrad had had too much to drink, and maybe the dress that Yozak had chosen had resembled one of Julia's, but whatever the reason, that night hadn't been close to anything that Yozak had anticipated.

Everything had started fine. Conrad had actually laughed at him. Laughed for the first time since the engagement had been announced and even called him cute. They had talked about the potential benefits that such a getup could have in the field and tucked into some bread and cheese and a large bottle of the kitchen's strongest ale.

As usual, nothing happened until Yozak pushed. Yozak had learned a long time ago that Conrad touching him was better than touching himself-- that everything was just better with Conrad, and so whenever he got the chance he would instigate. Conrad never seemed to mind. Yozak always made sure he came. That it was good. But Yozak was always the one to push the boundaries of the unspoken benefits of their relationship.

The first time they had had sex had been unexpected for both of them, but even then it was Yozak who moved from frotting to fucking. There had been so much heat. So much sweat and precome that it had just gone in. Sure Conrad had been the one to spread his legs-- offering the tight crease of his ass-- then flesh had suddenly given way to gods-- and there was no way either of them could have stopped until the end.

They hadn't talked about it, but after that fucking had been another option that they both enjoyed. Another option that was only enjoyed when Yozak was the one to push.

Sometimes Yozak was sure that Conrad would eventually touch him if he just waited long enough, but he never could. He wanted too much to wait and Conrad had never stopped him when Yozak pushed. Yozak had thought that once Conrad had had the chance to feel him that he would have a hard time waiting too.

And so on that night, two nights after Susannah Julia and Adelbert had announced their engagement, mind a fuzz of ale and heat and hope, Yozak had pushed Conrad onto his room's small bed and lowered himself onto his cock.

Things had gone so well at first. Conrad had grabbed his thighs and moaned. Thrusted up and into him. Things had gone so well at first, but then...

Maybe Conrad had had too much to drink, and maybe the dress that Yozak had chosen had
resembled one of Julia's, because it was Julia's name that Conrad whimpered. Over and over before he came. Came and fell asleep with tear stained cheeks and quiet snores.

The rest of the night was a blur, but even now the memory stung. Now, on his knees, while he let Conrad fuck his mouth.

Well. At least now Conrad was fucking him.

Yozak would have smirked, but instead he hummed and moved his tongue along the underside of Conrad's cock just so until his captain gasped and filled his throat with come.

This time the dress had been a good idea. A pile of skirts was much more comfortable beneath his knees than castle stone. And even though he had been in this position for quite a while he felt in no rush to move.

Conrad's legs were shaking now, and so Yozak rubbed his thighs with his thumbs as he drew slowly away, taking a few deep breaths to regain his own composure. Most of Conrad's come had gone down his throat before he'd had the chance to taste it, but Yozak knew it well enough that he didn't mourn the loss. Conrad's muscles were twitching beneath his fingers, legs spreading wider as he tried to moved down the wall. Yozak didn't let him. Instead he moved Conrad's still-hard cock aside to mouth the damp heat of his sack. Drinking in the other man's whimpers as he tried to shift, buck forward so that Yozak's tongue could press its way inside him.

It couldn't though. Not from this angle.

Yozak could feel blood pounding through his own arousal, hot and slick with wet where it rubbed up against his underskirts. Mouth still busy he took one hand away and reached into his false cleavage for the small bottle of oil. It took a moment for him to move his dress enough to slick his cock, but once he had Yozak was able to stand in one rush of motion, pin Conrad against the wall with his body and slide his naked cock between the other man's trembling thighs.

Conrad made a choked noise as the air was forced from his chest by his sudden re-impact with the wall. His eyes were closed and his mouth was half open, but he rocked forward and spread his legs as wide as he could given the confines of his pants and that was more than enough invitation for Yozak to push.

His heartbeat was loud in his ears and he could feel Conrad's pulse through the tight flesh surrounding his cock. It was so hard not to gasp. So hard not to that he did it anyway, pressing his mouth against the skin of Conrad's neck where his top button had come undone somewhere between the ballroom and their secluded corner of the castle.

"How's this for taking the edge off, Captain," he managed, voice tight with feeling.

Conrad sucked in air. "Move," his captain ordered, voice raw and close to breaking.

Yozak moved.

********

********

Wolfram would have been perfectly happy to spend the entirety of the reception dancing with his new husband, but unfortunately his uncle and cousins couldn't be postponed for much longer.

Yuuri wasn't exactly making things any easier. Looking at him the way he was. Hips touching occasionally. If only they could forgo the politics altogether-- anything to get them closer to the
royal bedroom and the perks of finally being wed.

But thoughts like that would not help him with his uncle, and so when the current set of music was drawing to a close he lowered his voice to whisper. "It's time to face our guests, Yuuri."

Yuuri pouted adorably. "Can't I just send them all away until tomorrow? I'm king after all..."

Wolfram had to laugh. "Yes, you are the king, but you shouldn't abuse your influence."

The music ended and there was a polite clap for the orchestra. Wolfram stepped out of Yuuri's arms and gave him an encouraging smile. "Come on, let's get this over with."

The remnants of a pout still clung to Yuuri's bottom lip, which only made Wolfram want to kiss him. But if he started Wolfram knew he would never stop. He was already painfully aware of the tightness in his pants-- tucked up to be less obvious but still *distracting*. At least that was one thing talking to his relatives would help relieve him of.

He sighed and took Yuuri's arm. "My lord uncle will be pleased to see us both, but don't expect smiles from Else and Reinhilde."

Yuuri frowned. "Why not?"

Wolfram let out another heavy sigh. He hated having to explain it, but he knew Yuuri would say something unbecoming if he didn't. "My lord uncle's daughter, Else, is the current heir to the high seat of Belefield. She has been since I was denied my crest."

"But now... You think your uncle might try to give it back to you?"

"He's *been* trying-- subtly of course-- for years." Wolfram shook his head. "I used to think of Belefield's high seat as something rightfully mine, and that I wouldn't hesitate to take it if it was ever offered."

Yuuri squeezed his arm. "And now?"

"Now I have more important things to worry about."

"You mean you married well," Yuuri teased.

"Of course, Wimp." Wolfram smirked. "That and it would require me to spend more time in Belefield."

Yuuri's eyes widened in realization. "No. You have to stay here with me."

Wolfram chuckled. "Exactly."

Yuuri was quiet for a while as they moved through the crowd, nodding in greeting to those they passed as Wolfram kept an eye out for his father's side of the family. He was half surprised that his uncle would have let him out of his sight. Else and Reinhilde were probably behind it.

Wolfram's mood darkened for a moment as he caught sight of his daughter dancing with that... *boy*. He would have to come over and glare later. Maybe singe that long hair a bit, just to make a point... His plotting was interrupted by Yuuri's voice.

"Why doesn't your uncle want his daughter to have the seat? Is it because she's a woman?"
Wolfram blinked. "Of course not. Why wouldn't a woman be capable of ruling?"

"No! I wasn't suggesting that!" Yuuri stammered. "I was just trying to think of a reason he wouldn't want his daughter to have the seat."

Wolfram shook his head. "She was never called. Else can use healing magic like all mazoku, but neither Ethne nor any other spirit called for her." He sighed. "Belefield is more... traditional than Shin Makoku in ways. Those in Belefield still judge a mazoku's worth by their magical abilities. Even as a child my magic was unusually strong, which only served to highlight Else's lack of magical skill. Uncle saw it as a sign that I was chosen to be the heir, despite my disinheritance. My father was the eldest after all, so if the council of Belefield hadn't taken my crest the seat would have gone to me. Uncle has tried to convince the council to reinstate my inheritance on my father's behalf, but has never quite managed it. The other council members are old and unlikely to forgive what they perceive as an insult to their house."

Yuuri worried his lip. "Conrad still blames himself, you know... He told me. Why they took away your crest."

Wolfram gave his husband's arm a squeeze. "Well, he shouldn't. I used to blame him, I won't lie about that... but... It's something that hardly matters now. It was never Conrad's fault."

Yuuri gave him a smile. "I like that you're getting along better. Acting more like brothers."

Wolfram snorted. "Speaking of brothers, yours seems none too pleased about all this."

"Ugh," Yuuri groaned. "You have no idea. At least he's promised to be on his best behavior... Japan really is a different world, Wolfram. We have to give him time."

"As long as his opinion of things isn't tainting yours I don't care what he does or how long it takes him to do it," Wolfram huffed. "It's that kind of thinking that makes that world of yours seem so backwards."

Yuuri shook his head and sighed. "Right."

It was then that Wolfram spotted his uncle and cousins talking to Gwendal. Else and Reinhilde were as beautiful as he had ever seen them, and it made Wolfram tighten his grip on Yuuri's arm.

Yuuri must have noticed where he was looking because the wimp stood up a little straighter. "Is that them?"

"Yes," Wolfram answered, then he took a deep breath and tried to shift his demeanor back towards the proper end of things. It seemed like he had laughed and smiled more today than he had in years, and even though he no longer had any intention of claiming Belefield's high seat, he wasn't in the mood to give Reinhilde any excuses to call him a child.

Both Else and Reinhilde were close to forty years older than he was, and since Else had never been called, Reinhilde's way of not-so-subtly supporting her wife's claim was to constantly point out Wolfram's immaturities. He even suspected that Reinhilde was behind the whole "selfish loafer" business, not that he would ever be able to confirm it.

It was strange. There was a time when he would have felt... more regarding the impending conversation. The one where he planned to give his uncle a very clear idea that he was no longer interested in something that for so long had defined him. But all Wolfram felt was Yuuri's warmth at his side.
His uncle smiled when he noticed their approach and so did Else, in her own way. Reinhilde, however, only looked at them with icy blue eyes and waited.

Wolfram gave his husband's arm a squeeze and inclined his head toward his family.

********

"Yuuri," Wolfram said with that proper air about his voice, "allow me to introduce my lord uncle Waltrana von Belefield, holder of Belefield's high seat and my esteemed father's younger brother. His beautiful daughter Else, and her lovely wife Reinhilde."

Yuuri nearly choked on his own spit. Instead he swallowed some air and managed not to cough.

"Wife?"

Thankfully Wolfram was still continuing the introductions and Yuuri didn't have to croak out a response. Yet. He hoped that Wolfram would think his blush was a result of his overly formal introduction to his family rather than any lingering Earth-prejudice that might make Wolfram reconsider him all together.

It wasn't that Yuuri had a problem with two women getting married, Yuuri rationalized to himself, it was just that things like that still surprised him even after all this time. Hopefully Wolfram hadn't noticed.

When Wolfram finished introducing him to his uncle and cousins with enough titles to satisfy even Gunter, Yuuri forced himself to speak. "A pleasure." And then, "I'm so happy all of you could make it... Be in attendance, I mean."

"The pleasure is most assuredly ours, Your Majesty," said Wolfram's uncle. "It has been too long since I've been able to spend time with my dear nephew." He reached out to hug Wolfram, which meant that Wolfram had to stop touching him and if it had lasted any longer than a moment Yuuri didn't know what he would have done.

Once the hug was finished Wolfram stepped back beside him, but instead of joining arms like they had been before Wolfram rested his hand—warm—on the very smallest part of Yuuri's back.

"Words cannot express how glad I am to see you so well," Wolfram's uncle continued. "The details we received were excruciatingly vague... but I was shocked to hear that your magic had gotten so dangerously low-- and for trouble to have befallen you on the road." He reached out to put a hand on Wolfram's shoulder. "I will confess I feared the worst, but you are as well as I have ever seen you. And your magic is..." He flushed, looked at Wolfram in a way that Yuuri couldn't understand but was sure he didn't like. "Well, I hope now that you are wed I will have the pleasure of seeing you more often in Belefield."

The woman with a bit of red to her golden hair, the one that Wolfram had introduced as Reinhilde, glared but said nothing.

Wolfram shrugged, casually removing his uncle's hand from his shoulder. "Don't let the echo fool you, Uncle. I've been assured my magic levels will be back to normal in short order--"

"Well, as normal as they ever were," Waltrana interrupted with a chuckle. "You couldn't have been more then fourteen when you set fire to my gardens."
"And all because you didn't like the clothes my Else had put you in," Reinhilde tittered.

"I admit I was never one to properly appreciate lace," Wolfram countered. "But really, Uncle, I'm afraid that the worst of the... damage is not so visible." The hand on Yuuri's back felt hot, thumb rubbing slowly up and down. "Despite my reaffirmation, I was too long with low magic in close quarters with the human's cursed stones."

Yuuri clenched his hands into fists. Wanted to touch and reassure, but Wolfram was already touching him and he wasn't sure if now was really the time to start any mutual touching.

Waltrana's face had paled. "You don't mean..."

"How long?" Else finished, green eyes wide with concern. "Wolf..."

"We can't be sure, but it was... substantial. Lady Gisela feels that my lifespan will be more similar to that of a half-blood now,"

Even Reinhild looked shocked. "Oh..."

Wolfram's thumb continued its steady motion on Yuuri's back. Up and down. Warm and reassuring despite the lump that had formed in Yuuri's throat.

"Don't look so distraught," Wolfram's voice was calm. "This way I don't have to worry about outliving His Majesty." Then Wolfram smiled and used his hand to guide Yuuri closer, until their sides were almost touching.

Yuuri adjusted to his new position eagerly. Wolfram was just so good at this. Talking. It was so easy to let Wolfram take control, slide his hand along his back like Yuuri was his puppet. Wolfram's hair sparkled where the delicate crown had been placed.

Wolfram was made for this.

It made Yuuri feel at once both reassured and hopelessly inadequate. Guilty for letting anything happen to him. For being the cause of such... of Wolfram losing half his life. Sometimes it didn't seem real. Wolfram looked the way he always did. Beautiful and strong. It was hard to really grasp the consequences of what had happened to him. And that even something so terrible... Wolfram seemed almost glad. Wolfram seemed glad that half his life had been stolen. Because of him.

And suddenly Wolfram's hand was the only thing keeping him together.

Wolfram's hand-- his words-- were warm as he assured his family that he was fine. That there was no need for him to oversee things in Belefield as his uncle and Else were doing such a marvelous job. That he was happy here. With him and with Greta.

Yuuri stayed quiet throughout. This was a family matter. One that he had married into but... But he didn't need to say anything. If he did, Yuuri was sure it would only make things awkward or worse.

After a while Yuuri even convinced himself that the hand on his back was as important to Wolfram as it was to him. That maybe, just by touching him, he was helping Wolfram get through this moment a little easier.

Thankfully it wasn't long before Cheri burst her way into their somewhat uncomfortable circle, Greta in tow. A relief in that it allowed Yuuri to worry about how Wolfram's conservative demon family might react to meeting their adopted human daughter, instead of all the ways he had negatively impacted his husband's judgment. He needn't have worried though. Greta was perfect.
She looked so cute in her frilly dress, appropriate in a way the same style never seemed to be on the girls and women who favored it in Japan.

Wolfram's uncle looked uncomfortable for half a moment but that was it, and both Else and Reinhilde seemed to be enamored at once, complimenting Greta's hair and dress and asking the identity of the boy she had been seen dancing with earlier.

At the mention of that, however, the comforting movement of Wolfram's thumb against his back stopped.

Cheri squealed. "They make quite a pair, don't they? Wolfie was such a dear to invite him and his father!" Then she leaned in to Wolfram's uncle to give her failed impression of a whisper. "I think it's because his own romance has worked out so nicely."

"Mother!" Wolfram blushed. "I hardly--"

"Papa even gave Wilfrido new clothes," Greta beamed. "And if he wants, Papa said he can train as a soldier so he doesn't have to work in the barn forever if he doesn't want to."

The hand on his back was hot.

Wolfram's uncle coughed.

It was Reinhilde who spoke. "And here I had thought you were planning something clever with the Calbacade princess, but a stableboy--"

"Isn't it quaint, darling," Else interrupted, taking her wife by the arm. "The children are so cute together with their dancing, it's made me want to steal you away to the dance floor. It's been so long since we've had a proper dance."

If Reinhilde was cross about being silenced she hid it well. "Of course." She curtsied. "If we may be excused?"

Wolfram nodded before Yuuri realized she had been asking for his permission. Once Else and Reinhilde had vanished in the crowd Greta gave his sleeve a tug.

"Can I go back to dance too, Papa?"

"Whatever you like," Yuuri smiled. "I'm happy you're having fun."

Greta gave them a grin before rushing off, probably as eager to escape the awkwardness of politics as she was to find Beatrice and Wilfrido again. Yuuri couldn't blame her; he was just as eager to rush off with Wolfram.

And then the hand went from his back. Yuuri looked at Wolfram, hoping to show his distress at its loss, only to see Cheri tugging him away.

"Don't look like that, Your Majesty," Cheri soothed. "I'm only taking him to get ready for the wedding night."

Wolfram's face-- even his ears were red. "M--Mother," he protested, "I'm perfectly capable of--"

"Come now, don't be silly, Wolfie. It's tradition."

Before Yuuri could stutter out a response Wolfram and his mother were gone, leaving him alone with Waltrana. Yuuri was relieved when the other man spoke first.
"If I may, I would like to thank you, Your Majesty."

Yuuri blinked. "For what?"

"I have never seen my nephew so happy." Waltrana paused. "My brother died before he was born and though I tried to be something of a father to him, I fear that Wolfram was... lonelier than I would have liked. Thank you," he said again. "After the events of the past few months especially, it is a relief to see him so well. So happy."

Yuuri knew that he was blushing. "I-- I only regret I didn't realize it sooner-- Wolfram makes me happy, too."

Waltrana smiled. "It is plain to see." He stepped closer. "Since you care for him so, I beg you, Your Majesty, insist that he take Belefield's seat. Of course now he will be your right hand-- beside you in ruling the ten nations as a whole, but Belefield is his birthright. The strength of Wolfram's magic only confirms his worthiness of the post. He used to wish for it, but now that I might be able to convince the council otherwise it seems..." he trailed off. "Please, speak to him."

Yuuri wasn't sure what to say. He had just been worrying himself about his effect on Wolfram's judgment... Was Wolfram hurting his chances at... something else... by wanting to stay at the palace with him? But then again, all of Wolfram's reasons for not wanting to take his uncle's offer-- the part about Else being perfectly suited, at least-- made perfect sense. And, on top of everything, Wolfram was capable of making his own decisions. "I will tell him what you asked me," Yuuri began with some caution, "but I don't expect Wolfram to change his mind."

"But his magic," Waltrana pressed, licking his lips. "Ethne has always favored him. There is a reason for it, I am sure. It would displease the gods to let such a gift go to waste--"

"Yuu-chan!"

Yuuri had never been so happy to hear his mother's voice.

"My apologies," Yuuri said, trying not to smile too broadly in relief as he waved his parents over. "I haven't gotten to speak to my mother and father all night."

"Yuu-chan," his mother cooed again now that she was close, holding his father tightly by the arm. "Who is this handsome gentleman?"

"Mother, Father, this is Wolfram's uncle, Waltrana, the current Lord of Belefield."

Waltrana bowed. "An honor."

His mother giggled. "It is an honor to meet you as well. I can see that Wolf-chan gets his looks from both sides of the family."

"You are too kind," Waltrana bowed again.

"Lord Belefield, allow me to introduce my parents, Souma and Jennifer Shibuya."

His parents returned Waltrana's bow.

Waltrana cleared his throat. "Forgive me. Allow me to leave you to your your family, Your Majesty."

Yuuri knew that he should have at least tried to protest, but he was exhausted of formality. "Thank
you. I hope to see you again before your departure."

"Of course, Your Majesty." And after a final round of bowing Yuuri was left with his parents.

"Where's Wolf-chan?" his mother asked. "You two have been joined at the hip all night."

"Cheri took him off to... to get ready for bed."

"Don't look so embarrassed, Yuu-chan. You're a grown boy--"

"Leave him alone, Jennifer," his father interrupted, holding his wife at the waist in a public display that Yuuri wasn't used to seeing in Japan. "It's been a long day."

"It has," Yuuri sighed. "It has."

* * *

Finally.

Finally Yuuri was done with all of it. The wedding, the reception, the politics.

The awkward conversations with Wolfram's family and other dignitaries. And the even more awkward conversation later when his father had expressed his fears over staying too long in Shin Makoku. It was so easy for Yuuri to forget that his father was mazoku, but the more he had thought about it the more sense his father's unease had made. If his parents were to stay, then his father would age much more slowly than his mother, and with how much his mother seemed to love everything about the other world Yuuri found himself sharing his father's concerns. It would be better if his parents and Shouri could return to earth as soon as possible.

Yuuri took a deep breath in an attempt to slow his rapid heartbeat. He was finally here. In front of his bedroom door. He had finally finished the strange series of baths, each more uncomfortable than the last. His skin was still tingling from when they had covered him with something that felt like sand but smelled like tea. That had been the strangest part of all, not so much the covering but the later removal, which had consisted of no less than three servants scraping the sand from his skin. Everywhere. He had given an un-kingly yelp when one had even lifted his balls to remove the sand-like mixture from parts of him that didn't bear thinking about. Yuuri shuddered. At least after that he had gotten to soak in hot water until his skin was pink.

But now the bath was finished. Yuuri was washed and scrubbed in more ways than he had even known were possible and he was close to shaking with nerves, standing in front of his bedroom door in nothing but a long black robe that brushed against his ankles when he walked. While Yuuri had been escorted to the royal baths for his preparation, Wolfram had been sent to the smaller bathroom adjoining their bedchamber.

Wolfram was so close. It was so hard not to picture him sprawled out naked in the very middle of their royal bed. Waiting for him. Hard.

Yuuri licked his lips. Even though he had just come from the baths he could already feel himself beginning to sweat. Sweaty palms could ruin everything. His heart was pounding in his chest, so fast it almost hurt. Made him forget exactly what it was to breathe at a normal speed.

Yuuri didn't know why he was so nervous. It wasn't as if it was his first time having sex with Wolfram. It was just the first time he was allowed to be having sex with Wolfram. It should have made him less nervous only it didn't. Now everyone knew he was going to be having sex with Wolfram. The walk here with Gwendal had been silent and terrifying... At least by now Wolfram's
older brother was likely a few hallways away. Yuuri could only imagine how cringe-worthy it would have been making that same walk with Conrad, who Gwendal had mentioned was taking care of some kind of guard duties elsewhere in the castle.

And on top of everyone else knowing that he was going to be having sex with Wolfram, Wolfram knew that he would be having sex with Wolfram. It was their wedding night. There were *Expectations*! It was supposed to be... to be... well, something better than the awkward desperate frotting that was all Yuuri suspected he was capable of at the moment.

He was going to ruin everything! Yuuri let his head fall forward, banging it against the door with a muffled thump and not nearly enough pain to justify the theatrics. He took a breath, trying to calm down. To regulate his breathing--

And that was when he smelled it.


"Wolfram!" The room was empty. Silent. The only sound the delayed click of the door as it closed behind him. There was no sign of Wolfram. No sign of a struggle. "Wolfram," he breathed, fear stealing the air from his lungs as he rushed into the room.

There was a dark spot on the rug near the door to the bathroom. A scorch-mark.

"Yuuri?"

Yuuri felt some of the panic rush out of him at the sound of Wolfram's voice. He sank to his knees before the burnt spot. "Wolf?"

"What are you doing, Wimp?" Wolfram's voice was quiet, muffled beyond the bathroom door.

*What am I doing?*

"What are you doing?!" Yuuri couldn't keep the anger from his voice. "You nearly scared me to death, Wolfram!" He stood, storming his way toward the bathroom door. "Why does the bedroom smell like fire? What happened to the rug?" The door to the bathroom was locked. "What are you doing in there?"

"Calm down, Wimp." Even through the door Yuuri could tell his husband was pouting.

For the second time that night, Yuuri let his head fall against a door. "Wolf," he pouted back. Then he rattled the locked doorknob.

On the other side of the door Wolfram sighed. "This is all mother's fault."

"What?"

"She put me in this-- this-- *thing* and then she stole the rest of our wardrobe."

"*What?*

"Even your things," Wolfram continued, "so I couldn't change into anything proper."

"Let me see." Yuuri tried the handle again, disappointed when it didn't budge. "Wolf..."

"I burned it," Wolfram huffed. "I'm not-- I refuse to be dressed like some *woman*. You married me. You shouldn't have to pretend I'm a girl to-- to consummate anything."
Yuuri blushed. "Of course not," he said, though he couldn't help picturing it anyway. *Lace*, his treacherous brain decided at once, and, *panties*!

"Yuuri..." Wolfram's voice held warning.

"What?" Yuuri stammered. "Well... okay, so you burned it. Why won't you come out now?"

*Naked*, his brain supplied, unhelpfully.

"I'm working on it, Wimp." There was that uncertain tone again.

Yuuri rubbed his forehead against the door. "Working on what, exactly?"

Wolfram made an exasperated noise and suddenly the door swung open, making Yuuri lose his balance and almost fall on his face.

"Mother took all the clothes, but she didn't take the parcels from Earth that the maids delivered this morning. This one had my name on it and felt like clothes-- I know I shouldn't have opened it without you..." His cheeks were pink, arms crossed over a bare and blushing chest as he stared at the floor. "I'm not even sure they fit properly... they're a little snug."

"Guh," Yuuri agreed. They were very snug. Wonderfully. Snug. The denim hugged the curves of his legs... low on Wolfram's hips. Tight-- so tight-- over his crotch where the beginnings of an erection was tucked to one side. Yuuri swallowed a mouthful of saliva. Cheri had taken all of the clothes which meant that under those jeans Wolfram wasn't wearing anything at all. All Yuuri would have to undo was a few buttons. A single zipper before gaining access to--

"Yuuri." Wolfram's voice was soft yet sure, emboldened by Yuuri's inarticulate response.

His eyes snapped up to Wolfram's face. His smirk. Yuuri licked his lips as he felt the blush staining his cheeks. "Wolf..." He had to swallow. "You look..."

Wolfram cocked his head to the side, smirk only widening. "I'm glad you approve." Then Wolfram stepped toward him, moving with all the confidence that Yuuri lacked. "Although you really should stop buying me things. You'll only spoil me, and if you ever found me insufferable before you can't imagine how much worse I can be if you keep treating me so well."

Wolfram was so close now. Yuuri could *feel* him. His heat.

"Never want to get rid of you," he answered, still too scared to reach out and touch. "Besides, I like buying you things. Spoiling you..." His blush deepened. "And those jeans... you in them... it's more of a present for me." He licked his lips. "Like you said before, you're supposed to be my present, remember?"

Somehow Wolfram managed to move closer without touching him, uncrossing his arms. "If that's the case... Shouldn't you open your present, Wimp?"

"Guh," Yuuri breathed, feeling the tug. The need to close the gap between them. To touch.

"Wolf..."

Wolfram's breath was on his cheek. Quick. Shallow.

Yuuri was a bundle of nerves. Anxious and scared but mostly *eager*. He reached out with almost-shaking hands. Touched hips. Soft, smooth, skin half-covered by stiff denim.
Wolfram let out a breath against him and Yuuri couldn't help but follow it to the source, kissing him. Soft. Just a brush of lips.

Yuuri sighed, or at least it would have been a sigh if it didn't catch on his voice. A high, pitiful, sound that was somehow worth the embarrassment when Wolfram's hands-- warm hands-- came to rest on his shoulders. Even though the fabric of his robe was so soft and so thin it wasn't enough. Wolfram wasn't really touching him and so Yuuri moved forward, pulled Wolfram closer, kissed him harder. Open mouths. Tongues. More. Wet. Yuuri tugged on Wolfram's hipbones until they were touching there and yes.

_God._

Wolfram's hands tightened on him too, bunching fabric. Pulling him closer. Rubbing. _Rubbing._

At this rate Yuuri didn't know how he was ever going to last. And he hadn't even gotten Wolfram out of his pants!

Yuuri forced himself to release his hold on Wolfram's perfect hips. To pull away just enough to undo the button-- zipper--

Wolfram _groaned._ Bucked his hips and tugged the robe off of Yuuri's shoulders, baring his chest and arms down to the elbows and restricting his movement until Yuuri shrugged it away completely, fabric pooling with a rustle at his feet. He shivered. Would have felt self conscious if there had been room for anything in his mind but the ache to get Wolfram as bare as he was. Wolfram who was _touching_ him with warm hands. Gripping his arms and making small noises into his mouth while Yuuri tugged at the now infuriating jeans.

Wolfram was so-- Yuuri didn't think he would ever be able to get enough. He couldn't-- He couldn't--

He couldn't get Wolfram's pants off!

Yuuri growled, cursing tight fabric. Pushing Wolfram back-- onto the bed because maybe if he could just get Wolfram to lie down he would be able to get the blasted things _off_!

Wolfram hit the bed with a bounce. Green eyes wild and wanting. Lips so very red.

Yuuri grabbed Wolfram's jeans at the ankles and _pulled,_ surprised when Wolfram yelped and grabbed onto the coverlet, almost bringing it with him entirely as Yuuri's enthusiastic yank pulled Wolfram as much as it did his pants. They barely moved. Barely. More hips. Blond hair. The very base of hard cock.

Not nearly enough.

Yuuri pulled again and this time Wolfram twisted, holding himself in place as Yuuri gave the pants a few good yanks until they were off. Thrown halfway across the room with a cry of victory.

Wolfram was laughing, he realized, somewhat belatedly. Yuuri would have laughed too-- but it was hard with Wolfram's backside exposed the way it was. Yuuri had appreciated Wolfram's butt before, but he had never been given the chance to properly enjoy it.

Until now.

Yuuri pounced. Pinning Wolfram to the bed by sitting on his legs. Wolfram shifted, turning just enough to look at him. Dark green eyes.
At first Yuuri barely touched him, running just the very tips of his fingers down Wolfram's back, starting between his shoulder blades. There were two dips just above the curve of rear, perfect for his thumbs. Wolfram looked away then, the back of his neck-- his ears-- splotching red, and shifted as much as he could with Yuuri still on top of him.

Beautiful.

Wolfram's skin was so smooth. Hot and firm beneath his fingers. Yuuri could feel his blood pounding through his veins-- his cock-- so hard it made him dizzy. Yuuri moved his hands down slowly. Touching. Feeling the other boy hold his breath when Yuuri squeezed. Both his hands full of supple flesh.

And suddenly Yuuri's entire world had contracted. Focused on the way flesh moved in his hands. The darkened head of his own cock. The heat of Wolfram's body against him. His legs. His balls. Yuuri leaned forward. Shuddered as he pressed himself into the groove between Wolfram's cheeks. Wolfram made a noise then, too-- but it was far away from the way flesh moved in Yuuri's hands-- his cock pressed between hot, soft, flesh.

Yuuri had been inside of Wolfram before. Inside. His cock had been so hot. Engulfed. It had been so impossibly good. And this was good too but Yuuri knew-- knew that this feeling was only an imitation of something more. Something greater that they both could share. He wanted to share this with Wolfram. To make him beg and moan and writhe beneath him. To fill Wolfram with himself. Fill him up so there would never be room for anyone else inside him. Inside this perfect body. This perfect...

"Wolf..." he breathed, falling forward. Relinquishing his hold on the right side of Wolfram's ass to keep himself from collapsing on the other boy completely. Wolfram squirmed. Shifted. There was so much touching that Yuuri could hardly breathe. His chest against Wolfram's back. His cock, still buried in the crease between Wolfram's cheeks. So good. Yuuri rocked against it. Slick. More. More.

Wolfram was calling his name. Begging. Wanting him. Spreading his legs and squirming in a way that was close to a struggle but so impossible to resist that Yuuri pushed forward harder. And Yes. Tight. Wolfram calling his name. Tight. Almost painful. Yuuri bit down on Wolfram's shoulder and almost sobbed.

But something wasn't quite right. Once the bliss-- the shock-- of finally being inside of Wolfram began to fall away Yuuri couldn't believe how tight it was. Almost-- Almost--

Painful.

It was so tight it hurt. So much tighter than it had been before.

"Yuuri!" Wolfram was growling at him. "Wimp!" And worst of all: "Stop."

Suddenly everything was wrong. So very wrong. The room was out of air and his cock hurt so much-- was somewhere so tight he wasn't even sure he could get out again. But he could. Yuuri struggled-- shaking arms-- shaking-- pulled back.

And then there was blood.

********

********
Wolfram sighed.

The wimp really could be such a wimp at times.

"Will you stop that!?” he said again, crossing his arms as he watched his husband curl into an even smaller ball on the far corner of the bed. Really, Wolfram had felt worse before and there had hardly been any blood at all. The wimp was making such a fuss over nothing. It had been nearly ten minutes and he still hadn't managed to calm himself. "I've already told you I'm fine."

"How can anything ever be 'fine' again?” Yuuri moaned. "I raped you."

"You didn't rape me!” Wolfram snapped. "I told you, I just didn't have time to--"

"You were bleeding,” Yuuri sobbed. "I hurt you."

Again, Wolfram sighed. "Hardly."

"I must have hurt you last time, too!” Yuuri looked at him with big wet eyes, rocking a little as he spoke. "I'm so sorry. So sorry, Wolfram. I didn't know--"

"Yuuri!” he all but yelled. "Shut up and listen!” Then he stood, walking around the bed to get closer to the wimp. Since the Incident Wolfram had slipped into the wimp's discarded robe because it was just too awkward to walk around naked given his husband's distress. The last few times he had tried to comfort him Yuuri had scrambled away, but this time his husband only bit his lip and sniffled, fingernails digging into his arms where they were circled around his knees.

Wolfram took a calming breath and sat down next to him. "Yuuri,” he tried, softer this time. "Stop this. I'm fine--"

"Only because I healed you with magic--"

"Even without that... Riding a horse tomorrow might have been uncomfortable, yes. But you didn't do anything serious. I never would have let you. You're blowing this way out of proportion... Hey.” He cupped Yuuri's chin, making sure the wimp couldn't look away. "I'm fine.” Then Wolfram kissed him. Soft and quick and much too short. After he pulled away he rubbed at the lingering wet on Yuuri's cheek with a thumb and gave the wimp a smile. "It's my fault anyway, for not telling you what I did last time to...” he blushed, forcing himself to hold his husband's gaze. "...prepare."

Yuuri shook his head. "But I-- I should have known."

"I'm glad you didn't... Well in a way, at least.” Wolfram gave him another quick kiss. "I'm glad you're only mine. That you've only ever been mine. If you knew about things like that... Well, I can be somewhat jealous at times..."

"At times?" Yuuri managed a small smile, but as quick as it appeared it was gone. "Wolfram... How did you... I mean... You knew how to-- to do that kind of thing. And not only that, you're so-- You're so good... I know-- I know I must seem wimpy and inexperienced but--"

"Yuuri,” Wolfram interrupted, letting go of his husband's chin so he could cross his arms and huff. "I'm hardly 'experienced' either. I'm simply educated. It's no wonder something like this happened with the sort of things they teach you on Earth."

For a while Yuuri was silent. "Really?” he asked at last. "You've never... with anyone else?"

Wolfram had to look away. Shame tightened in his throat. Cold and sharp and unforgiving.
"Yuuri..."

"Don't." Yuuri shifted from his curled position to sit beside him on the bed. "Wolfram, you're--You've had decades longer to-- to..." he stopped. "And everyone must have wanted you." A hand came up to touch his hair. "How could they not?"

Wolfram couldn't help but lean into Yuuri's touch. "I'm sorry," he breathed, hating how broken his voice sounded.

"Don't," Yuuri said again, hand tightening in Wolfram's hair. "It would have been stranger if you had never..."

Wolfram was gripping the sheets so hard his knuckles hurt. "I shouldn't have let you think otherwise. I shouldn't have ever let you think I wasn't..."

He could feel Yuuri shifting beside him but Wolfram couldn't bring himself to look. "Who?" Yuuri whispered, voice tight, fingers tightening further. Pulling his hair. "Wolf..."

"Elizabeth." Wolfram let out a ragged breath, licking his lips. "We were only children... Elizabeth... She thought we were to be married anyway and-- I wasn't expecting it."

"I thought... You told me you had never had sex with a woman--"

"Elizabeth and I never had sex!" Wolfram gasped, scandalized. "She kissed me in the kitchens!"

Yuuri was looking at him like he had grown another head. "Elizabeth kissed you in the kitchens when you were little and you... You made it sound like..." He shook his head. "And you say Earth is weird."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Wolfram narrowed his eyes. "Have you--"

"No!" Yuuri interrupted quickly. "You're the only one I've ever kissed... And the only one I've ever wanted to kiss..." Then he swallowed, loud enough that Wolfram could hear it. "Sara... Sara kissed me but I never wanted it. I promise. Wolf, you have to believe me..."

Wolfram sighed. Nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Beside him Yuuri shook his head. "Anyway, there's nothing to worry about. And besides, you were kissed by Elizabeth so now we're even."

Again, Wolfram couldn't bring himself to look his husband in the eyes.

"Wolf?"

He stood. Needing to move. To pace. Something. "Elizabeth isn't the only..." he sighed. Hating this moment. This moment that he had known he would have to face ever since Yuuri had proposed to him the second time. "I was in my Seventies... Not that it's an excuse but..."

"That guy..." Yuuri said for him, making Wolfram pause. "Marques. It was Marques, right? What happened? I mean... Why would he ever want to let you get away?"

Wolfram made a frustrated noise and continued his pacing. "It's not as if we were courting. I hadn't even really considered that anything could happen until the night it did. And after that he was lucky to be more than a scorch-mark on the floor."

"What?" Yuuri asked. "What happened?" There was fear in his voice. Fear and just enough anger
"What do you think happened, Wimp?" he snapped. "Marques thought what everyone else thought. That I was... 'loose as Mother'!" Wolfram knew that he should calm down, but the more he said the angrier he became. "I was too stupid-- I thought that he was my friend. That he knew all those things the servants-- that everyone whispered were lies. So when he kissed me I thought he wanted me. And when he used his mouth... It was the first time I had ever... that anyone had ever... And of course I--" Wolfram kicked over one of the room's few chairs, sending it clattering in the direction of the wardrobe. "But then he tried to-- to fuck me. Thought I would be as loose and willing as the whole castle thought I was!" Wolfram was almost out of breath, arms shaking where they were fists at his side. It took all his willpower not to set anything in the room on fire. "And that's how I know-- That what just happened wasn't so terrible, Wimp. Because I know what it feels like when it is." His back was to the bed. To Yuuri. "And that is why I never should have allowed myself to touch you... why I--"


"And there's more." Now that Wolfram had started he couldn't seem to stop. "Marques was there when those bastards took me. In the dark. He was there but I thought-- Because of the bread I thought he was you. I don't remember everything that happened. It's possible that all of them used me. I don't think they did but I don't know." His face was so wet. When had he started to cry? To sob. He had promised himself-- promised he would never let Yuuri see him like this-- never broken-- nothing like he had been in the dark.

If Yuuri hadn't been holding him he would have collapsed.


Wolfram didn't know how it happened, but the next time he was able to feel anything but burning humiliation he was lying with Yuuri on the bed. Kissing him. Losing himself in Yuuri's mouth. In the feeling of Yuuri's skin beneath his fingers.

Simple. Good.

Kissing Yuuri was so much easier-- So much better than thinking about what he had just done. Said. Yuuri was kissing him. Yuuri wanted him. Yuuri had said he loved him. Wolfram didn't think he would ever be able to hear Yuuri say it enough.

Yuuri's mouth was so warm, and even though each kiss was soft and short Wolfram could feel his body temperature begin to rise. Blood rushing lower. Leaving him light headed as Yuuri clung to him. Breathed into his mouth. Ran his tongue along the inside of Wolfram's lips until one of them moaned and Wolfram had to force himself to pull away-- only an inch-- only enough for Yuuri's face to come into focus, black lashes fluttering open.

"It's been a long day," Wolfram heard himself whisper, voice still raw, looking at Yuuri's face because if he looked anywhere else he would be reminded that there was nothing covering the wimp but sweat. "You must be tired."

Yuuri blinked at him. Black eyes. Swollen lips. Kissable lips. Yuuri was warm. So warm that Wolfram could feel it even though they were hardly touching, curled to face each other the way they were. Knees and lips. "But..." Yuuri shifted. Closer. "But it's our wedding night... And... and I finally get you." He pouted. "Unless, unless you're too tired-- Which is fine. I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to."
Wolfram kissed him, just once to shut him up. "Of course I want to. I just wasn't sure you would want to after--"

"Wimp." It was Yuuri's turn to interrupt. To kiss him into silence. "Of course I want to. It's just... Well... After what I did... I don't think I could... I'd be too afraid of hurting you." Yuuri covered Wolfram's mouth with a finger. "I thought... I was thinking, that is. There's something else."

"Mmh?" Wolfram had to smirk at Yuuri's blush. "Is there?" Then he shifted-- Caught the wimp's finger in his mouth and drew it in, loving the little whimper he got when he sucked it softly and swirled his tongue--

"Guh." Yuuri drew away his finger. "I mean... I wanted-- If you wanted, that is. I haven't... prepared. But I could-- if you wanted... I mean..." Yuuri was so red. "You could... inside me..."

"What?!" Wolfram couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Yuuri--"

Yuuri kissed him then pulled away, just enough to whisper, "Please." Another kiss. "This way... This way tonight can be something new for both of us..."

He could barely believe it. He had wanted for so long. Something he had assumed Yuuri would never-- but here he was-- asking-- begging. Wolfram kissed him. Hard. Gods, he was so hard already at just the thought of-- "Yuuri," he said again, just because he liked the way it felt in his mouth. The way Yuuri shuddered when he said it against his lips.

Wolfram twisted, moving on top of his wimp, covering him with his body. Pressing down. The robe must have been untied somewhere along the way and chest met chest. Cock met cock. Dark silk surrounded them both while Wolfram kissed him, not entirely knowing how to stop.

Yuuri whimpered. Pulled at the fabric on his back. "Off--" he panted, "off".

Wolfram obeyed,shrugging his way out of the robe and using the motion as an excuse to move his kisses down Yuuri's neck. To keep his cock from touching skin-- anything that would take away his focus from Yuuri.

He had to make this good. Better than anything so that he would be allowed to do it again. So that Yuuri would beg him to do it again and again.

Yuuri tasted so good. Heat and salt. Wolfram loved the sound of his shallow breathing. The way his voice would catch when Wolfram put his mouth on certain places. His tongue. His teeth. Yuuri had brought up both his arms to hide his face-- blushing-- small panting breaths while Wolfram moved his kisses lower.

Collar bone. Chest. Wolfram held Yuuri. One hand on either side of his ribcage-- kept him from getting away-- Not that Yuuri was trying to but gods Wolfram was sure he would die if Yuuri changed his mind. It felt good to hold Yuuri this way. Secure.

Eventually Wolfram moved his attention lower. Kissing everything he could. It was too much of a temptation not to trail his lips against a nipple... Rubbing the other with his thumb until it tightened and Yuuri made a noise, arching his back, inviting Wolfram to suck the nub against his mouth until it hardened too. Wolfram hadn't expected Yuuri to be so sensitive, but he made note of it before sliding his mouth down over Yuuri's stomach. Sliding his hands down to hold Yuuri at the hips. Wolfram rubbed his nose against the place where smooth skin became coarse hair and the wet tip of Yuuri's erection brushed against his throat.

Yuuri was panting. Spreading his legs. Wolfram touched him reverently, holding apart his thighs,

Lower.

Wolfram leaned back, just enough to find a pillow-- the bottle of oil that had been left beneath. He stuffed the pillow under Yuuri's hips, raising them for better access. Yuuri still had his eyes covered with one of his arms but Wolfram could still see his mouth. Open. A sliver of tongue. Wolfram suppressed the urge to taste that mouth again, pressing his lips to a shaking thigh instead. Sucking for just a moment before moving to slide his tongue against damp cock.

Yuuri twitched against his mouth and Wolfram slid his tongue up, pressing against the slit-- barely leaking-- before moving down to tease the skin below the base. Yuuri sucked in air when Wolfram cupped his sack-- feeling how tight, how drawn his balls were-- opening his mouth to gently suck. Yuuri squeaked and mumbled something, spreading his legs wider. Inviting.

Wolfram's cock throbbed. Seeing Yuuri like this-- tasting him-- was almost too much. He could feel Yuuri tense then-- try to close his legs-- as he moved his tongue lower. Pushed Yuuri's hips farther up with one hand while the other strayed to Yuuri's cock. Distracting him from any anxiety he might have over what was to come.

At first Wolfram only slid his tongue-- flat along the crease-- breathed hot air onto hotter skin. Wolfram knew he was shaking. He only hoped that Yuuri was shaking more and wouldn't notice his nerves. With the exception of a few half-forgotten memories that had never been his own, Wolfram was entirely inexperienced at this. He had read things, to be sure, but-- The sight of Yuuri spread before him. The smell of sex and sweat and wimp. Wolfram couldn't think of anything but how much he wanted to be inside this perfect body that somehow fate had laid bare before him.

Wolfram let go of Yuuri's cock-- trailed his hands along smooth thighs. Spread him wider-- Watched as muscles-- cock-- twitched.

He swallowed.

Yuuri's breathing had all but stopped and he was so tense. Shaking. Scared. Wolfram would have to put an end to that. Slowly he lowered his mouth. Slid his tongue against sensitive flesh-- zeroing in-- teasing the outside of Yuuri's hole until he started to squirm. Silently rocking his hips. Silently begging for more.

And then Wolfram pressed his tongue forward. In. Inside of Yuuri as far as it would go. Yuuri squeaked. Mumbled something as Wolfram moaned at the intimacy of the moment.

That was when Yuuri started to pant again. Each breath catching his voice. A sound that only made Wolfram wish he could get his tongue farther into the tight ring of muscle that spasmed against his touch.

He started slowly. Fucking Yuuri with his tongue before pulling away to blow cool air. To watch that sensitive hole twitch for him. Shining with his spit. Wolfram traced the outside edge with a finger-- then pushed-- slipped inside to the first knuckle more easily than he would have thought.

Wolfram had to bite back another moan. His cock would be in there soon. It was so easy to picture it-- to feel it in his mind. The way the tip would look as it disappeared inside. The way Yuuri's flesh would tense around him-- pull him in and push him back out the way it was trying to do with his finger. At this point Wolfram didn't think he would even need to be all the way inside of him to come. He could just put in the head of his cock. Watch Yuuri's body pull him in and push him out--
feel it the way he could feel the liquid dripping from his slit now. Sticking to his thigh.

He had to do this right. He had to prepare Yuuri right so as not to hurt him.

Wolfram lowered his mouth again. Traced the edge where his finger disappeared with his tongue. Using spit-- more pressure-- to put his finger all the way in. Trying in vain to get his tongue in there as well. Eventually, he pulled away his finger--using his hands to search blindly for the bottle of oil he knew was nearby while pushed his tongue into the newly stretched hole. Losing himself in Yuuri's tiny cries as his own cock throbbed painfully at being so long ignored.

Once his fingers were slick with oil, Wolfram pulled away and pressed two gently-- slowly--into Yuuri. Watching in fascination as they vanished into the heat of his body. Wolfram twisted his wrist-- hooked his fingers-- searching for the place that would--

Yuuri bucked his hips. Swallowed a noise as he bit his bottom lip.

Wolfram smirked and rubbed against that spot, watching Yuuri as he struggled to keep silent. Watching his fingers-- Yuuri's hole twitch around them. Watching Yuuri's cock jerk-- tug a fallen line of liquid that had landed on his stomach.

Slowly-- carefully-- Wolfram tried to spread his fingers. Leaning closer to try to see inside-- put his tongue into the space between his fingers and--

"Wolf!" Yuuri rocked his hips-- bucking forward. "Ah!"

Wolfram only rubbed that spot faster. Loving the increasing volume of Yuuri's cries. He could do this forever. He could listen to Yuuri-- feel him-- taste him--

"Please!" Yuuri was saying, voice raw-- breaking-- between breaths. "I-- Don't!"

Wolfram slid his tongue up-- over balls-- higher-- needing to suck the excess liquid from the head of Yuuri's cock while Yuuri fucked himself on his fingers and keened.

For a moment Wolfram thought he was only tasting precome but then there was more. Yuuri's cock was jerking-- filling his mouth with come as he tried to arch his back-- thwarted by his almost bent in half position but coming hard into Wolfram's mouth.

********
********

Yuuri had forgotten how to breathe.

Wolfram had-- Wolfram had-- Wolfram's mouth was still-- his fingers--

"Ngh," he managed. Then, "guh," when Wolfram drew away his mouth with one last suck and made a face-- probably in spite of himself-- as he swallowed.

"Sorry," Wolfram breathed, removing his fingers, leaving Yuuri altogether more empty than he had ever felt. "I should have noticed you were close."

"What?" Wolfram wasn't making any sense. "Why sorry?" He took a moment to catch his breath. "That was..." Yuuri licked his lips. "Wow."

Wolfram smirked at him. A look that made him shiver. Yuuri reached out, drawing him up, holding him in place at the waist with still-shaking thighs. Wolfram nuzzled his face into the crook
of Yuuri's neck and sighed.

Yuuri was happy and full of tingly sleep feelings but he pouted anyway-- nudging at Wolfram's hair. "Kiss," he explained.

Wolfram kissed his neck.

Yuuri made a disgruntled sound and pouted harder. He knew that Wolfram was probably reluctant to kiss him after where his mouth had been but Yuuri didn't care. Wolfram had-- had done 

Kissing him afterward seemed like such a small thing by comparison.

At first Yuuri had been nervous. Terrified. Despite all his recent bathing it was hardly the cleanest place-- It didn't make any sense that Wolfram would put his mouth there. But after Yuuri's earlier mistake he wasn't about to do or say anything to potentially ruin the mood and it had been a good thing too, because otherwise he might never have known... He didn't think-- He had never thought that there could feel so good but Wolfram had proven him wrong.

Very wrong.

The things that Wolfram had done with his mouth. His fingers... The place that Wolfram had touched inside of him still felt strange. Hot. Tentatively Yuuri clenched but it was no good. Not enough. He had been so relieved when Wolfram had finally touched his cock. Let him come. Yuuri had no idea what he would have done otherwise.

Eventually Yuuri was able to get Wolfram to move enough so that he could kiss him. Soft and slow at first and then deeper. Yuuri hummed in pleasure when Wolfram slipped his tongue into his mouth. Relieved that there was no other taste but sweat and Wolfram and just a hint of come. Wolfram was still so hard-- pressing against his stomach. So hot between them. Wet. Yuuri squirmed, trying to somehow touch him. To move so that Wolfram would realize that it didn't matter that Yuuri had already come. That it was still okay to-- to do what they had agreed to do before.

"Yuuri," Wolfram breathed against his lips, making his squirm. "You don't have to--"

"Want to," he interrupted. "Want you."

For a few heartwrenching moments Wolfram only looked at him. Looked at him like there was nothing he wanted more. Red lips. Eyes dark. Barely green they were so dark.

"Alright," Wolfram said at last, "here..." Then he pulled away, sitting up so that they were no longer pressed together. Yuuri pouted and freed Wolfram from his leg-grip somewhat reluctantly. "It will be better if you can have more control..." Wolfram explained as he piled pillows against the headboard. "Come here."

Yuuri obeyed at once, letting Wolfram maneuver him until he was in his lap. Facing him. His back flush against the pillow-covered headboard. It didn't take Yuuri long to figure out what Wolfram had meant about having more control. This way-- even though it would be an awkward sort of squat-- he could use Wolfram's shoulders for balance. To lower himself at his own pace. And with all the pillows he wouldn't have to worry about falling backwards. Would have another source of potential leverage.

The way Wolfram was sitting, legs folded in front, Yuuri sitting in the sort of bowl they formed-- it would be hard for him to thrust up suddenly. Wolfram's shoulders were slick with sweat where Yuuri held him and his breath was ragged on Yuuri's neck. "You don't have to," he said again,
though his grip only tightened on Yuuri's waist.

"I know," Yuuri shuddered. Nervous again as he looked down between them to where Wolfram's cock was pressing against his own-- still hard even after he had come. Next to him Wolfram seemed bigger than ever. Thicker. More pink than his own and shining slightly even though he had yet to coat himself with oil.

Yuuri reached for the bottle and poured a stream onto the tip of Wolfram's cock. Making him shiver. Hold him tighter. Wolfram wasn't even inside him yet and already he loved how close Wolfram was to losing control. To losing control because of him.

It was Yuuri's turn to smirk, a mask of confidence as he slowly rose, looking down at Wolfram's hair. Gold curls in the light. Wolfram made a small sound when the head of his erection finally slid under Yuuri's balls-- slipping against his crack as Yuuri tried to lower himself onto it and failed. But then Yuuri arched his back-- tried once more and felt the tip of Wolfram's cock catch on the loosened rim of his hole and he pushed.

Both of them gasped.

Yuuri was barely... he probably hadn't even gotten the head of Wolfram's cock in him and already it seemed impossible. Burning. Stretching.

Wolfram let go of his waist at once-- grabbed the headboard behind Yuuri's back and shuddered. "Oh..." he breathed. Then bit his lip.

It was enough motivation for Yuuri to lower himself further. Legs shaking. Putting close to all his weight on Wolfram's solid shoulders. If Wolfram could try so hard not to hurt him-- not to pull him down completely-- Yuuri couldn't give up. When the thickest part of Wolfram's cock was finally through the tightest part of him, Yuuri slipped down farther than he meant to and squeaked. Pulled back up. Then down. It was easier like this, he discovered, this rocking instead of all at once. Each time Yuuri lowered himself he went down a little farther-- took in more of Wolfram's cock. Bit by bit.

Wolfram was breathing in time with Yuuri's movement, head bowed. Yuuri could see the muscles in his arms-- his back and shoulders-- shaking-- Wolfram was gripping the headboard so hard. Was trying so hard to keep in control of himself. Yuuri got so lost in watching Wolfram that when he was finally down enough for his balls to brush at the hair at the base of Wolfram's cock it took him by surprise.

And then Wolfram was in him. Yuuri let his legs relax. Let his body fall that last half-inch and let Wolfram take the bulk of his weight. Wolfram moaned. Held him again. A tight hug that brought their fronts together-- his own erection pressed into the smooth skin of Wolfram's stomach. Yuuri realized his cock was softer now though far from flaccid. He did his best not to tremble-- not to let the tears stinging in his eyes to fall. He held Wolfram back. Breath shallow. Waited for the burning of his heartbeat where he was stretched so far to fade.

It took less time than Yuuri had expected. Wolfram's body was so hot. So much heat inside of him. Wolfram's face was pressed against his neck. Experimentally Yuuri shifted-- making Wolfram's breath catch-- making Wolfram tilt his head up so that Yuuri could trace those beautifully swollen lips with his tongue. Wolfram whimpered when Yuuri tried to break the kiss. Clinging to him. Kissing him desperately. Clinging to him. And then Yuuri realized his body hardly hurt at all anymore.

Yuuri shifted-- pulled away from the kiss to push himself up-- watch Wolfram's pupils as they
widened further, mouth half-open. Just that look-- how much Wolfram needed him-- was enough to make Yuuri's cock start to fill again.

Once he could feel that Wolfram was about to fall out of him Yuuri lowered himself-- down-- then up. Lips almost touching. Watching Wolfram watching him. Watching the way his body could make Wolfram look. *Feel.*

Watching Wolfram allowed Yuuri to pull away from any discomfort remaining in his body and so when that place-- the heat-- inside him that Wolfram had touched before started to build again it took him by surprise. It was a strange feeling. The more he felt it the less he could identify exactly what it was-- the less he wanted it to stop and the more he wanted-- He tried to shift. Bit his lip. Angle his hips a different way.

Wolfram must have noticed a change in him because that was when he *growled.* Said his name. Twisted them so that Yuuri's back was on the bed-- Wolfram over him-- *Thrusting* inside him over and over again. Letting go of any control he might have had and they were both gasping and grunting and there was a wet sound of skin on skin and Yuuri's entire world was spinning. He cried out when Wolfram's cock brushed *there*-- and every time afterwards when Wolfram seemed to hit it again and again. Rubbing. Rubbing his insides. His cock was fully hard between them. Twitching up sometimes-- brushing Wolfram's stomach-- as Wolfram *thrusted.*

Yuuri was bent in half-- it should have been uncomfortable but it wasn't. It wasn't it wasn't. Wolfram was touching him. Holding him. Words didn't make sense. There was so much heat inside him that Yuuri was sure that his insides were melting. So much heat that it was impossible to know where he stopped and Wolfram began.

He was so close. A different, more frustrating kind of close than he had ever felt. A kind of close he didn't know how to finish. He let go of Wolfram-- tried to move a hand between them. If he could only touch himself he was sure--

Wolfram growled. Grabbing Yuuri's hand and pinning it up behind him against the bed. Yuuri almost sobbed. He rocked his hips. Meeting Wolfram's every thrust. His muscles stung. Almost cramping. But he couldn't stop moving. He couldn't stop moving.

And then Wolfram's mouth was on his nipple--his free hand on the other-- Yuuri's wrist hurt for all of an instant as Wolfram put all his weight onto it but then the nerves in his chest were connecting to the nerves in his groin-- his cock-- to the nerves in *that place* inside him and it was too much.

Wolfram was grunting. Whimpering against his nipple. Thrusting. Yuuri could feel Wolfram's cock moving inside of him and it was too much.

It must have been too much for Wolfram too because Yuuri could feel it when he came. He could feel Wolfram's cock *jerk* and *throb* inside him. Time seemed to stretch. Pulling feelings from his body that he couldn't define and Wolfram was shouting words and it was too much.

Too much.

His cock twitched. Wet. Hot-- His own come on his stomach-- chest-- *Oh God* he hadn't even touched his cock and his body was melting. So much heat. So dark.

*Dark.*

When Yuuri was able to think again-- to see-- he was on his back on the bed-- a worried, sweaty, Wolfram hovering over him.
Yuuri grinned. Pulled Wolfram down into a sleepy kiss, sure that there was no way anything could ever be better than this, and wondered how soon both of them would be ready to do it again.

*******

*******
Whispers from the Rye: Chapter 7

********

********

Shou Shimeron
Capital Ring
The Following Day

********

Camilio woke with a start as his neck began to cramp, blinking at the dawn light as it streamed through the dusty glass windows as he waited for his eyes to focus. The headache from the night before had lingered, he noted with a frown as he rubbed his neck and shoulder in an attempt to relieve the cramping. He really did need to learn not to sleep on the books. God forbid he drool on one in his sleep. He doubted that Fingers would take too kindly to that.

At the thought of the archives' crone of a maintainer Camilio couldn't help but sit up straighter as he scanned the room for her. Thankfully, the only things in sight were books and more books. No sign of the old woman.

Camilio sighed and tried to force himself to relax. His heart felt like it was beating too fast for his body. It was always like this. Waiting for a summons that never came.

Since his king had ordered him to find a solution to the impending Mazoku threat, Camilio had been confined to the libraries atop the God Tower. But that had been weeks ago. Since then Camilio had gone through nearly half of the historical and religious volumes the library possessed and had come close to decoding the rest. The numbers had always come to him so easily. As easily as they did to all the Pure. Reading-- finding the letters the numbers hid-- was the only time that Camilio was ever able to relax.

Upon his arrival to the sacred library he had been shocked at the number of books. So few, for all the knowledge the leaders of the clergy had claimed to possess. Not that any of that knowledge had served them in the end.

They still hadn't washed the blood from the floor when he had been led through the main chamber. Camilio could feel the room begin to spin at the thought and he lowered his head back to the desk and tried to lose himself in the simple task of breathing.

He couldn't think about that. He couldn't think about Cleric Laurel, who had taught him throughout his apprenticeship, or Cleric Simon, who had always scolded him for smiling too much during his sermons.

And Rebecka. The children.

He had only been permitted to send a brief note-- explaining his absence as a duty to the crown. Camilio wondered how they were managing without him. He had faith in Rebecka's ability to put on a brave face for the sake of the children, but he knew his wife. She would be worried by now, though not nearly so worried as him.

Camilio was sorely tempted to risk a visit to his home. It wasn't as if he was being guarded at all times, though sometimes he had his suspicions about Fingers. But if, as Camilio sometimes
allowed himself to hope, he had been forgotten about, he didn't want to risk reminding anyone where he was-- or draw attention to the fact that his family was so important to him. He would never be able to forgive himself if they were punished for his failure.

In all his years Camilio had never been witness to so much violence-- so much terror-- as he had these last few months. The conditions in the outer circle had never been exactly comforting, but this-- Camilio was beginning to have more and more doubts concerning his king's ability to rule.

Treason.

Heresy.

Camilio sat up straight once more. Jumped and staggered from his chair when he saw Fingers hovering over him. Disapproval etched deep into her wrinkled face as if she had read his mind.

Then she laughed. Mouth opening to produce a terrible terrifying sound that only emphasized her four teeth. The absence of a tongue.

Camilio didn't know why it had been removed or who had done it, but he suspected it had some connection to the fact that the final joint of all her fingers were missing. Fingers. It was the first thing he had noticed about her. It only made it worse that she was almost always tapping them against things. Mostly the top of the crooked wooden cane she used to hobble around the God Tower. Eerily silent.

Except for the tapping.

It always drew his gaze to the scarred flesh and the curve of bone too close to skin. The places where her nails had tried to grow anew.

Fingers was tapping them now, since she had finished her laugh, and Camilio could feel the color rush to his cheeks and he made a show of straightening his robes. She was just a poor old woman, Camilio tried to remind himself. It was cruel to fear her like he did. To call her "Fingers" even if it was within the privacy of his own mind.

"Good morning," he said and tried to smile.

Fingers shook her head at him like a disappointed mother and gave him a small shove with the end of her cane in the direction of the door. Outside the library there was a small entry chamber, framed on either side by two small doors which hid two equally small rooms. The one to the left was his and Camilio's stomach grumbled eagerly when he saw the small breakfast tray the old woman had left outside, probably before her search for him brought her to the library.

This time the smile came easily. "Thank you. You don't have to bring me breakfast, you know. I'm perfectly capable."

Fingers shook her head again and her fingers tap tap tapped the top of her cane. Then she turned and disappeared within her own room.

Camilio retrieved his tray from the table by the door and went into his room to eat. Once he rearranged the books taking up the surface of his modest desk he set down his toasted dark bread bacon sandwich and mug of warm roggen and began to eat, eyes trailing across a nearby scroll all the while.

It wasn't as though his stay in the God Tower had taught him nothing, it was just that none of the things that he had learned offered any hint of a solution to the kingdom's problems, the king's
problems, or his own. Most of the books were simply lists. Family records of the Pure back to their earliest known ancestor. It had only been in the past three hundred years that the Pure had been recognized as God’s chosen people. Three hundred years since the Age of Heroes and the creation of the system under which their kingdom had since flourished. God had blessed the crop long before that, of course, but it had taken them time to realize their gift for what it was.

Camilio finished the last of his breakfast and made his way back to the library. The colored sunlight streaming in from the upper windows was far more... cheering than the sliver of light his room’s arrow slit provided. Made him feel like less of a prisoner.

He sighed. There had been a time when he had dreamed of being allowed into this place. To take his place among his fellows and preach God’s truth to all. To spend his time atop the tower reading vast tomes and discovering ancient secrets that would help him answer all that needed answering.

Camilio shook his head and tried to lose himself in the rows of numbers as they twisted into words.

This time, when the shadow fell over his reading Camilio managed not to jump. It was uncanny how quietly that woman moved. Camilio had to prepare himself to look up. It was hardly kind to appear so frightened of her all the time. Besides the missing tongue and fingertips she was merely old.

When Camilio looked up from his book the king's favored guard was towering over him.

"You will help him."

Camilio could only nod before the larger man yanked him to his feet and marched him down the God Tower. They cleaned the floors, Camilio noted through his daze as he was led through the main chamber and then across the empty courtyard to the shining white base of the king’s central tower.

He was out of breath, sweating, by the time they reached the top.

"You will help him," Reyes said again, face a mask of stone. "And you will hold your tongue. Cleric."

That was all the explanation he was given before Reyes led him into the king's private chambers.

It was dark.

Camilio hovered by the door while the guard strode into the room and opened the curtains part way. The bed-- the king-- whimpered and pulled the sheets up to hide from the light. Reyes was by the bed in a few quiet steps, stroking blanket-covered limbs and whispering words beyond duty.

Camilio lowered his eyes. Giving the intimate moment the privacy it was due. He didn't look up until--

"Cleric." A harsh whisper.

He approached the bed.

The pair had shifted. The king was curled, head in his guards lap. Clearly naked beneath sheets that clung to damp skin below the waist. The guard's hand stroked long silver hair.

The king's eyes-- pupils blown wide-- spoke volumes.
"How long?" Camilio asked carefully, licking his lips.

Their king giggled-- calming when Reyes placed a large hand over his ear.

"Sound tickles today," the guard explained in a whisper, other hand tightening possessively on the king's waist. "Just over a week."

"A week!" he gasped. "How was he even able to ingest more in this state?" Camilio eyed the black crumbs on the bedside table. Crushed cookies in the rug.

"He's my king." Reyes answered softly, sadly. Hand tightening in silver hair.

Camilio's mind was rapidly filling in the gaps. "You followed orders," he breathed, seeing the pain in the guard's eyes and knowing it was true.

"Can you help him or can't you?" This time the guard's voice broke in his whisper loud enough that the king laughed-- squirmed on the bed.

Camilio nodded and retreated toward the door. He ignored the way the king clung to his guard, having to be kissed and coddled like a child until he relented to being left alone on the bed. Their king. The one that God had chosen to rule them all.

"Well?" Reyes asked, eyes steel, once they were alone in the hallway outside the king's chambers. Camilio could only guess that the other guards and servants had been sent away to prevent the king from being seen in such a state.

Camilio licked his lips before speaking. "Don't give him any more--"

"-- He's the king. I have to--"

"Follow orders, yes. But don't let the kitchens add any of the blessing. Have them replace it with something. His Majesty is too far gone to taste the difference." Camilio shook his head. "If he is thirsty give him milk, not water. At least for the next two nights... Once he is himself again he will likely be able to realize what has happened. He should realize that it best to lower his intake."

Reyes looked unconvinced, but remained silent.

"How did this happen?" Camilio heard himself ask, even though it was not his place.

"Not long after you left the last time," Reyes answered stiffly. "The blessing helps him think, and he's so worried now that the Mazoku king has married the one from Belefield. He-- His Majesty did so much to earn the Mazoku king's favor. To protect us all. It means nothing after this. The one from Belefield will convince the Mazoku to go to war. There are too many and they are too strong," he grimaced. "I cannot protect him. If that were to happen I..."

Camilio sighed. "We will face that storm if it comes. For now it is beyond the horizon and the first thing we must do is help our king."

After a silence, the guard nodded.

*******
*******
Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
One Week Later
Anissina was moments away from finishing her latest invention when something rubbed against her leg, making her jump and brush the finely tuned mechanism with the end of her tool. The machine sputtered. Puffed up smoke. And died.

The cat brushed against her leg again and let out a needy 'Meh'.

It was impossible to be angry at something so endearingly cute and so Anissina sighed and picked up the tiny creature. It rumbled happily at the attention and proceeded to shed on the white collar of her work blouse. Another heavy sigh and she headed over to the corner that held her plush Thinking Chair where the cat settled on her lap and released handfuls of black fur every time she stroked it. She had just begun to devise a vacuum device to deal with the abundance of unwanted fur when the cat's owner rushed into her lab looking worried.

"Your creature is fine, Greta," Anissina assured with a grin.

Greta smiled and came over to sit on the rug beside her feet, scratching Wolri between his ears until the volume of his rumbling increased. A clear manipulation of people, Anissina decided. There was no other reason for a cat to make that sound.

"He likes you," Greta declared happily.

Anissina humphed. "I would like him more if he didn't startle me when I'm working. Someone could have gotten hurt."

"I'm sorry." Greta seemed to shrink. "I feel bad keeping him in my room so much of the time."

"It's fine," she sighed. It felt wrong to chide the girl when she had been moping around the castle for days. "How was your day?" she prompted.

"Boring." Greta worried her lip.

"I take it your fathers spent the morning in their chambers again?"

Greta nodded. "When are they going to go back to... normal? They only came out for lunch today and that was only because Yuuri had to say goodbye to his family and take them home. And now Wolfram will spend all his time catching up on work that he and Yuuri should have been doing and I still won't get to see him." Greta humphed, crossing her arms.

Anissina shifted and Wolri jumped from her lap. Men. She shook her head. They could be so one-minded once their cocks got involved. She wondered if Greta had any idea what her parents were really up to.

"I mean, honestly," Greta continued, frowning. "What's so great about sex anyway? From what the laundry maids say it only seems sticky."

Anissina blinked. Well. Old enough to ask, old enough to know. "It's only sticky when men are involved."

Greta looked at her with wide, horrified eyes. "I don't want to know. Don't explain anything! I'm too young!" She covered her ears. "I don't want to know!"

Anissina couldn't help but laugh. "All right," she said, when Greta had finished her fit. "But if you ever decide you want to know you can always come to me or Gisela at any time."
Greta blushed and stared at the floor. "I'm still... I don't like boys. I don't like anyone like that..." she mumbled.

"Really?" Anissina was hardly convinced. "And here we'd all been planning your wedding next. Hasn't that stable boy proposed?"

Greta turned as red as Anissina's work dress. "No!" she yelled. "Don't--ugh..."

Anissina laughed. "You know I'm only teasing."

Greta gave her a glare. Then she sighed and pouted. "I don't like Wilfrido like that. He's my friend. He's my only friend close to my age. I don't-- I don't want to ruin it. And it will if Wilfrido thinks I like him that way. He won't want to be my friend anymore, I just know it."

Anissina leaned forward to pat the girl on the head. "I'm sure things aren't nearly so dramatic."

Greta was quiet for a while, then she looked up at her with big brown eyes. "When was the first time you... you know. Liked someone, Anissina? How do you even know if you... like someone as more than friends?"

GWendal's hands on knitting needles. Fingers brushing. Heart beating too fast.

Anissina stood. "It's different for everyone." When she didn't say anything else, Greta stood and collected her cat from beneath a workbench.

"I guess," Greta mumbled, clearly disappointed.

Anissina felt bad. She knew she should say more. Advise the girl. But she was suddenly so very angry at herself for feeling like this that it was all she could do to keep her hands from shaking as she tidied her work station. "Come by again tomorrow, Greta," she managed at last. "There's an invention that I think you can help me finish that should be ready by then."

"Really?" Greta's enthusiasm was there, but somehow muted. She still hugged her, though, careful not to squish the cat between them before rushing to the door. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Anissina finished organizing her tools in silence.

* * *

Later that day, Anissina found herself wandering the hallways that coincidentally connected Gwendal's office to his chambers. The usual hunting ground for when she needed his maryoku to fuel her latest scientific triumph. She was only lonely, she reasoned. It had been a while since she'd had a conversation with another adult that wasn't about plagues or politics or potential wars.

Throughout the castle the hallways were bustling with busy servants righting the castle now that the festivities were over and the guests had gone. Anissina watched them scurrying for a while and was about to return to her lab when she spotted Gisela carrying what could only be enough sweets for a dozen men. A dozen men or one very depressed woman.

Anissina made up her mind at once. This would be a much better use of her brilliant presence. She could help Gisela as well as her own sudden and somewhat irrational need for emotional commiseration.

It took some persuading in the end, but eventually Anissina was settled in Gisela's room with a cup of hot tea and a chocolate tart. Gisela's eyes were moist and puffed with feelings and she had
already eaten three cupcakes. They had hardly spoken.

"Greta might ask you about sex," Anissina began, in the spirit of conversation. "It's so hard to tell how old she's supposed to be sometimes."

Gisela poured herself another cup of tea, dropped in three cubes of sugar, and nodded. "She doesn't want to grow up... but no one can help that. It's a common feeling for children who had to grow up too fast." She sighed.

Anissina sipped her tea. It was easy to forget that Gisela had been adopted and almost impossible to imagine Sir Christ as a father. Perhaps it was best not to think to hard on what this woman's childhood was like. She cleared her throat. "It's too bad that Lady Flurin had to go back to Caloria. The two of you--"

Gisela's teacup hit the saucer with a loud clink. "It's not-- I mean... It's not that obvious is it? F-- Flurin doesn't... politically I mean, it's not advantageous to--"

"No. It's not obvious." She took another sip of tea. "If I wasn't quite so brilliant you would have caught me by surprise just now."

Gisela attempted a glare and toyed with her necklace.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't trying to pry..." Anissina sighed and studied the layer of cream covering her tart. Poked it with her spork. "I just..."

Gisela pushed the plate of cupcakes in her direction. "I understand." She sniffed. "Weddings. Only a joy for the ones in love. Well, the ones who are mutually in love... Who get to have a future together..."

Medics. Anissina jabbed her tart and put half of it in her mouth at once to make room for a cupcake on her plate. Irritatingly perceptive. Still, Anissina wasn't about to deny it.

"I wonder... I wonder how long it will last," the other woman murmured. "Sir Belefield seems unlikely to stray from His Majesty, that's to be sure, but His Majesty... Before, I wouldn't have doubted it. Once he decides that something is right-- that he wants it... But if you had heard the things his brother said at the reception..." A sad smile. "Flurin threw a colorful fit."

Anissina raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Gisela nodded into her cup. "It appears that Earth is a stranger place than I could have imagined. Full of double blacks and laws that say who one can and cannot love." The smile returned. "I must admit, it was a bit of fun talking some sense into him, though."

Anissina returned the smile. "I can imagine." Then she poked at the crumbling remnants of her tart. "I hope it does last, though... for the Boy Wolf's sake at least. Someone ought to be doing something right."

Gisela nodded and took another bite of cupcake, eyes suddenly wet. "I suppose."

********

********

Habalouge
Two Days Later

********
Lucien had been waiting so long for orders that he could hardly believe it when they came.

He sighed, re-balancing the weight of the bundle he was carrying over to one of the carts. It was a wonder the men had been patient enough to wait for them. Most were... eager... to avenge the family and friends that they had lost to Shou Shimeron's engineered plague. Thankfully, Lucien had been able to convince them that 'eager' most often led to 'stupid'. At least he hadn't needed to explain where stupid would get them.

In truth, Lucien was still amazed that they had listened to him at all. He might have lived longer than all of the humans he now commanded, but he certainly didn't look it. He had only made corporal to replace Marques when he vanished. Lucien knew he was a capable soldier. He was loyal and good at following orders, but he had never been able to think of himself as a leader. Still didn't, for all that he was.

This camp was Wolfram's. Sir Grier's. They shouldn't have left him here to make whatever inevitable mistake was waiting for him. Looming in his future like a nightmare every time he closed his eyes.

Lucien placed his bundle on the cart and turned, heading back to the cabin for the last of it. The camp was a swarm of activity as it prepared to move. Most of the work should be done by nightfall and the rest could be done at dawn tomorrow when they started the road south.

The letter from Wolfram had been painfully specific. Three sheets full of his careful script along with a map half-covered in notes. Lucien knew that Wolfram had been loath to leave when he had, but he had hoped that the wedding would have calmed Wolfram's need to be here. For revenge.

For all he knew, maybe it had. Lucien shook his head. He shouldn't worry. If anyone could keep Wolfram from doing anything drastic it was His Majesty.

Their campground had been so full of noise all day that it took Lucien a moment to notice when the shouting around him changed. He turned, noticing the group that had gathered near an edge of the clearing. Lucien was halfway there when Eric rushed over, greeting him with a report.

"Newcomers," the boy explained. "A man with a soldier's look and an old woman who claims to be his mother."

Lucien nodded. They had been in one place for too long. It was a wonder no one more suspicious hadn't shown up sooner. Mostly they ended up with half-starved survivors from the neighboring villages that had fallen to ruin during the plague time, drawn by the smoke of their fires. By now they had more than twenty of these camp followers to feed. At least they had agreed to stay behind when he and the men marched south. Someday this little clearing was likely to be a village in its own right.

But not today.

Today it was still a military encampment and it was his job to interrogate and clear any newcomers.

Lucien let Eric lead him over, and he gave the man and older woman a critical look once he spotted them, surrounded by a half dozen of his men. The woman was older than Eric's father but not as old as the boy had led him to expect. She was past the years of childbearing to be sure, but with only a few greying streaks in her brown hair. The lines in her face were deep, but here eyes were sharp and strong. She held herself like a woman who had grown up with a hard life and managed to thrive. Her eyes were the same as her son's.
Familiar.

Dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. Military figure. Lucien had only seen the man once before at a distance, back when he had invaded Blood Pledge Castle, but he remembered all the same.

Maxine.

Lucien tightened his jaw, then wished he hadn't. It would probably be best to pretend not to recognize him. Better to judge the meaning behind his lies. Maybe it still wasn't too late... It wasn't as if the man would know him. His reaction could have been due to such an obviously military figure showing up unexpectedly in his camp. Why did he always have to over-think everything? Lucien forced himself to relax. Wolfram trusted him. He could do this.

"Hector," he said, looking at Eric's father and trying to add authority to his tone. "Take the man to the cabin. I will speak to him first." Then he looked at the woman. The cart beside her was full of things that Maxine must have been dragging until now. "I am sorry to separate you so suddenly, but it won't be for long. Please take a rest by one of our fires and have something to eat."

The woman nodded but did not smile.

Lucien turned, grabbing Hector by the arm as he headed toward the cabin. "Guard them both. Double."

Hector was trained well enough to only nod before hurrying about the orders that Lucien had given.

Lucien hated giving orders. Most of the time he preferred to interact with the men on a more even field. After all, Lucien had grown up the same way that most of these people had. Farming. Simple life. It had only been chance that he had been Called with Wolfram and Marques. Their friendship that had widened the options of his future overnight. He shook his head. Now wasn't the time to waste thoughts on the past. On Marques...

He could do this. Lucien would find out why Maxine and his mother his come. He didn't have any other choice.

* * *

Lucien had three men accompany him into the cabin where Hector was waiting with Maxine. Maxine wasn't wearing a sword, but Lucien knew that Shou Shimeron's army preferred their string-like weapon and he would rather be over-prepared than dead.

"Sorry for all the trouble," Lucien began, folding his hands on the small wooden table between himself and Maxine. "But you seem like someone who is familiar with precautions and protocol, so it is my hope that you will be understanding."

Maxine nodded. "I expected as much." He was sitting on the very edge of his chair. Back straight. "Coming here wasn't my idea. Mother insisted."

"Oh?" Lucien kept his eyes on the other man's hands. "And why is that?"

Maxine studied his lap. "You'll have to ask her about that..." he muttered. "All I wanted to do was look for-- well. Not be here."

"What did you want to look for?" Lucien asked, expecting a lie.
Maxine looked around the room and sighed, almost seeming to deflate in his chair. "I'm looking for someone."

"Someone?" Lucien blinked. "Who?"

A blush spread across the other man's cheeks and something about his eyes went soft. "My perfect woman. Possibly my future wife— If only I could find her again..."

Lucien could barely manage to hide his shock. "That's why you came? To look for some woman?" The other man's body language aside there was no way Maxine could be telling the truth. It was preposterous.

"Not just some woman," Maxine glared. "The perfect woman." A sigh. "A woman with hair like fire who could carry a platter of a dozen tankards without breaking a sweat..." Maxine smiled a wide and dreamy smile. "And those arms... those legs. I bet she could crush a man with those legs... Best barmaid on the continent--"

"A barmaid?"

Maxine nodded. "A beautifully built barmaid." Then his face fell, tears welling in dark eyes. "She vanished, though. Gone without a trace... My Yozona..."

It couldn't be. But... But Lucien could remember all too well the way that Sir Grier had looked when he had saved him from being strung up in the barn. The dress. He had even said something about working as a barmaid to question Maxine.

Lucien had to cough to cover the inappropriate laughter that threatened to pour out of him. He tried to focus on how depressing the situation must be for Maxine to keep himself from smiling. Assuming that Maxine was really as in love with 'Yozona' as he claimed to be...

Lucien talked to Maxine for a few more minutes before excusing himself to talk to his mother. The thought of Maxine being in love with Sir Grier's disguise was absurd, but everything about the man's demeanor suggested that he was telling the truth, as strange as it was. Lucien shook his head again as he left the cabin, having left Hector and the others to keep an eye on Maxine while he questioned his mother.

Lucien found her beside one of the fires, stirring a cook pan and surrounded by smiling men with bowls. For a moment Lucien worried about the possibility of poison, but Philip, who had taken up the position of the camp's cook, sent him a reassuring smile and Lucien was able to suppress his suspicions. He approached the happy-looking group and his nose picked up the alluring smell coming from the pan at once.

"This lady's a magician, she is." Philip's grin hadn't lessened. "Nothing in it I don't use myself, but something about the portions' a wondrous thing, Corporal."

Lucien's stomach made a sound of agreement and Philip chuckled.

"Strong boys like you lot ought to pay more attention to your meals." The woman's thin lips were tight with something resembling a smile. "You'll never accomplish anything with your stomach sounding like that, Corporal."

Something about the way she said his title made Lucien bristle and remember his purpose. "I'll be sure to remember your advice." He did his best to smile. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to have a small chat. As long as Philip won't ruin your stew if we leave him to it."
"Him?" The woman scoffed, making a show of giving Philip a critical eye before patting him on the shoulder and handing him the wooden spoon. "He'll do."

"I'm honored." Philip bowed and the men had another laugh.

Lucien led her over to a bench closer to the cottage and gestured for her to have a seat. She did, but only after giving the bench a critical look and a poke with the toe of her boot. Lucien took a seat beside her.

"There are some things that you should know before you continue your mission, Corporal."

Lucien tensed. "And what mission is that?"

The woman leaned closer. Stale breath on his face. "Most of Habalouge knows that there are men in the woods. Men who want revenge for what Shou Shimeron's plague took from them. Humans who believe the words that the Mazoku king and his court have spread."

Lucien pursed his lips. "And what is it that you think we should know? That the Maou is lying?"

"No."

Lucian blinked, allowing his surprise to show for just an instant.

"There are things that they do not know. Details that might make a difference in what they-- in what you are going to do," Maxine's mother continued.

"And these 'things'..." Lucien paused. "How do you come to know them?"

Maxine's mother snorted. "I was born in Shou Shimeron. Second ring. My father was a guard and my mother made clothes for the Pure. I was second class like they were, which meant I got glimpses of both sides of the walls that held us. There were things... that didn't sit well with me-- The fact that I wasn't allowed to choose my own husband high among them. Maxine is my only child." A sigh. "His father raised him the way all the boys were-- the ones that weren't suited for the clergy at least. I did what I could... but, well you've seen him." She snorted. "Once he was out of the house I didn't have much reason to stay. I've been living in Habalouge close to twenty years now."

Twenty years. Lucien hardly believed that this woman would leave her home of twenty years to wander around the woods with her lovesick son and all her belongings just to chase rumors of men in the woods. "If Shou Shimeron is your home country, then why would you come here? A place where you say is rumored to harbor those who seek revenge on Shou Shimeron for the plague."

"Just because you were born somewhere does not make that place free of fault," she snapped. Then she folded her hands carefully on her lap. "But as many mistakes as the clergy-- as that boy king Saralegui-- has made, it would not be just to enact that revenge on Shou Shimeron's people. They don't..." She closed her eyes. "I know your Maou's belief in Justice is strong. My son has seen that first hand... Your Maou would not wish you to harm those who are innocent."

Lucien bristled. "There are no intentions to harm innocent people, I can assure you. I don't know what you think we're trying to do, but--"

"It's not as simple as not killing the townsfolk!" the older woman interrupted, eyes fierce. "The crop... Even third class citizens will react poorly if you upset the system. They won't know what to think! How to live! It would be cruel to leave them without any type of guidance or structure. As corrupt as the current system might have become it provides structure to people who would not be
Lucien could feel the crease forming on his brow. "What do you mean, 'third class citizens'?" he asked. "No matter what type of class system Shou Shimeron might enforce, people are still people. You make it sound like they're... somehow mentally incapable."

"In a way they are." Her voice was almost a whisper. "The third class cannot... partake of the blessing." The final word was spat. "To think I used to believe in all of it..."

"Blessing?" Lucien prompted when Maxine's mother fell silent.

She looked at him with sad, sharp eyes. "You have a lot to learn, Corporal."

Lucien nodded. It seemed he did.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Three Days Later

********

This was what Yuuri had been looking forward to for days.

Wolfram.

He breathed deep. Sighed hot air into the fabric of Wolfram's crotch and nuzzled the growing bulge.

"Yuuri," Wolfram protested again, weaker this time as Yuuri ran his thumbs up along the inside of his thighs. Touched his balls. "Gods, Wimp." He shifted as far back as he could against the wall. "I wanted to talk to you about something. Just--"

"Talk." Yuuri mouthed against the now-damp cloth. "Not stopping you."

"Nugh." Wolfram tugged at Yuuri's hair a bit. Too soft to really mean it.

Yuuri grinned and traced the now full length of Wolfram's cock with his nose where it was trapped down one leg of his pants. It was easy to find the head. Mouth it. Press against the fabric with his tongue until it was wet and suck away the taste of precome. Wolfram's fingers were tight in his hair. Tighter when Yuuri lightly dragged his teeth back up and tugged at the fastenings of his pants with teasing fingers.

During his time on Earth Yuuri had managed to look up a few things while he was recovering from the magical strain of taking so many people between worlds. Thankfully Shouri had left almost at once to conduct business for Bob, and both his parents had been busy taking care of two weeks of accumulated work and household chores, which had left Yuuri blessedly alone for the most part.

What had started as an attempt to educate himself on ways not to be stupid around Wolfram when it came to sex had quickly morphed into an eye-opening educational experience. It had been weird at first, embarrassing, to look at, but after a while all of Yuuri's awkward feelings had turned to anger. To sadness and confusion.

How had it happened? How had the world he had grown up in-- society-- managed to convince him that being gay was wrong or in any way abnormal?! Not only were there more gay people on Earth
than Yuuri had ever thought possible but there always had been. Always. Recorded in history and literature for every society that there was history and literature for. Moreover, there wasn't even a word to separate people who were "gay" from those that weren't until a few hundred years ago. The more Yuuri read, the more humans-- the more people seemed naturally capable of a sexual variety that was absent from the society and media that had surrounded him for most of his life. Sure, there were a few countries that had gone so far as to legalize gay marriage, but there were more countries by far that punished any sort of non-heterosexual behavior as a crime.

Yuuri had been shocked. Hurt. So... so many feelings mixing together inside of him about all of it. What had changed? Why had society told him that only women and men could really love each other and, worse... why had he believed it himself for so long? As soon as the injustice of all of it hit him so did the anger. It was so ridiculous that so many people had been taught-- conditioned-- to hate and fear their own capacity for love. That because of everything he had been surrounded with for so long... even though he loved Wolfram, had married him, Yuuri didn't think he could ever feel comfortable bringing him here. To a place that wouldn't accept them. How many friends had he had in school-- distant family-- people he didn't even know-- how many would stop accepting him if they found out who he loved?

And Yuuri was the lucky one.

He could leave. How many people couldn't escape this world... this society... where even though he knew that he was right he couldn't help himself deep down from feeling wrong. Shame when there was nothing to be ashamed of. How many people couldn't let themselves feel safe or comfortable or loved in their own skin? It was as infuriating as it was heartbreaking.

How many people were suffering all over the world because of this injustice? How much pain could he have saved Wolfram if he had allowed himself to love him from the beginning?

But somehow Wolfram still loved him. In spite of everything. His stubborn, strong, beautiful Wolfram. Yuuri was so determined to do all he could to make it up to him.

And so in addition to his historical and political non-heterosexual education, Yuuri had made sure to research the physical dimensions that until recently had been a complete mystery to him.

The Internet really was a marvelous thing. Yuuri had learned... well... a lot. Enough to muster the courage to go to the convenience and buy a small plastic container of lubricant. As functional as the oil that he and Wolfram had been using was, it was still... overly liquid-y and seemed to get absolutely everywhere.

Yuuri had also given into the temptation of one of the ads for a free trial of a gay porn site. Mostly it was just... awkward. Japanese men in goggles having sex with annoyingly blurred bits. Still, it had taught him through plentiful visual evidence that it was indeed possible to get all of someone's cock into your mouth at once. Sure the cock in question, though pixilated, had been nothing close to Wolfram's size, but it had still given Yuuri plenty of interesting ideas.

A few clicks later, Yuuri had stumbled onto some western videos. He couldn't understand exactly what they were saying, but he doubted it would have mattered. This time nothing had been censored and Yuuri had been given a very... high-resolution view of everything that was happening. Until that point, Yuuri had managed to avoid touching himself, though he had been uncomfortably hard inside his boxers. But that had been before a blond foreigner had started fucking an Asian boy and Yuuri couldn't help but think about himself and Wolfram-- and that maybe it wasn't as bad to touch himself to porn if he thought about Wolfram while he was doing it. The sounds of sex had been loud in his headphones and the camera was showing angles that Yuuri could never have seen on his own and he couldn't wait to get back so that Wolfram could do all
those things to him and Yuuri had come, shamefully fast, one hand in his boxers and the other still
trembling on the mouse.

It was strange how little Yuuri had thought about sex before. How now it was almost all that he
could think about. Sex. Wolfram. Sex with Wolfram. Even though he had other things he "should"
be thinking about. Important things like how Murata thought that Wolfram was really Gael's king
and that it would be best if Yuuri was the one to tell Wolfram about it.

Instead Yuuri thought about how Wolfram was still winning. How Wolfram had made him come
almost twice as many times as Yuuri had managed to return the favor. Yuuri wanted to make
Wolfram lose control. To turn that perfect stamina into a pleading, blushing, writhing mass of want
and pleading cries. Yuuri wanted to make Wolfram feel all the things that Wolfram made him feel
and somehow this desire had narrowed down into all the ways that he could put Wolfram in his
mouth at once. Down his throat. He had read all sorts of techniques to make it easier. Strategies to
please. To prolong. To make Wolfram come undone and put him back together again.

Once Yuuri's brain had soaked up all the information it possibly could, Yuuri hadn't been able to
think about anything but putting all of his new knowledge to use.

And here he was. Finally. Yuuri undid Wolfram's pants and--

Yes.

Here he was. Salt. Slick on his lips. Tongue circling the head of Wolfram's naked cock. Wolfram's
thighs trembling beneath his hands. Wolfram was breathing fast. Shallow breaths as his fingers
combed lightly through Yuuri's hair-- still holding back. Afraid to really touch. But soon Yuuri
would make him forget to be afraid.

Slowly Yuuri slid lower. Mouth wide. Careful to keep his teeth from touching skin. Then the head
of Wolfram's cock was against his throat. Soft hard pressure. Yuuri made an eager sound despite
himself. He was going to make Wolfram come so hard.

And then he was pushing forward. Swallowing against his urge to gag. Feeling full and pressure
and fighting against his body until his nose was pressed against the hair at Wolfram's groin. It was
uncomfortable. Nothing close to the feeling he had gotten by sticking as many fingers into his
throat as he could at once. As much as Yuuri's body wanted to fight his mind wanted to continue so
much more and so he held tight to Wolfram's thighs at the same time that Wolfram's hands
tightened in his hair. Wolfram groaned deep in his throat. Mumbled something incoherent and
every bit of the discomfort in Yuuri's body was numbed away. Yuuri wanted and so he took.

Yuuri pulled back slowly than moved forward again. Now that he had gotten Wolfram down his
throat he didn't want to let him go and so he moved as much as he could for as long as he could
before the need for air forced him to let go all together. Cock popping away from the ridge in the
back of his throat in an odd way that made his mouth fill up with spit. Yuuri spread the extra wet
against Wolfram's shaft with his tongue before tracing the head again. Slow circles.

Wolfram made a desperate sort of sound and his hips snapped forward and Yuuri only had to gasp
in another breath before he was swallowing again. Hot flesh filling his throat. His jaw ached and
there was wet dripping down his chin but none of it mattered as long as he had Wolfram's voice in
his ears. Gasping and groaning and saying "gods" and "Yuuri" and "fuck".

After a while Yuuri's throat seemed to get used to everything that was happening to it and Yuuri
tried to move more. Pulling back to tongue the head-- the tempting ridges-- the slit-- whenever he
needed to breathe. He traced the vein down and up. Sucked on Wolfram sack until he begged and
his cock twitched against his cheek.

Yuuri's world had narrowed to the sound of Wolfram's voice. His smell. The slick taste that was everywhere at once. Yuuri moved his hands-- squeezed the perfect flesh of Wolfram's ass with both hands. Wolfram was so far in him and it still wasn't enough. His own cock was so hard-- pushing against his pants-- and something inside him ached to feel another kind of full.

Then Wolfram was tugging at his hair. Hard. Trying to warn him but Yuuri was determined to feel Wolfram spill himself down his throat. The base of Wolfram's cock twitched. Pumping hot come down his throat and Yuuri couldn't help it. He pulled back-- barely able to trap the head between his lips as he coughed come-- sticky wet dripping over his chin. This time it was more difficult to swallow but he managed, giving Wolfram's cock a final swipe with his tongue before leaning back as far as Wolfram's grip in his hair allowed and wiping his face with his sleeve.

Wolfram had thrown his head back against the wall, hips jutting forward. Eyes still closed and breath raw and ragged. His cheeks were flushed, making the rest of his skin look even paler against the crisp black of his uniform top. Yuuri had only managed to get the other boy's pants around his knees.


Yuuri licked his sore lips and grinned. Jaw still aching. He shifted a bit to take the pressure off his suddenly painful knees.

When Wolfram opened his eyes they were nothing like the happy-hazy green that he'd expected. All at once Yuuri was the focus of a sharp and almost angry glare.

"Wolf," he breathed, before Wolfram's pounce knocked the air from his lungs and Yuuri found himself sprawled on his back on the rug-covered floor. Somehow Wolfram had trapped both of his hands in one of his and pinned them over Yuuri's head.

"Exactly where did you learn that?" Wolfram growled, voice hot on Yuuri's cheek.

Yuuri blinked. "I read about it..." he sputtered. Wolfram couldn't think that he had gotten any practical experience during his recent time away, could he? Wolfram had to trust him more than that...

Green eyes narrowed. "I didn't know that Earth had those kind of books."

Yuuri blushed. "Well... it's not... I didn't read it from a book--"

"--One of those... plastic-- periodicals then. With the naked women who--"

"No!" Yuuri interrupted. "No naked women! None! I promise! And it wasn't a magazine, Wolf. I read about it on the computer..." Yuuri could feel his blush deepen. "And well... there was more than pictures... um... to the educational materials..."

Wolfram tightened his grip on Yuuri's wrists. "Oh?"

And then Yuuri was telling him everything. About the porn and the things he had seen and learned while Wolfram's eyes bore into him. Watching. Narrowed. While Yuuri babbled like a fool and tried not to squirm too much at the fact that Wolfram was practically sitting on his still-unsatisfied erection. When Yuuri ran out of words he licked his lips nervously. Worried them with his teeth until Wolfram used the hand that wasn't trapping both of his to stop him.
"Don't," Wolfram whispered. Traced Yuuri's tender lips with a finger until Yuuri caught it in his mouth. Sucked until Wolfram made a noise and took his finger back.

Yuuri whimpered. Squirmed. "Don't be mad... Wolf... Please..."

"Mine," Wolfram hissed, leaning close to kiss and shifting in such an almost there kind of way on Yuuri's still hard cock that he shivered and nearly came. "You're mine now, Wimp."

"Yours," Yuuri agreed, raising his hips as much as he could. Wolfram's hand was hot and tight on his wrists. Too hot.

Then finally Wolfram kissed him. Teeth and lips and hard and soft and short. "Mine," he said again. "You're married to me, not some... some moving picture--"

"Yes!" Yuuri assured. "Love you! I only looked because I was tired at being so terrible at everything--"

"Wimp," Wolfram said again before kissing him. Tongue reclaiming Yuuri's mouth.

Yuuri could feel every move that Wolfram made-- every swipe of his tongue-- everywhere at once. Building. He was so hard. Trapped under clothes and Wolfram's hot-- rocking-- weight. Yuuri cried out-- warning-- He was going to come if Wolfram didn't stop!

But then Wolfram did stop and it was agony! The pressure of Wolfram's weight was gone and Yuuri whimpered a protest into Wolfram's mouth as his body arched up-- desperately seeking any kind of friction despite himself. But then Wolfram's other hand took the place of his weight. Squeezed. And Yuuri cried out-- cock pulsing hot liquid into his pants as Wolfram's teeth dug possessively into the flesh of his neck.

********
********

Wolfram could barely keep himself from shaking. Yuuri's mouth. His throat. The place where one became the next that was so much tighter. Wolfram would never be able to forget Yuuri's face as he swallowed him whole. Over and over. Making eager noises. Yuuri's mouth-- his cock-- each redder and wetter as every moment passed.

Yuuri had been so eager. As if there was nothing more he wanted than to lick and suck and swallow...

He could still feel the heat. Yuuri's ragged breathing where he lay, still trapped beneath him. His own heart racing in his ears.

The heat.

Wolfram had been so angry. Jealous. Even though he knew the wimp was incapable of hurting anyone on purpose, Wolfram had let his fear and anger and... that dark place... overpower him again.

Slowly Wolfram loosened his grip on Yuuri's wrists and moved them both to a more comfortable position on the rug, Wolfram on his back and Yuuri pressed happily into the space between Wolfram's arm and body, head on Wolfram's chest.

Yuuri wiggled his way closer and sighed. Pouted. "Sticky." His voice was slightly hoarse, another reminder of where that perfect mouth had been.
Wolfram shook his head and grinned, curling his arm around his husband and giving him a squeeze. "Wimp. You should have thought of that before you dragged me to the bedchamber after barely having time to greet anyone else."

Yuuri blushed. "I couldn't help it. I missed you... And... Wolf... I'm sorry about--"

"It's fine," Wolfram said, a little too quickly for it to be true. But then Yuuri pressed closer and told him he was sexy when he was jealous and Wolfram really did start to feel fine about the whole thing.

He sighed. Even though his entire body was still humming pleasantly, and Yuuri felt so warm and good against his side, it was impossible for him to silence the worries of his mind.

He should be with them. The men whose respect he had earned. He should be there to put that perverted wretch of a king in his place.

Part of him knew it was wrong. He had Yuuri. Yuuri who for so long had defined everything he wanted. Wolfram knew he should be content to stay-- to let the men he had trained complete their mission.

But he wasn't.

Wolfram still wanted to go. To help. Even though he knew it was for revenge. Something inside of him burned to be there. Dreams of fire that woke him sweating in the night. Dreams of burning Saralegui in his skin for all that he had done.

The worst of it was that Wolfram knew that, if he went, Yuuri would find a way to follow him. If he went he would be putting Yuuri in danger. Wolfram would never be able to forgive himself if anything were to happen to Yuuri, and Greta would never forgive either of them for leaving her again to do anything so dangerous.

It was selfish for him to want to go. He should be content with Yuuri. Content as Yuuri's husband no matter what the whisperers said. He should know he was more than a pretty high-blooded whore who snuck his way beneath the Maou's sheets. Wolfram knew that the men he had trained with respected him. That Yuuri respected him.

Wolfram knew he should just let it go. Keep quiet. Keep Yuuri safe. But he was afraid that if he didn't do something the need would burn him from the inside out.

Wolfram gave his husband a squeeze and kissed the top of his head. "Come on, Wimp. Let's get you cleaned up. We'll be expected for dinner."

Yuuri groaned. "Alright..." Then he looked up at him with those pretty black eyes and smirked. "But only if you join me in the bath."

Wolfram couldn't keep himself from kissing him. "Fine," he said when they pulled apart. "But I get to wash your back."

* * *

Wolfram had been so busy with his own internal struggle that it wasn't until after they were both washed and dried and clothed that he realized Yuuri was trying to tell him something the wimp didn't know how to say.

Yuuri was fiddling with the buttons of his jacket, pushing them in and back out again in an attempt
to lengthen the process. Wolfram moved over to stand in front of him, crossed his arms, and waited.

Color spread over the wimp's cheeks and he worried his lip, gaze fixed somewhere on the ground between them. "Wolf..."

All at once the Dark Thoughts returned. The burning in his chest. What if something really had happened while Yuuri was on Earth? What if--

"--ing." Yuuri was looking at him expectantly

"What?"

"Gael's King," Yuuri offered an awkward, encouraging sort of smile. "Murata says he's almost sure of it," he continued. "It would make more sense than it being Shinou or me at least and--"

"What?" Wolfram said again. His mind was quickly banishing his fears of Yuuri's infidelity but it wasn't quick enough to make any sense of the insane words the wimp seemed to be stringing into sentences. "What do you mean, 'the Sage thinks I'm Gael's King'? What would possibly make him think something like that?"

Yuuri grabbed hold of Wolfram's hand. "Well you are pretty great," he grinned. "And Gael's King is supposed to be--"

"Shinou," Wolfram interrupted. "The scholars have always believed it was Shinou-- the ones that didn't change their minds when you came along, at least."

Yuuri shook his head. "Murata explained it to me... The prophecy that made Frith come here... You were the king that she was trying to save."

"By killing Saralegui..." Wolfram moved away, clenching his fists at his sides. He had heard the prophecy from Gwendal when they had been discussing the Taibhsear's new station as Gael's ambassador in Shin Makoku.

"You gave me the ring. Your magic," Yuuri was saying. "I took it, even though I didn't know what it was and--"

"And 'Sara' ordered it done."

*The king must die to save Our King.*

The silence in the room was painful.

"We don't know exactly what it was that Sara ordered," Yuuri began. "He could have--"

"Enough." Wolfram growled. "I know you don't want to think ill of anyone but I don't need to listen to you defend him." Wolfram forced himself to take a calming breath. He could feel the sparks threatening to form inside his fists.

"I'm sorry." Yuuri's voice was soft. "It... It would explain other things too... You being Gael's True King. Something to do with you taking so much of Ethne's magic when you reaffirmed..."

Wolfram closed his eyes and forced himself to feel something other than the lingering burn of rage. How could Yuuri still defend that sorry excuse for a king?! After everything that had...

No.
Wolfram took a deep breath. Another. Forcing the unnecessary thoughts away. Was it really even possible that the sage was right? Wolfram let the words he had memorized so long ago play over in his mind.

*Twice born of ash*
Twice raised by water
Filled by god
Killed by god
Our king who joins with waves
Will unite the world in mist

How could something so old have anything to do with him? The pretty third son.

And yet...

*Twice born of ash*

He had been born of fire twice. Reaffirmed his rites...

*Twice raised by water*

Yuuri... The Maou had pulled him back from somewhere beyond death twice. Once when Shinou took his heart and again after Saralegui's man pushed that cursed stone down his throat.

*Killed by God*

Shinou...

*Filled by God*

Ethne...

*Our king who joins with waves will unite the world in mist*

'Joins with waves' had been the part of the prophecy that had pointed the most to Yuuri, but was it possible that through his marriage Wolfram had joined with...

*Gods.*

Wolfram had to sit down. The room seemed to tilt. Yuuri was saying something but his words couldn't break through the storm in Wolfram's mind.

The final part of the prophecy made no sense at all. How was he supposed to 'unite the world with mist'? What did that even mean? And what about the other prophecy concerning Gael's True King?

The one that Shinou had feared enough to destroy.

********
********

Blood Pledge Castle
Conference Room
Three Hours Later

********

Murata's eyes ran over the corporal's tight script as he attempted to drown out the noise of Sir
Belefield's continuing tantrum. While the blond king was somewhat justified in his anger that Murata had been permitted to see the letter addressed to him first, Murata had been quick to point out that had Sir Belefield not been so distracted by his new husband he might have been in Gwendal's office himself when the letter in question arrived. That, of course, had only led to more yelling.

Even though Murata was using the pretense of reading the letter as an excuse not to engage himself in the current discussion, he was not actually processing the words. Murata had already read the letter a dozen times and had put to memory all of the useful information it contained. Now he was much more concerned with arranging all the facts within his mind.

Fascinating.

Absolutely fascinating.

Why hadn't he seen it before? How could he have missed it...

The encounter with Maxine's mother that Sir Belefield's corporal had detailed within his report had provided Murata with so many of the missing pieces that now much of the puzzle of Shou Shimeron seemed to be solved.

As his eyes scanned the corporal's script, Murata tried to imagine Shou Shimeron as it had become. A city secluded. Separated from the rest of the world by natural boundaries...

Fascinating.

The corporal's report, combined with everything that they had already learned, painted a compellingly tragic picture of life in Shou Shimeron. The humans in that valley must have co-habituated with the fungus polluting their food source for so long that some had adapted-- evolved-- to no longer naturally produce the chemical that the fungus created an abundance of. The people of Shou Shimeron, instead of relocating to a place where the majority of their population did not fall victim to all the symptoms of the "plague", seemed to have developed religious, cultural, and social coping methods that had enabled to survive within their toxic environment.

"-- least you could do is acknowledge the breach of protocol," Sir Belefield snapped.

Murata blinked as the letter he held was abruptly snatched from his hands. He looked up just in time to enjoy a venomous glare before Sir Belefield moved back across the room and sat angrily next to his husband. After a final spiteful look, Sir Belefield began to read the letter for himself as the rest of the room sat with ringing ears in relieved silence.

It was unnerving that Sir Belefield still allowed his emotions to get the better of him to such an extent. Murata had hoped that he would be capable of acting with more restraint once Shibuya informed him of his "inheritance". In truth, he had hoped that Sir Belefield would not still be so driven by his revenge at all...

"What does it say?" Shibuya asked, leaning close over Sir Belefield's shoulder despite Sir Christ's smothered squeak of discomfort from his chair nearby. "Is everything alright?"

"Maxine..." Sir Belefield murmured, eyes still flicking back and forth along the page. "Lucien had a talk with Maxine's mother. She turned up at the camp site in Habalouge and tried to convince him not to 'do anything rash' in retaliation for everything Shou Shimeron put us through."

"Oh." Shibuya bit his lip. "We're not, are we? Doing anything rash... I mean--"
"No," Wolfram assured. "We're being much more reasonable than the average citizen would like, but something has to be done. She must have arrived right before they set out..." Sir Belefield muttered, almost to himself. "If the letter was sent the day they left, we shouldn't be too far off schedule--"

"Schedule?" Yuuri stood, running his hands through his hair as he stood and began to pace. "What schedule? How far have things gone? What is even-- You haven't-- Why don't-- Why didn't I know about this before, Wolfram? You're not supposed to just-- just-- do things behind my back."

"And you're not supposed to just assume I'm doing something you wouldn't approve of," Sir Belefield stood too, face inches from Shibuya's. "You're supposed to trust me, remember?"

Shibuya deflated almost at once. He leaned closer to Sir Belefield. Indecently close. "I'm sorry... I know you tried to tell me about it before it's just--"

Gwendal cleared his throat, and the two hormone-blinded adolescents moved apart at once. "If the two of you are quite finished, there are far more important things to discuss."

Murata adjusted his glasses and nodded. "Sir Voltaire is right. This report has explained far more than any of us could have hoped."

Sir Belefield scowled.

"What do you mean?" Shibuya did his best to reign in his husband's lingering resentment by holding his hand. "What exactly did the letter explain?"

Murata leaned back, getting comfortable in his seat. The way the light from the oil lamps lining the walls hit his glasses dramatically from this angle only added to his self-satisfied smile. "The letter explained Shou Shimeron. Or rather, the letter explained enough of Shou Shimeron that I was able to piece together the rest."

"Something that only you, oh Great Sage, could have done," Sir Belefield huffed, returning once again to his seat.

Murata ignored the spite in Sir Belefield's remark. "Precisely."

Sir Belefield humphed again and Sir Voltaire sent him a warning look.

"We knew from our spies' inability to gather proper information from Shou Shimeron that something was suspicious, but before the whole business with the plague there was no real reason to risk the men to figure out exactly what was amiss," Murata began. "Shou Shimeron has been isolated for so long-- centuries upon centuries-- and this resulted in a very complex and individualized social structure."

"Lucien explained their class system in the letter," Sir Belefield snapped. "They treat their townsfolk like slaves. Keep them poor and farming and separated from the inner city by high stone walls. What have you learned, Sage, that Lucien didn't describe?"

"If you would be so kind as to let me finish, Your Majesty, you might learn something."

Sir Belefield's cheeks went red and Murata was sure the yelling was about to start again but Shibuya spoke first. "What's wrong with you, Murata? Can't you just explain everything simply? There's no reason to keep us here longer than necessary."

Somehow Murata managed to hold back his comment about Shibuya's need to return to the
bedroom. Part of Murata knew he was being inflammatory with his comments and yet...

And yet.

Maybe the wedding had affected him more than he thought? Was he really so jaded? So bitter? And why now? Some lingering feelings for Shibuya? For Wolfram who looked so much like Shinou? Was he simply lonely? Hurt that Shinou had yet to visit him, even after his excuse for saving so much of his power had passed...

Murata shook his head. Now wasn't the time for self-examination.

At least he was faring better than Sir Weller, who was practically pouting at his position by the door.

"My apologies." Murata waited for Sir Belefield to nod before he began again. "The lowest class humans in Shou Shimeron react to the fungus polluting their food source the same way the humans everywhere else did when the 'plague' was spread. This is because this 'third class' of Shou Shimeron humans are the same normal humans that exist everywhere else. They are normal humans who have the expected results of the constant exposure to the fungus. Gangrene, hallucinatory symptoms, paranoia, the general weakening of the immune system. All of the effects of a life-long exposure to the ergot fungus."

"A life-long exposure..." Sir Belefield's eyes were haunted. Words soft.

Shibuya covered his husband's hand with his own and squeezed. "What do you mean, 'normal humans'," he asked. "Aren't all humans who aren't demons or half-bloods 'normal'?"

"To an extent," Lady Gisela sat forward in her chair. "Please continue, Your Grace."

"That is where things get interesting," Murata nodded. "The corporal describes in his letter that second class citizens were often forced to breed in an attempt to create more of the first class citizens, but that there were no discerning physical features that separated them. What the letter does not explicitly describe is the fact that there is a biological difference between the humans that occupy each of Shou Shimeron's social classes." Murata couldn't help but smile. "And it is the nature of those biological differences that is the most fascinating part of all."

Lady Karbelnikoff raised an eyebrow. "And what exactly are those differences?"

"Well, the reason that humans--and demons for that matter- react the way that they do to the fungus is that it so closely mimics an existing chemical within the body. It is the abundance of this chemical that creates all the negative side effects. Of course the body has ways of attempting to cope as well, but for the most part third class citizens in Shou Shimeron are normal people, who react normally given the abundance of the chemical. It is a different story with first and second class citizens. The second class citizens are only half resistant to the chemical abundance, as it were. They do not show physical symptoms, such as gangrene, from their poisoned food supply, but it would appear that they still hallucinate and have other mental difficulties when exposed to an extreme dosage of the fungus. Following this line of thought... it is likely that the first class citizens are not only immune to the fungus but rely upon it."

"Their bodies don't create the chemical at all..." Lady Karbelnikoff clarified, licking her lips. "They need the chemical that the fungus provides to function like normal people..."

Murata nodded. "Exactly."

"But that doesn't make sense." Sir Belefield crossed his arms. "If the first class are utterly
dependent on the fungus to function, shouldn't that be seen as a weakness? Lucien depicts the first class, the 'pure', as having all of the power in the social hierarchy." He shook his head. "If anything the second class are the lucky ones. They can withstand the negative effects without being dependent on something."

"Excellent point," Murata smirked. "The reasons for the superiority of the 'pure' are entirely social, not physical."

"I don't understand..." Shibuya's voice was close to a whisper. "If the first and second class people are normal... at least mentally..." He looked up, eyes soft and scared. "The third class people are suffering... Have been suffering for so long... Why hasn't anything been done to help them?"

"People in power often like to stay there, Wimp," Sir Belefield spat. "Not everyone is as kind as they should be."

Shibuya studied his lap for a moment before looking up again, eyes hard. "We have to help them. We can't just... We have to help them." He took Sir Belefield's hand and squeezed. "I know you hate it when I say things like this but... I have to help them. We have to help them. Please don't be mad, but--"

"We'll go," Sir Belefield interrupted. "We'll go and help them together."

Shibuya grinned.

Murata narrowed his eyes. "How altruistic of you, Sir Belefield."

Sir Belefield glared, cheeks gone red.

Murata sighed. He was tempted to say more, but there were still those in the room who did not know of Sir Belefield's identity as Gael's King. More who didn't know how deadly Sir Belefield's need for revenge could become...

Across the room Sir Voltaire caught his eye.

Murata shook his head. That conversation could wait. He would have to make sure he had a talk with Sir Belefield before he and Shibuya headed off on their latest adventure.

Alone.

********

*****

Blood Pledge Castle
Royal Stables
Four Days Later

*****

The blanket crunched when Greta sat on it, but otherwise the thick cloth did a fine job of converting the pile of straw into a suitable place for a picnic.

The barn smelled like horse and the end of summer and other less pleasant things... but mostly it smelled like damp hay. Outside thunder crashed and rain pounded on the wooden roof.

Wolri had disappeared somewhere in the rafters overhead. Hiding from the noise. Lightning flashed, and for a moment Greta managed to catch a glimpse of light reflecting off of tiny green
eyes.

She sighed. Greta supposed she was hiding too, in her own way. Hiding from how empty the castle felt now that her fathers had left. From Gunter and his lessons. From Anissina's guilty eyes and Gwendal's wrinkled forehead.

From the butterflies and funny feelings that she did her best to ignore whenever she spent time with Wilfrido.

Wilfrido who was late.

Greta sighed again and opened the lid of her picnic basket. The smell of fresh bread and cake only made her stomach growl and so she shut it with a huff. Even though it was late afternoon, the barn seemed darker than it should have been. Emptier, now that Ao and Hildefun and so many of the other horses had gone.

She was so caught up in sad thoughts that Greta jumped when the door to the stall opened and Wilfrido poked his head inside.

"What are you doing in here? I saw your guard outside and--"

"Happy Birthday!" Greta interrupted quickly. "I made you cake!"

Wilfrido blushed. Studied the ground. "Oh... Well then... Thank you, princess. You didn't have to..."

Greta smiled and stood, ignoring the awkward crunch the straw made when she did. "Don't call me princess. Come on, sit here and try some." She grabbed Wilfrido's hand and pulled him over to the blanket. "I didn't know what kind of cake you'd like best so I had Doria help me with a few different kinds. There's bread and maple butter too-- ohh and sea salt toffees from the market on the docks that Wofram sent me." She was rambling. Greta had to bite her lip in order to stop talking as she watched Wilfrido sit and explore his birthday basket on his own.

Eventually he looked up at her, a strange look at first, before his face morphed into the most beautiful grin. "Well, come on then, Greta. I can't eat all of this on my own."

Greta beamed and sat on the other side of the blanket, basket between them. She had gotten Wilfrido to tell her his birthday when she had celebrated hers a few months ago. It hadn't been much of a celebration... Gwendal and Anissina had tried of course but... It hadn't been the same without her fathers. The best part had been after the "party", sitting in the shady place behind the barn with Wilfrido and eating the honey flowers that grew there until both of them had been too sick to do anything but nap until the sun went down.

It was one of the few times that she really felt close to Wilfrido. She had spent so much time wanting to be his friend, and he had spent so much time resisting, that now Greta felt like there would always be room in her mind for doubts. It didn't help that Wilfrido could be so impossible at times. So quiet about his life before. Greta knew that he had been training to be a priest of some kind and that he was brilliant at maths, but every time Greta asked him about his mother or any other family besides his father he would shut down. Say something rude or stupid to try and distract her. Greta supposed that something must have happened that he didn't want to talk about. Maybe his mother had died or his father had done something terrible and that was why they had had to move away. Something like that would certainly explain why Wilfrido was afraid to talk about his past. But it still hurt that he didn't trust her enough to really open up. Even after everything that she had told him.
Greta worried her lip and stole a glance at her friend. Wilfrido was holding one of the little cakes in her direction, still smiling. "You have to eat too, Greta."

She nodded and reached out and took the cake. Wilfrido's fingers were warm where they brushed hers.

Greta took a big bite of her cake to try to keep herself from blushing.

"Why did you bring so many anyway? It will be impossible to finish all of this, even for the both of us. I doubt your cat will help us."

Greta laughed. The image of Wolri trying to eat one of the cakes was too silly for her not to. Maybe she could make him a fish cake...

Wilfrido gave her a funny look.

"Sorry," Greta managed, pulling herself together enough to answer. "There are thirteen. One for each year of your life... For good luck..." She trailed off. "Anyway, you don't have to eat them all right away. You can save some for later."

Wilfrido made his eyes go comically wide. "But the princess made them. If I don't eat them all on the spot then I'll be thrown in the dungeons!"

Greta rolled her eyes and popped the last of the small cake into her mouth. "Don't be stupid."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

She glared. "Excuse me, good sir. I didn't realize this was a formal affair."

Wilfrido only grinned at her. The kind of grin that made her stomach flip. "Don't be like that." He scooted closer to her on the blanket-covered straw. "Really, thank you, Greta. This is the best birthday I've ever had."

Rain pounded against the roof. As fast as her heart.

"You're welcome," she managed. Then lightning flashed and thunder rumbled and somehow the tension in the air went away when the dark broke their eye-contact. Greta toyed with the edge of her dress.

Wilfrido was eating another cake now, but his dark eyes were still fixed on her.

Lightning flashed again and Greta suddenly realized how dark it had become. How the rain seemed to blur away the world outside and the only thing that mattered was the two of them, protected from the world by an empty barn.

"Greta," Wilfrido whispered. "I... I think... Well, there's something I should have told you a long time ago..."

"What is it?" Her heart was beating so fast.

From the other side of the barn, torchlight crept along the wall. Wilfrido's father returning from wherever he had been.

Wilfrido must have noticed the light as well because he jumped from his seat at once, face pale in their still-dim hiding place.
Greta wanted to scream. She didn't know what Wilfrido had been about to say but... but...she wanted to!

Maybe he was going to... Maybe Wilfrido had been as worried as she had been about all the same things but he had finally found the courage to say something and then... and then his stupid father had ruined everything! Of all the times she had hated that wretched man this had to be the worst of them!

"--I'm sorry," Wilfrido was saying, "I have to--"

"Go." Greta sighed. "I know."

Middle Sea
Five Days Later

The ship rocked slowly under Yozak's feet as he watched the last glimmer of sun disappear beneath the waves. It was a smallish vessel, meant for little more than bolts of Suberelain cloth in trade for Spitzburg's finer wines, but She had been at port when She was needed, and the old captain had been happy to drop his nameless travelers on the southern edge of Caloria's coast for a small pouch of gold.

Of course, the captian's happiness had soured once Sir Belefield had taken ill an hour out of port.

The old man's rickety voice echoed in Yozak's mind. "I won't have anyone dying on my girl, it's bad luck!" Yozak had heard him say at least a dozen times.

Yozak shook his head. He wondered how the old captain would react if he knew that the sickly boy in question was none other than the son of Spitzburg's queen and the Maou's new husband. The True King of Gael.

Part of him still didn't believe it. The sage must be losing his touch. Yozak had never been one to place his faith in prophecy, and he wasn't about to start now just because of the sage's hunch.

Yozak sighed.

The small bottle of Papavir Dreams that the sage had given him felt heavy in the pouch attached to his belt. They had been prepared for Wolfram's illness before they had boarded the ship, and Gisela was here to give him tea laced with the drug to help him through the journey, but the sage had provided Yozak with his own supply for an entirely different purpose.

The sage feared another prophecy concerning Gael's True King than those that could be found in any text. One that spoke of power and fire and rage. Even though Wolfram had been permitted to tackle this mission-- there being no one with the power or rank to suggest otherwise-- the sage did not intend for him to be given free range to enact his vengeance on Saralegui and Shou Shimeron.

Yozak tightened his grip on the ship's wooden railing. Sure, Wolfram did not have the greatest history of level-headed action, but he had matured more in such a short time than Yozak would have ever believed if he hadn't seen it all firsthand. Yozak had watched Wolfram train with humans. Work and sweat and share meals with them. Share their stories. And all of this while recovering from more pain and trauma than most experienced in a lifetime. Yozak hardly
recognized the spoiled little prince who had so scorned his brother for his mixed-blood.

And beyond that, Wolfram had strategized this entire endeavor with Shou Shimeron so thoughtfully and delicately that Yozak didn't even think Sir Voltaire could have done better himself. That even now the sage would have so little faith in Wolfram that his contingency plan was to have him drugged was more paranoid than Yozak had come to expect from the Sage.

Was the sage really so afraid of an old prophecy? Or was it simply the magnitude of Wolfram's recently acquired power that had him on edge?

Yozak shook his head and fished the bottle out of his pouch. The sage really must be losing his touch. Even though Yozak had the stealth necessary to complete such a task, it was one better suited to the captain. Weller always had been better about following orders.

The captain probably wouldn't have given the mission a second thought, brother or no. He would do anything to protect His Majesty, though Yozak didn't doubt the man would make himself miserable in the process of doing so.

Even now. Even when the "perfect soul" he so coveted had chosen someone else. Again.

Pathetic.

Yozak snorted and wondered what was worse. Following an impossible dream, or following the one trying to follow it.

Pinning Weller the night of the royal wedding had only made things worse. Normally whenever Yozak submitted to his own nostalgic yearnings he would get some feeling of release before leaving to pursue his latest mission. He had been planning on doing exactly that before Sir Voltaire had detained him. Predicting, as accurately as usual, that soon His Majesty and Wolfram would be heading off to Shou Shimeron one way or another and that he would rather have Yozak there to watch them from the start than risk a later rendezvous in hostile territory.

Now Yozak was stuck with Weller. Trapped on a very small boat with little else to keep his mind from the feel of hot flesh and wanting but a now-empty bottle of whiskey and the sound of waves.

Watching His Majesty wring his hands at his husband's bedside while Weller stood by looking uncomfortable had only been interesting for less than five minutes and Gisela was too distracted thinking up ways to help Shou Shimeron's third class recover from a lifetime of food poisoning to engage in any decent sort of conversation. Yozak had hoped that the old captain would at least have a few interesting stories but, despite his advanced years, the old man had somehow managed to avoid any life-experiences with a modicum of entertainment value.

Yozak sighed again and wondered if there was any Subaralain wine hidden away in the old captain's quarters. It was worth a look, at least.

The small glass bottle hardly made a sound as it was lost among the waves.

********

Northern Shou Shimeron
One Week Later

********

Even after all the traveling the wimp had subjected him to over the years, no other horse seemed to
feel as solid beneath him as Hildefuns. The horses that Flurin had made ready for them at the boarder were fine stock, but Wolfram still missed the familiarity of his fine white stallion.

Wolfram shifted as he felt his husband's drool begin to soak through the cloth covering the back of his shoulder and had to smile. The current traveling method did have some benefits after all. It felt good to feel so needed. That Yuuri trusted him enough to keep him from falling from the saddle. Trusted him enough to drool.

He shook his head, almost laughing at himself aloud. He really was hopelessly besotted if he was enjoying the wimp's drool, but then again, he supposed that being hopelessly besotted was something he should have gotten used to by now. It was amazing how every day Yuuri managed to bury himself deeper in his heart. So deeply that part of Wolfram was always aware of how easy it would be for the wimp to break him. Pathetically easy. But Yuuri trusted him. So Wolfram would have to keep doing his best to really trust him back.

The sky above was full of stars where it peeked from between the branches overhead. They had been lucky. A full moon and a clear sky meant that it was less likely that any of the horses would stumble, making it possible for them to cover more ground at night.

At least traveling by night made the insomnia that Gisela's tea had left him with seem like less of a burden. Better to spend the night riding than sleepless on hard ground. Still, Wolfram was eager for the pounding headache that had lingered with it to fade. Every pound of his head seemed to make the growing ache caused by the human's cursed stones as they headed south toward the capital that much harder to ignore.

In spite of the pain, for the first time in human territory Wolfram still felt connected to the fire. To his magic. Before, traveling in human lands had left him feeling empty on top of all the pain, but now... Even though it still hurt Wolfram still knew that if needed the fire would come to him.

It was a heady feeling. Power.

_Our King's rise to power is followed by his fall._
_Power that is his and not consumes,_
_contorting rage_  
_Revenge blinds, the child of hope is lost_  
_His kingdom, the whole world burns_  
_Is left in ash_  

Wolfram shuddered as the sage's words echoed in his mind.

Yuuri made a small sound and shifted against him and Wolfram tightened his grip on the arms wrapped around his waist. Yuuri snuggled closer against him and murmered his name and for a moment Wolfram thought he had woken. But then Yuuri shifted again, and Wolfram felt the reason for all that shifting hard and hot against his lower back.

There was no way that Yuuri would rub against him in public like that if he was awake, even if it was unlikely that anyone in their column would notice. Or at least, Wolfram was pretty sure he wouldn't.

Wolfram still wasn't sure how he felt about how much Yuuri's views on intimacy had changed since his last visit to Earth. Certainly, Wolfram was happy that Yuuri had gotten over his strange
earth-notions regarding sex with another man, but it still seemed sudden. Too good to be true. Like it would be snatched away the moment he dared to get used to it.

Not that Wolfram had been given much chance to get used to it at all before they had set off for Shou Shimeron. They had only had two nights before departing to enjoy each other's company and both of them had been spent convincing Greta not to hate them for leaving her again. Wolfram couldn't blame her for feeling the way she did, of course. He was being selfish. He knew that and yet... Knowing it wasn't enough somehow.

He had to take care of Shou Shimeron. He had to make sure that everyone was safe from their infected crop, their infected society... He was doing this for his kingdom. For Greta and every one else.

He was...

Wolfram sighed. He was lying to himself.

He wanted to see Saralegui suffer. Be the cause of that suffering. Make that perverted sovereign drown in the darkness that haunted him.

Wolfram wanted it so much it scared him. Especially when he considered the Sage's dark prophecy...

And so Wolfram told himself the "right" reasons for needing to be here. Because maybe if he said them inside his head enough he would believe them. And maybe believing them would make them true.

Wolfram snorted. He couldn't be that foolish. Doing so would mean losing everything. If the Sage was right... it would mean destroying everything. Wolfram cared too much about this world for that to ever be an option. He loved Greta. Yuuri. His family. He would not let revenge destroy him and so much else.

"Wolf..." Yuuri whispered against his ear, rocking against him.

Distracting him from dark thoughts.

Wolfram turned in the saddle a bit to brush his lips against his husband's forehead. "Hey, Wimp. Later."

Yuuri pouted in his sleep.

Then the horse stopped and Wolfram snapped his attention to the front of their column. Weller had drawn his blade. All was still in the woods. Too still.

Wolfram touched the hilt of his sword.

"Peace." A voice said, followed by rustling. "Friends, peace."

Then a familiar figure emerged from the roadside and bowed. "It's been a while Sir. I mean, Your Highness-- Sir."

"Lucien!" Wolfram grinned despite himself. "What are you doing here?"

"We heard you coming," his corporal reported. "I thought it only proper to escort you to the camp in person."
"Hello Lucien," came Yuuri's sleep-filled voice behind him. "It's good to see you."

"You as well, Your Highness. You as well."

* * *

They reached the camp before dawn. It wasn't much of a camp, of course, they could hardly travel in such a large group and not call attention to themselves. Lucien had split with the rest of the men with Hector and his boy Erec little more than a day before. The plan was to approach the capital staggered in small groups. All coming from different directions so as not to raise suspicion.

Lucien and the rest had set up in an abandoned barn, surrounded by tall stalks of un-harvested rye that brushed against them as they weaved the horses through it. Against the cloudless sky Wolfram could see another building nearby as they approached.

"A house," Lucien whispered back after he asked. "We didn't go upstairs, but by the smell inside..."

Wolfram didn't need for him to finish. He tightened his grip on the horse's reigns and was thankful the wimp had fallen back to sleep. "We'll go in once it's light."

"Sir?" Lucien stammered, "I mean Your High--"

"It's Wolfram, Luke. Don't be like Weller." He shook his head. "We should bury whoever was left. It's the least we can do for using their home."

"Of course."

It was the longest conversation they had before all those not on watch or suffering from drug-induced insomnia were tucked beneath their blankets and asleep. Wolfram lay beside Yuuri and tried to let the warmth of his presence lull him to sleep. The peaceful look on his face when he slept.

Wolfram must have succumbed to dreams for a few hours because the next time he opened his eyes he was even more sore and exhausted, and the sun was rising in a grey sky to the east, letting a column of light through one of the barn's high windows.

Outside Weller was sitting beside the fire with Lucien, who was stirring a pot of gruel. Wolfram shivered and accepted a cup of steaming tea from his brother and sat beside the fire. He sipped it in silence for a while before eying the nearby house. "I want to do it before Yuuri wakes up. He shouldn't have to see."

Lucien nodded and stood while Weller hesitated.

"Stay here and look after them," Wolfram said in a clipped voice, not looking back as he headed toward the house. He still had his suspicions about his brother's feelings toward his husband, but there was no one else besides himself who would protect Yuuri like Weller.

The house was as ill-kept as the surrounding fields. Chickens pecked at the ground beneath a nearby tree. A tree with a broken swing and two small graves.

Wolfram shivered as he pushed open the door. Lucien hadn't lied about the smell. The kitchen table was laid with half-rotten food. Maggots squirmed in a central dish.

Lucien covered his nose with his sleeve as he crossed the cabin's single room to open windows, stepping around an overturned chair. Wolfram braced himself against the stench of death and
climbed the creaking stairs one step at a time.

The room upstairs was shuttered and dark and Wolfram nearly gagged, eyes watering even as he breathed through his mouth.

"Is that you?" A voice whispered.

Wolfram jumped and reached for his sword, eyes still adjusting to the room's low light.

"I knew you would come home, love."

The voice came from the bed, and as Wolfram approached the smell of rotted flesh and excrement was almost overwhelming.

The woman's face was sunken. Hollow cheeks.

All at once Wolfram realized what he was seeing. Recognized the twisted body of a child rotting in the woman's arms.

"Lucien!" His own voice seemed distant in his ears. "Get Gisela. Now!"

Wolfram stumbled forward, kneeling at the bedside.

"I missed you, love. I think Rose has caught the fever." Her voice was so soft. Broken. "Will you go to the market and get something, Fernan..."

"Yes," Wolfram whispered without thinking. "Yes, of course." Wolfram tried to focus on the woman and not what she held. He should get her some water... Or maybe...

He reached out, willing his hands to steady and pushed. The power was soft but there. A green glow in the dim room.

The woman sighed, eyes smiling up at him with relief. But then she never took back in the air...

The magic in his hands fluttered out. Nothing left to push toward.

Wolfram's stomach dropped.

He didn't move until Lucien returned with Gisela, and then it was only to close the woman's eyes. "We were too late."

Gisela was at his side in moments, her face a mask of concentration as she examined the woman.

Wolfram stood, anger hot beneath his skin. "Next time we won't be."

**********

**********
Marques nursed his second tankard as he watched Fernan and the other guards play a game of darts across the noisy tavern hall. Shou Shimeron as a whole was obscenely paranoid but, ironic as it was, keeping an eye on its guards seemed to be the least of its concerns. After all that Marques had observed, however, the likely answer for this little lapse was that Those In Charge simply didn't care what the guards got up to in their spare time as long as they kept the third class beyond the outer walls and the second class inside them.

While it was easy for Marques to observe and learn about the goings on beyond the outer walls and within the parts of the city designated for use by the second class, getting beyond the much taller white walls of the inner city had proved to be a nearly impossible task. The only citizens with access to everything were the clergy, and while second class citizens could train to become one of these holy men if they were born within the second ring, it was unheard of for someone who had been born Outside to be given the honor of attending the Institution. Besides, Marques had heard their preachings a dozen times since his arrival and, as good an actor as he was, he didn't think that he could fake that level of devotion about anything.

Especially anything as ridiculous as what went on at the daily Gatherings.

Attendance was not mandatory, but it might as well have been. Part of his duties as a guard was to take note of the whereabouts and doings of those who did not participate. It was the only reason that he was able to escape the clerics' dronings as often as he was.

Marques yawned. Exhaustion was one of the downsides to using roggen to numb the ache of living so close to the human's stones. Some days it felt like he was living off the stuff, as none of the food seemed to be completely free of the damned "blessing". But at least his habitual overindulgence helped to explain away the frequent vomiting. Alcoholism was a much better fault than being a spy. People liked it best when you had faults anyway. It comforted them.

Across the tavern, Fernan seemed to be growing bored of his game. Marques took another gulp of roggen and tried to keep his posture relaxed. It was only because of his connection to Fernan that he was able to get so deeply integrated into Shou Shimeron's system as quickly as he had, but the more he learned about the other man the more Marques had to fight the urge to strangle him while he slept.

"Lucien!" Fernan grinned as he approached. "I've taken the boys for all their coppers. What do you say we put them to good use fucking one of Clara's new boys?"

Marques took a slow sip of his tankard, finishing the last of it before tossing it on the polished counter top with a clatter. "As long as you're paying."

Fernan laughed and slapped him on the back.
Marques did his best to smile as he let Fernan lead him from the noisy tavern to the cool quiet air outside. Clara's was the only brothel in the second ring. It was clean by brothel standards, and fairly upscale as well, but neither of those was the reason that it was allowed to sell sex to Shou Shimeron's upstanding citizens. Clara's girls had the highest birth-rate in the city. While the average second class woman averaged three stillborn children to every breathing child, Clara's had a surplus of healthy babies. *Pure* babies.

Marques wondered what percentage of the blessed "pure" were conceived for three coppers a cunt. The boys were more expensive. Probably because they couldn't be used as breeding stock.

Still, Marques liked the place because of the stew and the fact that Fernan paid on the odd occasion when someone managed to catch his eye. Clara's great granddaughter, Astor, who ran the place now, made the best beef stew, and would sit and tell him all the latest gossip while Fernan spent his purse. It didn't hurt that Astor had a bit of a crush on him. A bit of a crush and a better mouth for cock-sucking than he had expected from a woman.

Without Astor, Marques might have given up hope. It was Astor who had whispered that some of their more lucrative clientele were pure. Pure citizens who had to sneak back and fourth to her establishment without being seen.

A secret way to the inner city.

And all Marques had to do was convince Astor to give him a tour.

********

********

Shou Shimeron
Third Ring
The Next Day

********

His head still hurt.

Fernan rubbed the bridge of his nose and cursed the sun. He didn't know how Lucien drank so much. It always left a taste in his mouth like he had spent the night eating ass instead of pounding it and a headache that was worse than listening to a Cleric.

He cursed again and kicked a scrap of roof that had fallen into the alley he was currently patrolling. His stomach growled and he decided it was past time for lunch.

Fernan had spent too much on his bit of fun with Lucien last night and so he headed for one of his favorite establishments outside the wall. The sort of place that wouldn't question a guard not paying his tab.

By the time Fernan reached the small inn his stomach was rolling with hunger so he ordered quickly before sitting in a corner to survey the room. There weren't many patrons this time of day. A bit late for lunch and early for dinner. Two men he recognized from his days before numbers were huddled nearby comparing asking prices for this season's crop. To think, without his numbers he would have been trapped outside like them. Fools.

Fernan shook his head and waited impatiently for the old innkeep to bring him his food. The only other person in the room was a young man sitting on one of the far benches. Staring. He was dirty, but through it Fernan could see golden hair. The hint of a tolerable body beneath loose clothes.
Fernan kept an eye on the boy while the innkeep brought him his food.

Why hadn't he seen him before?

Fernan had been starting to think that he had sampled all that was worth having in the third ring. It was possible, though, that this boy was the son of one of the farmers who lived farther out in the fields. Someone fresh.

He licked his lips as he stood, abandoning his empty plate to approach his target.

There was something different about the boy's face. Eyes the deepest green that Fernan had ever seen.

"What's your name?" Fernan stopped when he was close enough to lean on the boy's table.

"What's yours?"

Fernan blinked. No one questioned a guard. Still, the boy was pretty enough that he let the insult pass. He reached out and cupped the soft, smooth skin of the boy's cheek. "Does it matter?"

Green eyes flashed as the boy slapped away his hand. "Don't touch me!"

Everyone was staring at them. Quiet.

"Come with me," Fernan growled as he yanked the boy to his feet, pulling him outside and into one of the nearby alleys. The boy went with hardly a struggle. Good. Maybe now he had remembered his place. Anger boiled within him and he gripped the boy's arm until he hissed. Now that Fernan was a guard there was no reason for him to tolerate disrespect from any of the third-class filth. Waste of a pleasant fuck or no, Fernan would enjoy hurting this one before he turned him in to his superiors.

Once Fernan was sure that they were not being watched, he forced the boy against the wall. "I touch what I please, boy. How dare you disobey a guard?"

There was so much hate in those eyes, but the boy did not resist him. His body went almost completely limp. "I-- I didn't mean to offend, Sir. I was only... I'm looking for someone. I'm only... I'm looking for someone. Can you tell me, please?" Long lashes fluttered. Pink lips moved slowly, forming words. 'I'm looking for a guard named 'Fernan'. I heard-- I heard that I might be able to find him on this side of town. Please, Sir. I have a message from his wife."

Fernan had expected the boy to fight. Had wanted it. He did so like it when they squirmed. Fernan sighed and loosened his grip on the boy's arms. "What could that woman possibly want? She saw me taken..." He shook his head. Laughed. He had almost forgotten about Rosalina. "I have a new wife now. Tell her that when I'm done with you, boy. Tell her I wouldn't touch her again for all the--"

Pain.

He gasped, grabbed the hand that was pressed against his chest. Hot.

Too hot.

The pain stole his breath-- it felt like the air in his lungs had turned to steam-- like his chest was melting-- sticking to his clothes-- it smelled like roasting meat.
Burning.

He wanted it to stop. He would do anything to make it stop.

The boy was talking to him. Saying things-- telling him to talk-- wanting him to say something-- something that would make the pain go away-- but he couldn't breathe.

Everything burned. It burned until there was nothing else.

********
********

Wolfram was alive. Alive with power. Raw and full and so good that he wanted to laugh. To fuck. Wanted to kiss Yuuri until--

Yuuri.

The man was dead. He had killed...

Yuuri would...

"Gods," he breathed, sliding down the wall at his back until he was sitting on the dirt-covered stone of the alley. Blood trickling between the stones toward him.

Wolfram had killed men before. He was no innocent to the shock. To the guilt of taking another life... But they had always had a sword in their hand. They had always been trying to kill him-- the people he loved.

This man. Fernan. Husband of the woman in the house. Father of the dead child in her arms. This man was worth killing but somehow--

It was different.

It had been so easy.

Wolfram's stomach rolled. He had lost control. The world was still here, around him, but he had lost control. What if it happened again?

The others would find him soon. See what he had done. Yuuri would see what he had done.

Wolfram had left Yuuri with Weller while he, Lucien, and Grier had split up to see what could be overheard by keeping to places that Shou Shimeron's guards were known to frequent. The same thing they had been doing for the past three days. The same thing Wolfram had been doing when he had heard one of the guards mention someone named Fernan.

There was no way of knowing that the Fernan they had mentioned was the same Fernan that had abandoned his family, but somehow Wolfram wasn't able to make himself stop thinking about the chances that it was. And then today. The cold dark look in the guard's eyes as he had studied Wolfram from across the room had been reason enough for Wolfram to abandon his act of indifference. To do whatever it took to find out... And then...

The things Fernan had said had only confirmed it.

"I have a new wife now. Tell her that when I'm done with you, boy."

And now Fernan was dead.
And Wolfram didn't know if he would ever be able to trust himself again.

If the others would able to trust him again. If Yuuri...

If Yuuri ran out of patience and ordered Weller to take him into the city to 'help'. The wimp only had so much patience-- it was only a matter of time until Yuuri saw what he had done.

He could always leave. Abandon the body. No one would ever have to know-- but then-- Wolfram didn't know if he would ever be able to bring himself to tell Yuuri what he had done. He had to tell Yuuri what he had done, didn't he? Yuuri was the only one who could ever save him from himself. If he didn't tell Yuuri there wouldn't be any hope left for him--

"Wolf?"

Wolfram jerked himself back into the moment. Stood. Heart beating too fast. Saw the figure standing just a few feet away.

Standing over Fernan's body.

It took Wolfram's panicked mind several seconds to realize that it wasn't Yuuri. That it wasn't Yuuri who had found him at his worst.

"Marques?" His voice was soft. Still in shock.

"What are you doing here? Besides taking out the trash, that is." Marques smiled. Spoke like they were having tea in the gardens. "But really, Wolf, it's too dangerous for you to be here. I'm taking care of things. You should go back and--"

"Why are you here? What are you doing here?!" Rage pooled inside him again and Wolfram could feel the sting of his nails digging into his palms as he clenched his hands into fists. He stepped over Fernan to get closer and--

CRACK!

His hand hurt. Marques was on the ground.

"Ow!" Marques hissed, clutching his face.

"Ow?" Wolfram almost laughed. Everything seemed far away. Darkness creeping in.

It was always like this. It had always been like this. There couldn't have ever been anything else. In the darkness he didn't have to close his eyes to become nothing.

It all came rushing back. The smell of burnt flesh around him became his own. Wolfram could remember the feel of it. The pain of everything that had been done to him in that fucking darkness. The way he had wanted the colors to swallow him whole. Anything to keep away the dark.

How it felt to want to die.

Marques had helped those men. Helped those men hurt him.

Everything had hurt so much.

Grier had told him how Marques had "saved" him. "Saved" him before running like a criminal.

Wolfram remembered all the things that the "Yuuri" his broken mind had made had done.

Giving him the will to live far longer than he would have been capable of on his own.

Wolfram hadn't thought much about Marques since he had run. He had tried not to think about anything that reminded him of that time. It was still... difficult.

On some level Wolfram knew that Marques had helped him in his own perverted-bastard sort of way, but it really didn't help dismiss the rage he felt inside. The lust for revenge.

Marques staggered to his feet. "What is it with you and hitting me?"

"What is it with you and deserving it?"

"I saved you, you ungrateful--" Marques stopped himself. Took a breath. "Look, there's a lot going on here that you don't understand."

Wolfram crossed his arms to keep himself from hurting the other man further. "Then enlighten me."

Marques flicked his gaze down to Fernan's body. "Here might not be the best place for such sensitive discussions, don't you think?"

Wolfram had to close his eyes for a moment to steady himself. "Right. Fine." He forced himself to look down at the man that he had killed. At the blood thickening on the cobblestone. "What should we do with--"

Marques cursed. "I just remembered that the bastard was useful... Well it can't be helped. We can just leave him."

Wolfram blinked. "But he's a guard."

"Exactly." Marques turned. Started walking back down the alley the way they had come. "He won't be missed."

* * *

By nightfall everyone had assembled in Fernan's old barn to hear what Marques had to say for himself.

Since Wolfram had come back, Yuuri hadn't left his side. Holding his hand. Glaring at Marques. Things that Wolfram should have loved but now...

Now all he could think about was Fernan's dead body. The things that had happened to him while he was in the dark. The way power still tingled beneath his skin, waiting to be free. Even the pain of being close to the human's stones had numbed. Lost in the magnitude of Ethne's fire. Ethne's curse.

Would Yuuri even want to touch him again once he found out what Wolfram had done? Wolfram hadn't even intended for Yuuri to find out about Fernan's wife and child but Gisela had ruined that. Piping up with the truth when they returned and Yuuri asked where they had all been. Why they had come back covered in dirt.

Yuuri had been upset-- just like Wolfram had known he would be. Yuuri was already upset about how Shou Shimeron treated its third class. He didn't need to see it first hand. Wolfram should have
been able to protect him from that. And now...

Yuuri tightened his grip on Wolfram's arm. Looked at him with worried black eyes.

Wolfram shook his head. He couldn't. Not now. Not when he should be keeping an eye on Marques-- Even if Lucien appeared to have that under control. His corporal hadn't looked at anything else since Marques had arrived.

Marques. Typical Marques hadn't stopped talking since they had arrived. Laughing at his own jokes and being generally snarky and loud but not saying anything. Not anything that even hinted at whatever games he was playing, at least. Marques only seemed to pause to devour half of the stew that Hector had made from what was left in Fernan's larder.

Gisela was the only one who seemed to be enjoying Marques' sudden appearance at the camp. Fussing over his apparent "over-exposure" to human stones and asking him question after question about how the people here were able to cope with their constant exposure to the fungus.

Wolfram gritted his teeth. He supposed it was partly his own fault. He had told Marques to wait for Grier to begin explaining himself. Grier was the best at picking up on what people weren't saying and Wolfram didn't want to risk missing anything by being over-eager.

But now Grier was back and it was time to begin. Wolfram took a deep breath and removed his husband's hand from his. He couldn't afford to be distracted.

"So," he began simply. "We're waiting."

Marques pouted. "Typical Wolf. All work and no fun."

"Bastard," Wolfram hissed. He would have stood if Yuuri hadn't grabbed his thigh beneath the table.

"Play nice, kiddos." Grier's smirk was dangerous. "Let's not forget why we're here."

Wolfram grumbled and crossed his arms.

"You deserted." Weller seemed almost as angry as Wolfram felt. "Why?"

"A reason with which you are intimately familiar, Sir Weller." Marques leaned back in his seat. "Supposing the rumors are true."

Weller's chair clattered to the floor as he stood.

"Conrad!" Yuuri's voice was the only thing that stopped the rush of motion. "Everyone, stop it! Just stop."

The room was painfully still. All eyes on Yuuri.

"Sit down, Conrad." Yuuri managed to keep his voice calm even though Wolfram could feel his husband's grip tighten on his leg. Feel the humidity rise-- crackle with power in the air around them. "Marques, tell us what happened. What you had to do with those men who took Wolfram-- And what you're doing here."

Weller sat, and Marques managed to look uncomfortable for the first time since they had arrived.

Marques' discomfort vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "I left because Shinou told me to leave. I was with Velasco because that was where Shinou told me to be. Because that was the only
place where I had any hope of saving Wolf."

Wolfram couldn't help but snort. "And you're here because Shinou told you to be here as well, I imagine."

Marques only smirked.

"Why you?" Grier leaned forward. "Why would Shinou talk to you instead of anyone else? Instead of the sage?"

"You'd have to ask him." Marques winked. "I am but a humble-- and loyal-- servant of Lord Shinou."

Wolfram frowned. Bullshit. Marques had always been a good soldier, but he was hardly the most obedient. He was more likely to question orders than follow them. Sometimes it had led to an improvement of strategy, true, but more times than not it had only created arguments. A waste of time. Wolfram couldn't imagine Marques following Shinou's orders without asking questions. Whether Shinou decided to answer them or not was another matter entirely...

"Since when, Marques? Since when?" Lucien's voice was shaking. Hands clasped-- knuckles white on the table in front of him. "You just vanished."

"Luke--"

"No!" Lucien snapped, voice rising with his anger. "I don't care how self-important seeing Shinou made you feel-- But you would never... You wouldn't let anyone use you like some sort of pawn! I know you never cared what anyone thought-- that there was never any point to all those times when you were called a deserter and I defended you because you don't care. Just--"

"I was bored." Marques said it like it was nothing. Like it explained everything.

It certainly explained the hurt on his corporal's face.

But then Lucien stood. Left the barn with a mumbled apology and too-quick steps.

The stunned silence was broken by Marques's voice. "I was bored..." He was looking at the door. The last place that Lucien had been. "Shinou offered adventure. Things that I was the only one to know." Marques shook his head and smirked. "Self-important... Luke knows me too well."

Not well enough to keep himself from getting hurt. Wolfram put his hand on the wimp's where it still clutched his leg. At least Lucien had gotten Marques to explain his behavior in a way that Wolfram could believe. "So what have you learned?" Wolfram managed to keep his voice neutral. "How will Shinou's plans for you help us now?"

Marques's grin was dangerously wide. "My status as a city guard should come in handy, for one."

So that was how Marques had come to know Fernan.

"And how did you accomplish that?" Grier was the only one who managed to look unimpressed.

"I was given numbers." He chuckled. "You've all seen the messages, I imagine?"

"Numbers manifest the chosen," Grier nodded.

"That they do." Marques shook his head. "Anyway, I was here for a while, just watching. Shinou wasn't very specific about his instructions so I had to figure out a lot on my own. Eventually I
realized that the only one who really seemed to notice the writings were the guards, and so I asked one." Dark eyes flicked in Wolfram's direction. "That guard brought me into the second ring of the city. Apparently that's how a lot of the guards got their job. The only citizens outside who are well enough to notice the graffiti on the walls seem to be the ones with an ability to... resist the effects of the blessing."

"So the second class who are born outside the city are filtered in that way," Sir Grier simplified. "So you can get past the walls."

Marques shook his head. "Being a guard-- second class-- only gets you through the first set of walls. Only the pure are allowed in the inner city."

"So really you can't help us all that much." Weller glared.

Marques leaned back into his chair, his self-satisfied grin firmly in place. "Can't I?"

"Spit it out, Marques," Wolfram snapped. "You're wasting our time."

Marques pouted. "No fun." A sigh. "I found a way in."

"How?" Grier asked.

"Through a brothel. There's a way to sneak the pure clientele in and out without damaging their reputations."

Wolfram snorted. "Of course you would find a way through a brothel."

Marques didn't even have the courtesy to look offended. "Of course."

* * *

Yuuri was restless.

Wolfram was doing his best to lie still. Even his breathing. But the Conversation could only be avoided for so long.

It had taken them several hours to agree on the plans for the following day, and by that time late night had shifted to early morning. Normally everyone but Gisela, Hector and Erec and whoever was on guard duty slept up in the barn's loft, but Yuuri had insisted that Marques sleep down below. At first Wolfram had assumed that it was only the wimp being jealous or protective, but the results suggested that his husband was far cleverer than he sometimes seemed.

Putting Marques below meant that Weller stayed down as well to keep a better eye on him. With Weller suitably distracted and Grier on watch, that left them alone up in the loft-- alone, at least, until Lucien decided to stop moping outside and go to sleep.

"Wolf?"

Wolfram tried not to tense and failed.

Yuuri scooted closer to him beneath the blankets. Wolfram could feel how warm he was. "I know something's wrong. Talk to me."

Wolfram rolled away, putting his back to the wimp.

"Is it Marques? I know you said he--"
"What?!" Wolfram interrupted, incredulous. "No!"

Yuuri's voice was painfully earnest. "Wolfram, it's okay. I know the two of you didn't have the best relationship... Not to mention him being there while you... while all that stuff was happening and... and he looked like me... It's okay to be upset about it."

"I don't--" He sighed. "Marques is the least of it."

Yuuri paused. Puzzled. "Then what is it?"

Wolfram moved to his back. Brought his hands up to cover his face.

"Wolfra--"

"You don't want to know. Wimp. Just-- ooph"

Yuuri had maneuvered his entire body on top of him. It felt like all his weight was on his chest. The wimp pulled Wolfram's hands away from his face and pressed their noses together.

Wolfram opened his eyes. "Yuuri..."

Yuuri kissed him, quick and soft, before sighing and settling his face into the crook between Wolfram's neck and shoulder. "Wolfram," he whined.

"You're ridiculous."

"But you love me anyway, right?" Yuuri snuggled closer.

Wolfram couldn't resist returning the embrace. Yuuri. How could he ever live with himself if he lost this?

Wolfram's breath shook as he took in air. Exhaled. "I... Remember the people we found here? Who lived in this house?"

He felt Yuuri nod. Hold him tighter. "We were too late to help them..."

Wolfram squeezed his eyes shut again. He couldn't believe he was telling Yuuri this, but once he had started the words just kept tumbling out. Each one leaving him more numb. Empty. "The woman who died-- she talked to me before... She said her husband's name was Fernan. The other day I heard one of the guards talking about someone named Fernan and so after that I made sure to return to the same area." Another shaking breath. "Today there was a guard-- I don't know why but something about him seemed wrong and when he-- I confronted him and--"

Yuuri had shifted. Wolfram knew he was looking at him but he couldn't bring himself to open his eyes-- to see Yuuri's horrified face.

"I killed him."

And then it all came back. The anger. The hot raw power that Ethne's fire had left-- still tingling-- within him. The smell of Fernan's flesh.

"I killed him. I killed a human with fire in a land so full of human stones that until that moment everything ached. I was angry-- what he did to his family-- that child-- I lost control. I just-- It's not that I killed that bastard-- I'm glad he's dead but-- You... You--"

"I understand." Yuuri's voice was soft. "I still love you."
Wolfram opened his eyes in shock. "What?"

"I'm not sure I agree with what you did... but I understand why you did it. Ethne... I know you don't tell me everything that happens when I'm the Maou but I know..." Yuuri bit his lip. "It's why I've been so good, you know... Staying here while you and Yozak and Lucien-- while everyone goes out into the city. Just thinking about the way that these people have been treated... I understand."

"But you don't, Yuuri." Wolfram hated how broken his voice sounded. "If I really am Gael's king-- I can't afford to lose my temper-- To lose control of my power-- What if I--"

Yuuri kissed him. "You won't."

"You can't. You can't know that, Yuuri!"

"I can." Yuuri kissed him again. Lips so warm-- soft against his own. "I believe in you. No matter how bad the other prophecy might be, I know you, Wolfram. As much of a temper as you may have, there's nothing that could make you angry enough that you would destroy this world."

"If Sara kills you. If you or Greta or--"

Yuuri's kisses could only stop him for so long.

"If I lost you I don't know what I might be capable of."

For a while Yuuri was quiet. Then, "Even if I died you'd never lose me. And I have no intention of dying any time soon." He looked away. "I know you'll think it's a stupid thing to depend on-- that it's dangerous-- but no matter what... Even if Sara was the one who did this to his people... Even if there's an army-- I've always been able to survive before. To protect you and Greta and everyone else. As dangerous as using magic in human territory is supposed to be I've always come out alright in the end."

"Idiot."

Yuuri laughed at him. "Maybe. But I'm your idiot."

Wolfram looked up at the rafters. Moonlight creeping in between the slats. How was Yuuri able to make everything seem like it would turn out alright in the end? How was his presence-- his weight- - enough to make Wolfram believe it for just this moment? Tomorrow he would be worried-- remember all the things that the warmth of Yuuri's body made him forget-- but for tonight...

Yuuri made a noise when Wolfram kissed him. Rolled so that he was the one using his weight to hold Yuuri-- hot and squirming slightly beneath him. It had been a long time, too long, since he had gotten to fully enjoy the benefits of finally having Yuuri as his husband.

Wolfram poured all of his feelings into the kiss. Frustration. Fear. Yuuri's mouth accepted all that Wolfram had to give and more. Tongue pressing eagerly against his own until everything in Wolfram's mind seemed far away and only his body-- heat-- remained.

********

Yuuri hadn't expected... Well, any of it.

The things that Wolfram had said. Done.
His own ability to make it sound like everything would be alright when the reality was that Yuuri was just as scared as Wolfram seemed to be, if for different reasons. Yuuri had meant everything that he had said to Wolfram. Everything. The things that worried him... were hard to remember with Wolfram kissing him like this. Pressing him down. Pressure in all the right places.

It had been so long.

Wolfram made a desperate noise as he attacked Yuuri's mouth and it was all he could do to submit. He wanted to submit.

Ever since that night-- their wedding night-- it had only gotten worse. Yuuri wanted to feel Wolfram inside of him. Everywhere. That place.

They had really only done it that one time. Sure, there had been a week of blissful Other Things. Mouths and hands and needy bodies pressed together. But Yuuri had been too afraid of not being... clean enough. The first time he had been literally scraped from head to toe in preparation and Yuuri had been too afraid that that was the sort of cleaning that Wolfram had expected every time. After all, Wolfram was all about doing things "properly", and it was such an awkward subject that Yuuri hadn't really been able to muster the courage to ask about the expected protocol. That, and there had been that one moment in the bathroom afterward when the result of Wolfram's orgasm had left him... Yuuri had barely managed to contain his embarrassment having gone through it in a private bathroom, and the idea of dealing with it in the woods or outhouse was pretty much unimaginable.

But it had been so long. And Yuuri was so hard that he just couldn't bring himself to care.

Yuuri shifted-- gasped-- as Wolfram's body fell into the v of his spread legs. Hard on hard. His hands found their way under Wolfram's nightshirt and he could feel the muscles of Wolfram's back shifting beneath his fingers. More.

"Wolf..." he begged. Breaking the kiss.

But then Wolfram's mouth was on his neck and Yuuri forgot what he was trying to say. It had been so long since they had gotten to do anything and he was already so close. Wolfram was pushing up the fabric of his shirt and so he arched, doing everything he could to encourage him. Gasping as Wolfram's kisses moved from his neck-- lower.

Yuuri had to bite his lip to keep from making some kind of embarrassing sound when hot breath ghosted over a nipple. Teasing him. Wolfram had even moved his weight off of Yuuri's crotch and suddenly nothing was more important than Wolfram touching him. Somewhere. Anywhere. Now.

The fabric of his nightshirt was bunched under his arms and neck, limiting his movement. He shifted, tried to draw it over his head and be done with it, but he was half-way through the process when Wolfram stopped him. Trapped his arms over his head with his own shirt and looked at him.

Green eyes dark.

Yuuri squirmed. Blushed.

"Perfect." Wolfram's other hand was trailing patterns on Yuuri's exposed chest and stomach. Hovering at the waistband of his pajamas. Never quite going lower.

Yuuri could feel his blush spreading to his ears. He bit his lip again to keep himself from saying anything stupid. Yuuri tried to free his hands. Touch. But Wolfram made a warning sound. Tightened his grip on the fabric trapping Yuuri's arms.

"It's been a long time, Wimp." Wolfram's voice was suddenly close. Soft and hot on his neck.
"How long do you think you'll last if I let you go?"

Wolfram still wasn't really touching him at all-- just the heat of his body. *Almost.* Yuuri arched his hips but Wolfram moved away. Kissed his neck instead.

For a moment Yuuri wanted to fight it. To prove to Wolfram that he could be in control-- but then he realized there wasn't much point. Yuuri knew that if he wanted he could break free. That he could struggle. That if he wanted he could hold his own.

But right now Yuuri wanted something else. And Wolfram-- Wolfram wouldn't have put him in a position like this if he didn't need the control it gave him.

Yuuri turned his head, offering Wolfram more of his neck while simultaneously giving himself a better view of the ladder. How long would their stolen moment of privacy last? "Wolfram... You know I want to do this but..."

Wolfram's mouth stopped its motions on his neck. "We could pull up the ladder."

Yuuri blinked. "But then everyone will know!"

Wolfram chuckled at him. "I think they already know, wimp." Then he kissed his nose. "We're up here alone after all. What newlyweds would pass up an opportunity like this? Lucien's probably already decided to sleep elsewhere."

"Ugh," Yuuri groaned, squeezing his eyes shut as if it would help rid his mind of the image of everyone else down there... *knowing* what they were up to.

"Maybe you'll just have to be quiet, wimp." That hot mouth was on his neck again, the sensitive skin below his ear. "So they don't know *exactly* what we're up to."

Yuuri had to bite his lip to keep back a noise. "Wolfram--"

"Shh." And then the hand was gone from the fabric holding his wrists. "How long do you think you can last? No moving? No sounds? Hhn?"

"Long enough."

Wolfram's eyebrow rose at the challenge. Face inches from his own.

"But next time it's your turn."


Since the fabric had gone loose, Yuuri locked his pinkies together over his head. If Wolfram was making this a challenge, Yuuri was going to do his best not disappoint him. Just because Wolfram had inhuman stamina on his side... and it had been so long... and Wolfram was looking at him like it had been so long... He swallowed.

Wolfram must have seen the discomfort in his face because a moment later he was kissing him. The kind of kiss that Yuuri was sure only belonged to Wolfram. The kind of kiss that made him dizzy and hot and all too aware of how much the other boy needed him. Loved him.

Wolfram hardly ever said it. That he loved him. But every day-- especially moments like this. He made sure that Yuuri knew it anyway.
One of Wolfram's hands had made its way into Yuuri's hair. Holding so tight that the pain was almost enough to distract him from the heat that was spreading across his flesh. Pooling in his groin. His pajama bottoms seemed so thin. Incapable of stopping the heat that Wolfram's body put off. The head of his cock was rubbing at the damp spot on the tented fabric—not enough. Yuuri used the floor as leverage to arch himself up against Wolfram's body, but contact only lasted for half a moment before Wolfram pulled away.

"Patience."

Yuuri had to clench his jaw to keep from saying anything. It was worth it for the look of approval on Wolfram's face.

Wolfram kept one hand in Yuuri's hair while the other moved down to make patterns on his chest. Circle a nipple. Yuuri could feel—see the look of satisfaction on Wolfram's face as the flesh tightened. Nerves seeming to connect straight down to where that touch was needed most. Making everything in between burn for more contact.

Yuuri shivered. Gasped, when Wolfram's hot mouth lowered to his chest. Hot mouth. Sucking on his other nipple while his fingers continued teasing.

He couldn't breathe. Breathing would mean making a sound. Admitting how much his body wanted this. His cock twitched and Yuuri could feel precome dripping down onto his stomach. Cooling as it dried. He shouldn't want this. It shouldn't feel this good. Boys weren't supposed to--

A particularly hard suck followed by a swipe of tongue had him panting--air catching in his throat--too loud after so much quiet. Wolfram's mouth moved lower almost at once. Hand no longer in Yuuri's hair. Lower.

Yuuri arched eagerly as Wolfram slid his pajama bottoms over his hips. His knees.

For a moment Yuuri felt naked--but then Wolfram's mouth was on his cock and he forgot how to feel anything else. His hands were in Wolfram's hair-- urging him on--his own voice in his ears. Whispered pleas. "Please. Now... *Fuck now.*"

Wolfram's mouth came off him and Yuuri almost screamed. Wolfram kissed the head of his cock before sticking two fingers into his mouth. Yuuri watched him. *Clenched* in anticipation.

Wolfram started slowly. Mouth back on Yuuri's cock at first. Fingers only brushing lower. Yuuri rocked his hips forward. Knew that he would die if Wolfram didn't put something in him now. Wolfram's tongue was moving over the head. His breath was so hot. Everything was so hot. And then his fingers were in him--burning--*there*. Rubbing. Pressing.

*Oh.*

Yuuri bit his fist to keep from screaming. Come pulsing out of him in waves. Wolfram sucking him until it was too much. Too sensitive. Then kissing his stomach. Bellybutton. Fingers slowly sliding out of him.

Minutes later Yuuri finally managed to catch his breath. Wolfram was looking down at him with such contentment that for a moment Yuuri forgot that he still hadn't come.

Yuuri sat up slowly, the muscles in his legs still twitching in the aftermath. Wolfram only watched. Eyes still hungry. Waiting. Wanting.

Yuuri leaned forward to kiss him. Mouth somehow warmer--softer after so much work. "Your
"turn," he managed, before kissing him again. Tugging at the night-shirt that still covered him.

Wolfram opened his mouth but Yuuri pushed his tongue inside, silencing any protest that might have come.

He could hardly wait to make Wolfram come. Lose that perfect composure. Watch Wolfram slam into him until both of them were gasping and lost.

Removing Wolfram's night shirt would mean breaking the kiss. This hot-- sweet-- mind numbing connection of mouths and tongues and shared breathing, and so Yuuri did his best to pull down Wolfram's pants instead. Free the thick, hard, cock he knew was waiting for him beneath thin fabric. The ridiculous underwear he knew his husband still preferred to wear even to bed.

Wolfram held him tighter as Yuuri's fingers brushed against bare flesh. Wolfram's underwear had already been rendered mostly useless, the majority of his erection free and pressed almost flat against his stomach, but Yuuri managed to push it down further, under his sack, making sensitive, damp, flesh all the more available to his eager fingers. Yuuri pushed Wolfram back, until he couldn't anymore and Wolfram was flat against the wooden floor of the loft. Until Yuuri was sure that beneath his kisses his husband was spread before him, waiting to be devoured.

And so Yuuri finally leaned back. Took in the sight of pale skin and dark eyes. The way the shadows fell over the strength of his arms-- stomach-- cock. The way that Wolfram was looking at him. Wanting him.

"I want you to--" Yuuri bit his lip. Reached out to touch hard flesh, already slick with sweat and precome.

He wanted it so much. Why couldn't he say it?

"Yuuri." Wolfram's voice was pained. "Gods."


And then he couldn't help himself from putting even more of Wolfram's perfect cock into his mouth-- throat-- while at the same time using what little wetness had spilled onto his hand to reach between his own legs. Tug at the base of his renewed erection. Only hinting at the kind of stimulation he craved.


But Yuuri's fingers seemed to know exactly where they were needed. Moving back. Behind his balls. Teasing. Pressing inside. Rubbing. He moaned. Looked up at Wolfram helplessly for a moment before swallowing his cock-- as if that would distract him from what Yuuri was doing. The way his own body had betrayed him. Wolfram's hands were in his hair. Tight. So good in his throat. Having Wolfram in him. In him. His own fingers were good but the longer he did it-- the angle of his wrist-- his hand wanted to cramp.

Wolfram's eyes were on him. So much expression in his face that it was overwhelming. Like watching what Yuuri was doing to himself was somehow better than what Yuuri was doing to Wolfram with his mouth.

Unacceptable. Yuuri did his best to concentrate on the things that made Wolfram shiver. Using his other hand to cover the base when he needed to breathe. Needing to distract Wolfram from the
shame of what his body had reduced him to.

Wolfram's orgasm took him by surprise and he coughed-- sputtering excess onto the floor. Wolfram's thigh.

He was so busy trying not to choke that Wolfram pinned him easily, replacing fingers with his own.

"Mine," he hissed. Pulled out his fingers only to add a third. "Only I can do this do you."

Yuuri couldn't even answer. Feeling was too much. He reached down to tug his cock but Wolfram slapped his hand away. Covering him with his mouth instead.

It was so--

**Hot.**

Heat pooling. Wolfram still hadn't managed to get him successfully down his throat but somehow it still managed to feel like he was everywhere at once. Hot. Wolfram's fingers seemed to know exactly where to go. How much pressure-- Stretching-- Filling--

Wolfram's mouth came off his cock-- fingers came out of him-- and Yuuri almost died. Wolfram's voice was in his ear. Telling him to hush. To keep still. But he was being quiet and still and he only wanted-- He moaned. Something bigger than fingers was pressing against him. Hot. Pressing. Rocking forward but never quite enough to breach. Sometimes catching on the loosened rim. The head of Wolfram's still-hard cock was so wet-- so soft-- hot and--

Yuuri gasped, shuddering as he came for the second time. Come pulsing between them. Warm. Wet.

Wolfram watched him recover with satisfied eyes, holding him for long moments despite the stickiness that was beginning to dry between them.

"Guh," Yuuri managed once he found his breath. "Mess..."

Wolfram shook his head, half-laughed. "Wimp."

********

********

Four Hours Later

********

Lucien had fallen asleep cold and miserable and mortified, and so it was a shock to wake feeling warmer and more safe than he could remember being in months. The first thing he noticed was that he was on the ground instead of propped up against the wall of the barn like he had been when he must have fallen asleep. The second thing was that the source of the warm comforting feelings was none of the above.

Marques’s arms tightened around him and he wiggled closer, which was impressive given how closely the other man was presently spooned against his back.

Shame colored his face in an instant and Lucien went from half-asleep to struggling in seconds. "What are you doing," he hissed.
"Well I was sleeping." Marques made no efforts to help him escape, instead throwing his leg over Lucien to better entangle them. "I missed you."

Lucien nearly laughed at the absurdity of the statement. Marques had already proved he was quite incapable of missing anyone, let alone him.

Gods he had made such a fool of himself last night...

He stopped struggling and sighed instead. "What do you want, Marques?"

The other boy's mouth was pressed against the back of his neck. "I wanted to apologize. You were upset and..." A wet kiss. "I wanted to make it better."

For a moment Lucien didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or cry but in the end he settled for neither. He should have learned long ago that being angry at Marques for getting bored or sleeping with other people was like getting mad at a dog for licking its balls. It was his own fault for wishfully assigning Marques any sort of "normal" emotions in his own mind.

Lucien let out another heavy sigh and twisted in Marques's arms. Looked at the face that he had missed, despite himself, for so long. At the shadows under his eyes and sickly hollow of his cheeks.

"What happened to you?"

Marques grinned at him. "Only symptoms of being away from you, love."

Lucien snorted. "More like symptoms of being in human territory for far too long. You'll kill yourself."

"Ah yes, but all for the greater good!"

"Idiot." Lucien sat up, half-surprised that Marques let him. "You can't really be thinking like that."

Marques gave a dramatic pout. "But it sounds so heroic!"

Lucien shook his head. He didn't know how, but somehow Marques managed to look adorable. Half-dead and sprawled on the ground with that stupid pout on his face. "What are you doing, Marques. Really?"

Marques stretched. Then settled with his hands behind his head. "Besides saving the world?" A sigh. "I have no idea... I never thought it would take so long, to be honest."

"You left after Soushi tried to kill everyone. It's been... close to two years."

"It feels like longer." Marques closed his eyes.

Lucien moved dark hair away from the other boy's forehead. Ignored the way his stomach flipped when he smiled. "The last time I saw you... you tied me up naked in a barn." The memory was enough to wipe the smile from his lips before Marques opened his eyes.

"Mmm yes," Marques purred. "You looked so pretty."

And then Marques' hand was on the back of his neck. Pulling him down into a kiss he couldn't quite bring himself to fight.

"I really did miss you, Luke." Marques breath was hot on his lips. "Lucien..."
"Bastard," Lucien choked out between kisses. "Idiot."

Lucien only managed to really break the kiss when Marques reached between them for his cock. As much as that part of him might want Marques to make use of his... talents... Lucien didn't need to add being discovered being fucked by Marques behind the barn to his list of humiliations in the past twenty-four hours.

Lucien was able to to break the kiss but he wasn't able to stop himself from bucking forward into Marques' practiced hand.

"So eager... Gods, I missed you."

Lucien opened his mouth to protest but all that came out was an embarrassing whine and he was lost. Lost and at the mercy of Marques's mouth and hands.

Feeling wanted.

* * *

Later Lucien winced as he climbed into the back of the horse-drawn cart and cursed himself for falling victim to Marques's charms yet again. At least no one had discovered them. One small mercy in the downward spiral of shame that seemed to be his life.

Still, things could have been worse and he was glad he wasn't riding in the saddle. They had covered the bottom of the cart with hay to make the journey more comfortable, but it could only do so much. Wolfram and His Majesty were already situated in the back and Lucien did his best not to smile at the look of indignation on his Lieutenant's face. As pretty as Wolfram was, Lucien had never seen the other boy quite so miserable as he was when forced to wear women's dress. Rumors about his sleeping attire once engaged to His Majesty aside, Wolfram had always loathed anything that made him look feminine.

His Majesty seemed to be handling his new attire somewhat better. Neither of the dresses the two wore were particularly fancy, or clean for that matter, but Marques had assured them-- and Sir Grier had agreed-- that it was all for the best.

The plan was to sneak the three of them in first, with Lucien and Wolfram posing as brother and sister and His Majesty as another found girl with the potential to be second-class. According to Marques, the occurrence was rare, but not unheard of. It was more common for second class men to be found outside the walls, since men were more likely to travel close enough to the city to see the markings and be given numbers. While men who were discovered to be second class were often made into city guards given their familiarity with the outside, women who were found were taken, without exception, to Clara's.

Lucien snorted and shook his head. Of course Marques's great plan to get them all inside would involve a brothel.

Once the three of them were safely past the first set of gates and within the brothel-- hopefully not to be put to work on the first day, lest the Lieutenant have a reason to burn the place to the ground-- Marques would return to the city's outermost gate, where he, Sir Weller and Sir Grier, would neutralize the guards on duty and then sneak in to Clara's to meet the rest of them. Once assembled they would make the trip through the brothel's secret path under the remaining walls to the innermost part of the capital before anyone could be the wiser about the fate of a few unlucky guards.
At first they had thought of having Sir Weller and Sir Grier masquerade as city guards themselves, but Marques had assured them that since there were so few guards in the second ring they all knew each other by face. Sir Weller had hated the idea of not being able to protect His Majesty directly, but even he had had to admit that it would be easier to go unnoticed in smaller groups. And, though no one had said anything aloud, easier for the two of them to dispose of complications without worrying about their king's heightened sense of morality in the heat of battle.

It was a dangerous plan, and far from perfect, but it was the best they had.

Gisela, Hector and Erec were to stay behind, to watch for signals from any of the other of their now separated band currently located in the surrounding area. Gisela wouldn't be able to use her healing magic so close to human stones anyway, and she was more capable of leading and adapting to problems as they arose than any of the human troops that had only been trained for a matter of months. Orders were to stay put and not raise attention until it was time to mount the final attack.

The whole thing was designed to minimize civilian casualties, and take enough of the guards by surprise that killing them wouldn't be necessary. The social structure of the entire kingdom seemed so dependent on Saralegui as their leader that they were sure that once he was taken care of there shouldn't be much of a struggle to put the kingdom under a temporary system until the whole business with the rye fungus was dealt with. What "taken care of" meant seemed to depend on who you were talking to. His Majesty seemed to be intent on talking to the young sovereign while the Lieutenant...

Well, hopefully the two would balance each other out.

********
********
Wolfram hated every inch of skin that the dress came into contact with. Grier hadn't told him where he had found the peasant garb for him and Yuuri to wear. Wolfram hadn't asked, but he had known.

It made it even harder to regret what he had done for Fernan.

Wolfram took a calming breath and focused on the warm place where Yuuri leaned against him, his head on Wolfram's shoulder. He was glad that Yuuri was able to get more rest. They hadn't gotten much sleep, and it was possible that he would have to use his magic before the day was out. Despite his husband's confidence, Wolfram understood the risks too well not to have his doubts. Wolfram pulled Yuuri closer against him. He wouldn't let that happen. For the first time, a small part of Wolfram hoped that Saralegui really was innocent in everything that had been done to him. Anything to spare his wimp. Anything to lessen the risk that either of their emotions-- their magic-- would act beyond their control

His moment of benevolence was brief and faded to hardly a memory as the carriage rolled through the outer city of Shou Shimeron. There was so much sickness here. Dirt and filth and decay. It was a smell that he would never be able to forget.

It was unforgivable for a king to do nothing when his people were suffering this much. Unforgivable.

On the other side of the carriage, Lucein had fallen asleep as well, curled up on his side. It was just the four of them now, including Marques. Weller and Grier had separated from them just outside of town to wait for dark.

As the carriage rolled between the uneven cobblestone of Shou Shimeron's streets Wolfram could feel the adrenaline stirring in his chest. The eager flutter of his heart. He felt naked without a sword. Sneaking any with them was out of the question as it would be sure to raise suspicion if discovered. The brothel didn't allow clients to bring their swords or any other weapons inside and required them to be left for safe keeping in a room near the brothel's main gate. The hope was that they could acquire swords there before making their way to the tunnel that Marques claimed would lead them under the innermost wall.

Of course, all of that was assuming that Marques was able to get them past the first wall.

From his place in the carriage Wolfram could only see the back of Marques's head, and even that was infuriating. Stupid Marques and his stupid somewhat-legitimate reasons for everything that he had done. It would have been less annoying if he was just an evil bastard. That way Wolfram could just hate him and be done with it.

It was mid-morning by the time the outer gate became visible over the tops of the city's dilapidated houses. There were more people on the streets the closer they got, but no one seemed to look at them as if anything was out of place. A family of stray cats peered down at the carriage as it passed and Wolfram thought about the little cat that he had given Greta. About how guilty he felt for leaving her alone again. Once all of this was over he would have to make it up to her.
The carriage slowed and Wolfram looked up to see that they had reached the line of people and carts waiting to be allowed access to the part of Shou Shimeron designated for use by the second class. There were three guards on duty. One standing to the right of the gate, one to interview and approve those who wanted to get through, and one dressed as a beggar, asking for coin or scraps of food from those in line.

Of the three, it was only the last that gave Wolfram any real concern. Given what Marques had said about Shou Shimeron's guard, Wolfram hadn't expected to see anything remotely clever. Perhaps the presence of human stones was not the sole reason they had lost so many spies to this city.

Wolfram gave Lucien a shove with his foot to wake him, careful not to move much himself lest he disturb the wimp. His corporal was awake at once, eyes a little too wide. It only took Lucien a moment to remember where he was, though, and he gave Wolfram a silent nod.

The carriage started and stopped a few more times before it was finally their turn.

"Lucien!"

Lucien's head jerked in the direction of the speaker, but it was Marques who answered. "Morning, Dale."

The guard who had spoken was tall and thin with a crooked nose. He smiled at Marques as he approached. "We missed you and Fernan last night at Carla's. Where were you?"

"We got caught up Outside during yesterday's patrol. Found these three in an old farmhouse down south a bit. Fernan will be along later with another boy."

Wolfram kept his eyes down and his expression neutral as Dale peered at them and clicked his tongue. "Typical Fernan. That boy must be something special if he left one this pretty behind." Dale grabbed Lucien by the chin to better examine his face and grinned before turning his attention on Wolfram and Yuuri. He nodded in greeting. "Ladies."

"They're for Astor, Dale." Marques turned to bat Dale's hand from Lucien's face. "Come by tomorrow, and you can spend your wages on them."

Dale made a disappointed noise but didn't try to touch Lucien again. "Astor really does have you whipped."

Marques laughed. "You're just jealous that she'll suck mine."

The guard over by the gate snickered and Dale's face went red, glaring at Marques as he waved them through.

It wasn't until they were past the gate completely that Wolfram let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

The city beyond the first wall looked eerily normal compared to the appalling conditions outside. The houses and streets they passed could have been from Caloria. There were fewer people on the streets, but those they passed looked clean and well fed, though they all seemed to be rushing and gave them a wide girth. Wolfram couldn't be sure, but it was possible it had something to do with Marques's standing as a guard.

Yuuri shifted against him and yawned.
"We're past the first wall," Wolfram whispered into his husband's hair. "Everything's gone well so far."

"That's good," Yuuri mumbled, before falling asleep again.

Wolfram couldn't help but smile. Somehow the wimp could manage to be cute in any situation.

Across from them, Lucien seemed to be focused on the back of Marques's head. Wolfram had been blissfully oblivious to the nature of their relationship before, but after Lucien's outburst the previous night it was impossible to ignore. He had known both of them for so long. Lucein had never seemed the sort that would fall for Marques, but then again, Wolfram had never really considered himself the sort that would give in to Marques's brand of persistence, either. Still, it made him angry to see Lucien so obviously hurt by Marques. Lucien was a good corporal. A good friend. Marques didn't deserve him.

It was another hour before they reached the brothel. The building itself wasn't much different from those surrounding it in terms of architecture, but it was substantially larger and closed off by a tall wrought iron gate. Marques halted their carriage and dismounted to ring a heavy looking bell on a poll nearby.

Yuuri jerked awake when the bell rang, and Wolfram squeezed him closer. "We've reached the brothel."

"Oh." Yuuri blinked, looking up at the building. "It looks nice... Much nicer than outside..."

Wolfram gave his husband another squeeze and watched as a young woman emerged from the brothel and headed toward them.

"Morning, Astor." Marques grinned, pressing his face into one of the empty spaces between the gate's poles like a child.

The woman scoffed. "What have I told you about interrupting my beauty sleep?"

"You don't need beauty sleep," Marques purred.

Astor shook her head, but it was hard to miss her blush. "What are you doing here, Lucien?" Sharp, blue eyes were already studying them, lingering on the real Lucien longer than she looked at Wolfram or Yuuri.

"I come bearing gifts."

"I can see that." Astor pursed her lips. "The girls I'll take, but why don't you take the boy with you back to the guard? He has good eyes. I'd feel safer with another guard worth something in this miserable place..."

"Oh take the boy too, Astor." Marques reached through the gate to pet her cheek. "Dale already wants to buy him for a night or three, and we both know Fernan will spend good coin on him. He'll make you a pretty penny. I'm sure of it."

Astor looked at Lucien for a long moment, then back at Marques. A sigh. "Fine."

Marques grinned and tugged her forward. Kissed her on the mouth between the bars of the gate. Lucien colored and looked away.
Marques stayed with them at the brothel for the rest of the day, making advances on Astor in a manner that he probably thought was distracting, but it was difficult to watch. How could Marques act like that in front of Lucein? It was frustrating to keep silent, but Wolfram knew his voice would give them away if he even tried to say anything.

At least Astor had fed them. The stew was as good as Marques had promised and he watched protectively as the wimp dug into his second helping. Yuuri had been good about keeping their cover so far. Everything was going according to plan, but Wolfram could feel his heartbeat thrumming in his chest. Waiting for the moment he would have to spring into action and protect them all. He wished he had a sword! Wolfram could hardly wait until nightfall when the clientele would start to arrive. They had passed the place where the weapons were stored while the guards were enjoying themselves and Wolfram was already contemplating possible routes back.

About an hour before sundown, the brothel "employees" began to trickle in to join them in the dining area and it became even clearer that those who worked at Clara's enjoyed a nocturnal lifestyle. When a blond girl with hair as curly as his mother's --but only half as long-- entered the dining room, Astor called her over to them.

"Ellie, dear, after you've had your breakfast will you take the girls upstairs for a bath?"

Ellie curtsied. "Of course, Miss."

Yuuri sent him a worried look and Wolfram found his husband's hand beneath the table.

"The boy as well," Astor added, and Wolfram let some of the tension go out of his shoulders. At least they would be together. But then Astor continued, "He'll be harmless. This one doesn't seem like the type to give girls any trouble."

Ellie giggled and nodded.

Marques gave Astor an odd look and she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, all the while giving Lucien a teasing look. "This one can hardly keep his eyes off of you."

Lucien turned a violent shade of red and studied his empty bowl.

Astor laughed. "Don't be like that, dear. There's no shame in it. Lucien has that effect on everyone."

"Flatterer." Marques grinned.

"You love it."

"Mmm..." Marques stretched. "True. But as much as I would love to stay here amongst my many admirers, needs must." He stood, but not before giving Astor a parting kiss on the cheek. "I'll be back as soon as I take care of a few things."

Wolfram took another bite of his stew. Marques really was an accomplished liar. If Wolfram hadn't already known of their plan, he would never have suspected that by "things" Marques meant "sneak enemy soldiers past the gate." Still, with Marques gone, there was no one with any authority in this society to protect them. Here was where the real danger began.

Once Marques was gone, Astor sent them with Ellie upstairs to bathe. Until now, they had had Marques to speak for them, explaining that he and Lucien were brother and sister and that Yuuri had been found with them. Astor had seemed to believe their story easily enough, but Wolfram
knew they couldn't rely on that bit of good fortune forever. At least acting meek and terrified lend itself to few words. It had been easy to cling to Yuuri and look at everything with wide eyes, but taking a bath...

Lucien and Ellie were walking ahead of them and Wolfram made sure to make note of all the turns and doorways that they passed.

"How old are you?" Ellie asked Lucien as they walked. "Did you live on a farm before the guard found you?"

"Yes," Lucien answered carefully. "A farm." Then he paused and Wolfram worried that he wasn't familiar enough with the way humans aged to give Ellie a believable answer.

"I don't know how old I am either," Ellie answered softly. "But I've been here with Astor for almost eight years." She looked back at the two of them. "You don't have to be afraid. It's good here. Astor feeds us well and proper and gets rid any clients who don't treat us right. It's much better than Outside."

Wolfram nodded at her and she gave him a smile in return.

"I'm Ellie, by the way. Please feel free to ask if there's anything that I can do to make you more comfortable. I know how hard making the transition can be."

"Thank you, Ellie. You have been most kind." Lucien glanced back at Wolfram for a moment before continuing, "You can call me Mark."

"A pleasure to meet you."

"I'm Jennifer," Yuuri added in a falsetto that would have made Grier proud. "And this is Cheri."

"A pleasure!" Ellie's smile was bright. "Ahh, here we are." She stopped at a set of double doors and pushed them open.

The bathroom was small, by palace standards, but much nicer than Wolfram had expected. The large room was covered in patterned white and blue tile and there were at least six tubs, each large enough for two.

"Normally we use the baths downstairs," Ellie explained. "But since you're fresh from Outside it goes without saying that you're over due for a pampering." She winked at them before walking over to turn the knobs on two of the tubs, pouring in some soap as they filled with steaming water. "I had never seen the like before I came here," she chattered. "This room is for clients most of the time, but it's my favorite place to come and relax when I can get away with it."

"Thank you for being so kind to us." Yuuri's voice cracked from the strain of being so high, but Ellie must have taken it for emotion because she rushed over to give him a hug.

"It's nothing, dear. I remember Outside. It's so much better here, you'll see."

Yuuri nodded.

"Now, go ahead and get washed, all of you." Ellie made her way to the door. "I'll be back in a minute with fresh towels and clothes."

None of them moved until Ellie closed the door behind her.
"What do we do?" Yuuri asked in a rush. "We can't take a bath!"

Wolfram walked over to the nearest tub. There were some bubbles covering the surface but not nearly enough. They could always try to find the passage on their own, but secret passages had a tendency to be difficult to find and slipping away now was certain to raise alarm. Wolfram picked up one of the soap bottles and upended it into the tub. To his relief the water became opaque and bubbles began to multiply under the faucet. He turned back to Yuuri and Lucien and smiled.

* * *

The gods really were on their side.

Somehow they had managed to bathe, dry, and dress without being discovered. The girl, Ellie, had made herself conveniently scarce throughout the entire process. She seemed to be treating them like trauma victims rather than future brothel employees. Her kind heart had saved them. Wolfram hoped that once all of this was over, Ellie could find a better place for herself in the world.

After their bath he and Yuuri and Lucien had been tucked away in one of the brothel's bedrooms. It was a small, windowless, room that was clearly not intended for use by clients and was oddly reminiscent of his soldier's quarters. Ellie had left them here an hour earlier and now there was nothing to keep them occupied but thoughts of how Marques was fairing on the second stage of their plan.

Yuuri was pacing. It was grating his nerves, seeing Yuuri walking back and forth in their tiny room wearing a dress, and was a constant reminder that he was wearing a dress, too. At least this one didn't belong to Fernan's dead wife.

"Stop that," he snapped, when he couldn't take it anymore and Yuuri paused. Turned to face him.

"Well, I have to do something!"

"No, you don't." He held out a hand. "Come here."

Yuuri pouted but moved toward him. Wolfram was currently sitting in the small room's only chair, so Yuuri took a seat on the bed beside Lucien and sighed. "I can't believe they live like this... Ellie knows how bad it is out there. Others must too. How can they know what it's like and not do anything to stop it?"

"Others have probably tried," Lucien offered softly. "I doubt things went well for them."

Wolfram nodded. "It's possible." He reached out to rest a hand on Yuuri's shoulder. "But remember what their society teaches them. That those outside deserve the life that they are born into. That only the second class are worth enough to live inside the first set of walls. When you aren't the one suffering it is easy to ignore the suffering of others. To forget and go about your own life."

"But it's not right!" Yuuri's voice was pained. "It's not right."

"It isn't right," Wolfram agreed. "But it's the way things seem to be."

"Not anymore. Not another day longer. We'll stop this."

Wolfram squeezed his husband's shoulder.

Yuuri sighed and turned his cheek to rest his head on the back of Wolfram's hand. "You make it all sound so... clinical. Like it happened in a history book a long time ago not something that's going
Wolfram studied the floor. He had changed so much since he met Yuuri. Wolfram knew now that it was wrong to hate humans the way he had growing up. A misplaced hate that was only born of hurt... but it was part of why Yuuri had looked down on him when he had first come to this world. Why it had taken him so long to love Wolfram back. But everything about Shou Shimeron--Saralegui--made Wolfram miss the simplicity of that old hate.

"I suppose I do look at things like this the same way I look at the things I read in books," he said after a pause. "It makes it easier to focus on what needs to be done, rather than succumb to emotions. I can't afford to..." He took a breath. "Thinking about the solution rather than feeling anger. It was the sort of thing they tried to teach me when I was younger but... better late than never I suppose."

Yuuri's cheek was warm against his hand. Soft, as he nodded.

For a long time they had heard nothing besides their own voices, and so when a woman's laugh and heavy footsteps approached from the hallway outside all of them went tense. A man's voice joined the woman's. Paused outside their door.

"Astor will be so mad when she finds out," the woman giggled as the doorknob turned.

There was scuffling outside. A wet sound. "It will be fine, pet. I'll pay you both double for it."

More laughter as the door opened. The woman wasn't Ellie or anyone else that Wolfram could remember seeing before, but he recognized the tall, thin, man behind her.

Dale had his hand on the woman's shoulder. Her dress was rumpled and her bodice was only half-laced, revealing far too much cleavage and part of a nipple. The coal on her eyes was thick and her dark curls were tangled, falling half way down her back.

"What do you want?" Lucien stood. Put himself between Yuuri and Wolfram and their unwelcome guests. "We were told we would have the night to ourselves."

Dale's eyes fixed on Lucien and stayed there. "A night to yourselves indeed." He crossed the room in two long strides. Towering over Lucien. "And what better way to spend that time than with me, humm? I'll make sure you're begging me for more before the night is out, you'll see." Dale's grin was enough to turn Wolfram's stomach.

The girl by the door let out an excited squeal. "Ohh he is adorable, Dale. You simply have to let me watch."

Wolfram narrowed his eyes. There were only two of them. One man to three and a woman who seemed half-drunk. They wouldn't be too difficult to overpower. The question was would they be missed? And where could they be put once--

"Not here," Lucien's voice was soft. "If you want to... You'll leave my sister and Jennifer out of it." He looked up at Dale. "You'll have to take me somewhere else."

Dale cupped Lucien's cheek. Licked his lips.

"We can take him back to my room," the woman offered. Giggled.

Yuuri moved to stand, but Wolfram was faster, caught him in a hug that landed both of them on the bed. "Mark, you don't have to..." Wolfram hoped his voice was high enough and suitably muffled
by the fabric of Yuuri's sleeve not to raise suspicion. That Yuuri would understand the meaning behind the hand that was pressed against his mouth and not say anything. Wolfram held tight to Yuuri and hoped that Dale and the woman would be distracted enough by Lucien not to question the strangeness of their action. Wolfram turned his head enough to see Lucien step away from Dale and come to sit beside them on the bed.

"Don't be scared. It will be all right. Just stay here and don't worry." He kissed Wolfram on the forehead first. Then he did the same to Yuuri, hands shaking. "I'll be fine, little sister. Just stay here and look after Jennifer. I'm sure someone will be here to take care of you if I'm not back soon." Then he stood and walked back to stand by Dale.

"Mark..." Yuuri's voice cracked. "Don't."

Lucien only shook his head. Gave Wolfram a lingering, hard, look over his shoulder as Dale led him from the room.

And just like that, Lucien was gone, the girl's laughter getting steadily fainter before it disappeared entirely.

Yuuri was still in shock. "We can't just let--"

"Yes we can. I don't like it either, but--"

"But that guy is going to--"

Wolfram held him closer. "I know. But Lucien made a choice. We could have overpowered both of them, but it also could have given us away. Lucien gave himself up for a reason. If we do anything now to try and save him, his sacrifice won't be worth anything."

Yuuri made an aggravated noise, punching the bed, and it was hard for Wolfram to keep himself from doing something similar.

As soldiers they had been trained to give themselves up for a mission, especially to protect the king. Lucien hadn't given himself up to death, but at the same time-- Wolfram would never be able to forget the feeling of Marques's hands when he had been captured. What it felt like to be touched without wanting it.

Lucien didn't deserve to have to feel that way.

Wolfram swallowed and tried to remind himself that this was war. That Wolfram would have done the same, if it meant protecting Yuuri. "Lucien will make it through. He deserves for us to have faith in him."

"I hate it," Yuuri growled. "I hate it, I hate this!"

"I know." Wolfram held him close. Buried his face in the wimp's neck. His smell. "It will all be over soon, remember?"

It would be so easy to let the anger come. Take control. But Yuuri was warm and here and safe. And warm. And that was all that Wolfram could allow himself to think about. He couldn't think about the tingle of power. The heat that was ready, always ready beneath the surface to swallow him.

And so Wolfram held on to Yuuri. Held him until the rage stopped and the only thing in his mind was the sound of both their breathing.
Eventually Yuuri spoke. "I wonder what's taking Marques so long?"

Wolfram shook his head and only silence followed.

********

Marques had to grin as he glanced around the final corner separating them from Clara's. So far all of his plans couldn't have gone better. No wonder Shinou had come to him when the world needed saving.

Clara's seemed to be as busy as it always was. The trick would be waiting for a gap between incoming patrons to slip inside. Then he could find a place to hide Weller and Grier for the time being while he found out where Astor had stored Lucien and the "girls". Once those three were safely to the tunnel's entrance, he could worry about getting Weller and Grier past everyone, using force if they had to.

They had been lucky with the guards at the gate. There had only been three on watch and two of them had gone down to Grier's potion-soaked cloth without so much as a peep. The third man had reached for his weapon before Marques had given a good thump on the head with the hilt of his sword.

It had actually taken them longer to travel through the second city on foot than it had to get past the gate. The longer they had walked, the more quiet and focused his companions had become, and Marques would have been a fool not to feel nervous turning his back to either of them. Weller in particular seemed to hold him in high disdain.

Some people could be so ungrateful.

Marques leaned out a little farther from his position and a sudden wave of pain and dizziness made him clutch the stones of the nearby wall for support. Once all of this was over he was never going anywhere near a human stone again even if Shinou himself got on his knees to suck his cock.

"I could really use a drink..." he muttered and raised his head.

"This isn't one of your usual visits to this establishment," Weller snapped at him. "Remember why we're here."

Marques rolled his eyes. "Oh yes! I had completely forgotten. Whatever would I do without you here to keep me on my toes, Sir Weller?"

Weller glared. "Your attitude isn't helping."

"Well it's helping me. Takes the edge off the sting. Something you wouldn't understand, halfblo--"

"Enough." Grier's voice held warning.

Marques pouted. Sighed. "Fine. Let's just get on with this."

It wasn't long until there was enough of a lull in business for Marques to escort his guests through the gate and into the entry room of Clara's. A door to the right led to the weapon's-check and after a quick look around Marques ushered the other two men inside. Even though Clara's was doing quite well, the number of clients was clearly not what it once had been and there were plenty of dark corners that were rarely used. They didn't even have anyone on guard.
Marques unclipped his sword from its harness. "Do you think the two of you can manage not to cause a fuss while I go and get the others?"

Grier snorted. "Just go. We'll manage just fine."

"If you insist," Marques purred, hanging his weapon on a nearby peg before making his way to the door.

Once he was outside the weapon's-check, Marques peeked out the main door. No one else seemed to be making their way toward Clara's. Weller and Grier should have plenty of time to find a dark corner and stay there.

Somewhat satisfied, Marques headed off in search of Astor.

The dining hall was full of noise. Some of the younger girls were playing stringed instruments and singing up above on a make-shift balcony to keep them out of grabbing reach while laughter and other sounds overlapped their music. Even though Astor liked to insist that anything worth paying for could only be practiced in her employee's private rooms, here was the place the working boys and girls had to entice their prospective clients, and they went to all sorts of interesting measures to do so. Luckily, Marques had been there enough times to know where Astor preferred to spend her time.

There was a small staircase toward the back of the dining hall that led to another balcony, this one higher and less obvious than the one the musicians made use of. Halfway up the stairs, he could smell the sticky sweet smoke of south-grass.

This would be easy.

Marques knocked when he reached the top of the stairs and Astor's lazy voice told him to enter.

"What's worried you, pet?" Marques sat on the edge of the chaise Astor was reclining on. Even in the relaxed position, Astor had a clear view of the majority of the dining hall. "You normally like to keep a clear head when you're working?"

Astor laughed and sucked in smoke from the long pipe that she held in practiced fingers. She waited a moment before exhaling and handing the pipe to him. "Oh, shut up."

Marques pouted and took the pipe, twirling it in his fingers rather than inhaling. "Humm? You still haven't answered."

She waved at him dismissively. "What are you doing here alone? You normally don't visit me without that troll Fernan."

"Do I need a reason to see you?" Marques caught her hand and pressed a kiss into her palm. "Though you have seen right through me, I'll admit. I'm worried about those three I brought in earlier."

Astor glared. "Do you think I can't take care of my own?"

"Of course not!" Marques sighed. "It's still new for me. All of this. I just wanted to see that they're all right."

Astor studied him for a long moment before shutting her eyes. "We need more guards like you, Lucien. No one cares about each other anymore." She pursed her lips.
Marques used the opportunity to steal a kiss. She tasted like south-grass and cherries.

"I keep all the new ones close. I put them three doors down from me." Her eyes were wide and relaxed. "No stealing from me, Lucien. Those girls-- That boy-- deserves a night of peace before the likes of you and Fernan paw him."

Marques gave her his best smile. "Of course." He handed her back the pipe.

Once he had closed the door behind him and walked partway down the stairs, Marques couldn't hold back his excitement any longer and he let out a little laugh just for himself. "The girls" and Lucien were only three doors down from Astor's private rooms. Only three doors down from the entrance to the tunnel that would take them into the very center of this city.

Marques was so pleased with himself, that he seemed to make it to Astor's room in record time. The hallway outside her door was close to silent, a stark contrast to the noise of the dining hall. Marques strolled down the hall and pressed his ear against the door in question and was somewhat disappointed to hear only silence. He knocked.

There was no answer.

Marques turned the knob slowly, for a moment doubting that he had come to the right room. He shouldn't have doubted himself, though, "the girls" were seated on the room's small bed, looking tense.

"What took you so long?" His Majesty's voice was sharp and full of concern. "If you had only come five minutes sooner than maybe... maybe..."

Marques frowned. "What do you mean?" His Majesty and Wolf were sitting on the bed but--"Where's Luke?"

"Dale took him," Wolf answered. "Lucien went with him to ensure we weren't discovered."

Marques realized he was holding the door frame for support, hand already aching from the force of his grip. Dale had taken Lucien. Dale was probably touching Lucien at this very moment. Marques could hardly breathe the tightness in his chest was so great. "Where?" he choked.

"He was with a girl," His Majesty explained. "Dale said they were taking Lucien back to the girl's room..."

Marques had to close his eyes. Take a deep breath to steady himself. He wasn't thinking clearly. Luke wasn't in any real danger. It was just fucking... Just fucking but...

Luke was his.

The thought of Dale touching Luke shouldn't be enough to cloud his judgment. But it was.

Marques couldn't-- He had to stay focused. He had to remember what they had come here to accomplish. "I'll take the two of you to the tunnel first, then I'll get Luke... Then I'll go and retrieve Weller and Grier. We've just added an extra step. Everything should still be fine." He glanced back into the hallway to make sure it was still empty. "What are you waiting for? Let's go."

His Majesty and Wolf followed him in silence the short trip to Astor's door. Marques reached up, running his fingers along the top of the door's frame until he found what he was looking for. The key slid easily into the lock and turned and Marques let out a shaky sigh of relief. Now that one thing had gone terribly wrong, he couldn't help but expect it to be the beginning of some terrible
wave of misfortune. He ushered them inside and closed the door. "The entrance to the tunnel is behind that tapestry," he explained in a rush. "Stay here until I bring the others, but if someone comes or it sounds like trouble, you'll have to go on ahead without us."

Marques turned, already wracking his mind for which of the girls Dale had seemed to favor in the past. He and Dale had never been close, and Marques had never thought it would be important to pay much attention to what he did. Stupid. Stupid.

"What did the girl look like?" he asked suddenly, raking a trembling hand through his hair. "You said Dale was taking Luke back to the girl's room."

"She had brown hair," His Majesty answered. "Dark, long hair and um..." He looked at Wolf. "Largish breasts?"

Wolf glared. "She also couldn't seem to stop herself from laughing."

"Right," Marques muttered to himself. "Elinor."

Marques turned and headed for the door, ignoring the argument that had sprung up behind him about breasts and the importance of noticing them.

Elinor was one of Clara's more popular girls, as well as a notorious gossip. Marques couldn't remember the location of her room though, which meant he would have to risk raising suspicion by asking someone.

How could Luke have just gone with Dale? Of course it made sense considering the circumstances but... but now everything was so complicated. His chest hurt and he couldn't seem to be able to make his palms stop sweating. Marques couldn't remember ever feeling this way before.

The bad feeling stayed with him as he asked one of the boys in the dining hall for the location of Elinor's room, and worsened as he barely kept himself from running there.

Once he reached her door, Marques didn't waste any time with knocking.

"Do you mind?" Elinor squawked. Marques couldn't even see her. All he could see was Dale on the bed. Luke beneath him.

"Yes," he hissed, crossing the room in long strides before kicking Dale as hard as he could-- hard enough to send him sprawling from the bed. "I mind."

"What the fuck are you--" Dale started but never finished. Marques's hands were too tight around his throat. Dale's face was turning red. Redder.

"You'll kill him!" Elinor screeched. "Stop it!"

Dale was struggling violently beneath him. He was barely clothed. His pants were down around his ankles, hindering his movements to Marques's advantage.

Marques pressed his thumbs harder against Dale's throat. "Oh he should be so lucky," he panted, so full of rage that he could barely feel where Dale was hitting him, each blow not quite as hard as the last. "Don't worry Elinor. I won't kill him. But I will have to kill you if you don't stop screaming, love. Be a good girl and go find someone else to entertain tonight."

Elinor must have taken his words seriously because as she left she closed the door behind her.
Dale's face was turning purple. He stopped struggling.

A hand lightly touched his shoulder. "Marques... that's enough."

Marques shook his head. His face was wet. "He... he touched you."

"And so have you, if you recall."

"But that's different!" Marques's voice sounded like a sob. And then he wasn't choking Dale anymore, his arms were wrapped tightly around Lucien instead. "Luke..."

"What has gotten in to you," Lucien breathed. "I've never seen you like this?"

"He touched you," Marques said again, holding Lucien tighter.

"I'm okay. It's only... only sex, after all. I'm not hurt."

"I don't care!" Marques managed. "I mean, I care that you're alright. I'm so glad that you're not hurt... But he touched you."

Lucien let out an irritated sigh. "So what if he touched me Marques? You've 'touched' almost everyone you've ever met. What's so different about--"

"It's completely different!" he snapped. "It doesn't matter when I touch people. It doesn't mean anything. It never means anything!"

Lucien huffed and wiggled from his grasp. "So what's the problem? Come on, we need to--"

Marques grabbed Lucien's wrist. "It's not like that with you, though." It was so true. Touching Lucien was the only kind of touching that mattered. "Where? What did he do? Where did he touch you?"

"It's not important." Lucien sighed. He was wearing a shirt and pants but both were completely unbuttoned.

Marques stood, then pulled Lucien with him to sit on the bed. "It matters." He leaned in to kiss Lucien but the other boy turned his head away. Marques kissed his cheek, his neck, instead.

Lucien put his hands on Marques's shoulders but any attempt to push him away was half-hearted at best. "Damn it, Mark. You can't just keep... doing this."

"It's alright. We have time--"

"That's not what I mean." Lucien's voice was soft, heartbeat fast beneath Marques's tongue. "You kissed Astor in front of me-- You've had sex with hundreds of people!"

Marques frowned between his attentions to Lucien's neck. "But none of that means anything." He pulled back to cup both of Lucien's cheeks with his hands. "You're the only one that means anything to me."

Lucien's laugh sounded like a sob. "I'll bet you say that to everyone."

Marques shook his head, then he leaned in to kiss Lucien. Soft. Slow.

One of them moaned. Marques had never felt so much. He never wanted it to stop. Lucien was so warm. So solid against him. All the pain faded away, replaced with the tingling anticipation for
Lucien's next kiss. The soft nip against his bottom lip that made him shiver. Whimper. His heart was beating so fast. Marques opened his mouth wider and Lucien accepted the invitation. Tongues met. Wet. Hot. Sliding tentatively together. He never wanted it to stop.

Marques moaned when Lucien touched him. For so long it had only been mouths that touched. The press of his hands against Lucien's cheeks. But then Lucien's hands were running over his shoulders. His chest. And all at once, Marques realized that not only was he hard but he was close. So close from only a kiss. And so he kissed Lucien harder. It was the only thing he could do. He was afraid that if he moved at all this wonderful feeling would stop.

Lucien's hands trailed down. Over his stomach. Thighs. Marques knew he was the one making those high noises in the back of his throat, but it didn't matter because-- there. Lucien was touching him. Hand over cloth. Cloth over hard eager flesh. Rubbing softly. So softly. But it was enough.

Marques gasped, breaking the kiss, resting his forehead against Lucien's as his cock pulsed. "Oh gods. Lucien. Oh..." He kissed swollen lips. "My Luke."

Lucien laughed. "That was fast."

Marques licked his lips, needing to taste Lucien on them. Lucien's lips were red. Swollen. His eyes were dark, but there was something there besides lust that made the hurt comeback. A mirrored hurt. Distrust. Fear. Marques didn't think he'd ever be able to forgive himself for making Lucien look at him like that.

Marques leaned forward to kiss Lucien again. He cared so much. It was strange. Surreal. Wonderfully painful. Marques didn't ever want it to stop.

"Stop." Lucien pulled away. Put his hands on top of Marques's and removed them from his face. "We don't have time for this."

"It's okay," his words came out too quickly, all in a rush. "Weller and Grier are in the weapons-check and 'the girls' are safe at the tunnel's entrance. We can take some time without the world coming to an end."

Lucien shook his head. He wouldn't meet Marques's eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Luke. That I let him touch you," Marques said without thinking. "I'm sorry."

"You don't understand, Marques. I don't think you ever will, but..." Lucien sighed. "Thank you for coming to my rescue. It's time to move on to the next stage of the--"

"No." Marques pounced. He didn't understand. One minute Lucien seemed to want him, and the next... Why was everything so complicated? Lucien was hard beneath him. Marques could feel him pressed against his thigh. He grinned. At least something seemed to make sense. "Where did he touch you, Luke?"

"Marques--"

"Did he hurt you? Did he fuck you?"

"Marques--"

"Did he kiss you?" Marques kissed Lucien's neck. "Did he kiss you here?"

"Marques..." Lucien's protest sounded like a plea. "No. He didn't."
Marques kissed his collar. Chest. Used a hand to spread the unbuttoned shirt to reveal a pale nipple. "Here?" Marques pressed his tongue against the nub. Suckled for just a moment before moving his mouth to Lucien's stomach. "Did he kiss you or did he just spread you and take you, the brute."

Lucien's answer was to arch against him. "Nothing like this. Nothing like you--"

Marques growled. "Of course not!" He tugged at Lucien's trousers to reveal his erection, pushed the fabric lower, low enough that he could spread Lucien's legs. Press two fingers into him. "But he did fuck you."

Lucien let out a noise of surprise. A groan when Marques twisted his fingers and pressed. "Yesss."

"But you didn't like it did you?" Marques lowered his mouth to the underside of Lucien's cock. Trailed his tongue lower. Nuzzled his sack before pulling one ball into his mouth and then the other. Sucking until Lucien squirmed. Gods he tasted good. "I'll make it go away, you'll see. I'll touch you until you don't even remember what he felt like."

Marques moved his mouth lower. Pressed his tongue into Lucien's hole again and again. Relieved that at least the bastard hadn't come in him. Not that he wouldn't have eagerly licked Lucien clean had it come to that.

He was so distracted by the act of devouring Lucien that he didn't know how much time went by until he was startled by the feel of Lucien's fingers in his hair. His broken voice, begging for more.

Marques used a thumb to pull Lucien further apart. Force his tongue further inside. Lucien made a delicious noise when Marques added a finger. Twisted. Pressed against his prostate with just enough force to tease. Marques didn't stop until Lucien was sobbing. Until his begging was incoherent, and Marques's jaw was sore and his tongue was exhausted. And then, he pulled away completely. Letting his breath ghost over the head of Lucien's dripping cock and nothing more.

"So pretty," He whispered, lips just brushing against the swollen head. "Perfect."

Lucien must have run out of patience because he used his grip on Marques's hair to push him down against his groin. Marques barely had time to kiss the skin against his lips before he felt Lucien's cock pulse against his cheek. A few pumps of come escaped before Marques was able to catch Lucien's twitching cock in his mouth. Swallow far too little before the pulses stopped and he had to soften his attentions on Lucien's over sensitive flesh.

He wanted to stay like this forever.

After a while Lucien spoke. "I think... I think I got some in your hair."

Marques laughed and moved up on the bed to cuddle Lucien. "I think I'll survive." Lucien felt so good in his arms. So warm. Even though Marques felt like he could easily go another round it was somehow so much better than simple sex just to hold Lucien in his arms.

And then suddenly Lucien went tense. "Marques..." He sat up-- pushed Marques off of him. "Where's Dale?"

"What?" Marques blinked, looked, to see that Dale was in fact gone.

"When did he leave?" Lucien was already off the bed, tugging on his clothes. "How much did he hear? Shit."

Marques smiled. Lucien was adorable when he was frantic and prudish. "It's alright. Maybe he
learned something that will make him better with the next one of Clara's boys he takes to bed."

Lucien gave him an incredulous look. "I'm not talking about that, Marques. He knows we're not who we say we are..."

Marques felt his mouth go dry.

"Weller and Grier are in the weapons-check and 'the girls' are safe at the tunnel's entrance."

"Fuck." Marques jumped from the bed. He grabbed Lucien's hand and pulled him toward the door.

The hallway outside was empty, but who knew how long it would be before Dale told someone. Before other guards or who knows who else would come for them.

"Fuck," Marques said again. "Alright. I'll take you to the tunnel. Dale probably doesn't even know what we were talking about. If anything, Weller and Grier are in trouble but not the others. I'll take you to the tunnel. You'll go on ahead with Wolf and His Majesty, and I'll go back to help Weller and Grier with any trouble that might have started."

"But--"

"--Come on!" He tugged Lucien down the hall. As they approached the dining hall Marques knew there was something wrong. The music had stopped. He paused. The hallway was lined with doors on one side and windows on the other. They were on the first floor. "This way." He opened one of the windows and looked around outside. Clear.

There was no way to get back to Astor's without crossing the dining hall. If they went outside they stood a chance of making it to Weller and Grier. To weapons.

Marques cursed again as he stepped out of the window and into the hedges surrounding Clara's. Hopefully Wolf and His Majesty would be able to manage without them for just a little while longer.

********

********

It felt like Marques had been gone for hours.

Yuuri worried his lip and squeezed Wolfram's hand. They were sitting against the wall next to the tapestry, close enough that their sides were touching. Yuuri moved their joined hands into his lap.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Wolfram complained in a low voice. "Every other woman I know owns pants. What is wrong with this one?"

Yuuri stopped being anxious long enough to roll his eyes. "Maybe she doesn't like pants?"

Wolfram huffed. "Whether she likes them or not, pants are practical at times. For riding and... other things..."

"You're just cranky because you think you look like a girl," Yuuri teased. "You shouldn't be upset because you're so pretty."

"Wimp." Wolfram glared, his cheeks turning pink. "Looking like a woman is nothing to be ashamed of. Don't let Anissina hear you say things like that."

Yuuri chuckled, but he didn't argue. He had learned that sometimes when Wolfram changed the
subject and called him a wimp it was as close to surrender as he was going to get. Still, Wolfram was adorable when he was pouting and Yuuri took a moment to simply look at him. Perfect profile outlined by the dim light of the room. Green eyes focused somewhere far away.

Looking at Wolfram was enough to calm his anxiety for few moments, but then the sound of pounding footsteps in the hallway outside pulled him abruptly away from his small moment of comfort.

Wolfram stood in a rush, pulling Yuuri up with him. They had discovered the door behind the tapestry earlier but since the narrow, winding, staircase that lay beyond was hardly the most comfortable place to rest, they had decided to wait for the others outside. As the footsteps approached, Wolfram slid behind the tapestry and opened the little door, ushering Yuuri inside before he followed. Wolfram had only just stilled the motion of the heavy cloth when what sounded like half a dozen footsteps entered the room.

Yuuri hoped that it was Marques, back with Lucien and the others, but somehow he knew it wasn't. Wolfram seemed to know it too. He was still standing slightly in front of Yuuri, and even in the dim light filtering through the tightly woven tapestry separating them from the room outside, Yuuri could see how tense he was. Ready to act. The footsteps traveled around the room, some coming much too close to them for Yuuri's comfort. His heartbeat seemed so loud.

"It's clear," a man's voice said from outside the tapestry, and within moments all of the footsteps filtered out the door.

It was a long moment before Wolfram moved. "Something's gone wrong. They're looking for us," he whispered.

"What if they've got the others? We should go help them.

"No." Wolfram shook his head. "We have to trust them to be able to take care of themselves. Conrad and Yozak were in the weapons room, after all. Either one of them with a sword could take a dozen trained soldiers, not to mention a few human guards. They'll be fine."

Yuuri frowned. Wolfram was right. "In that case, the only thing we can do is move forward."

Wolfram looked at him for a moment before his lips curved into a small smile. "Right."

Yuuri hoped the dark would hide his blush. Even on the edge of so much risk, Wolfram's pride in him could make his stomach flutter.

By now, Yuuri's eyes had adjusted to the low light inside the stairwell. The downward spiral of steps was tight and narrow. He and Wolfram would have to travel down it one at a time. While they shuffled to allow Wolfram to close the door behind them, Yuuri took a few steps into the ever increasing darkness. Yuuri knew that Wolfram would want to go first, but there was only so much of Wolfram's over-protectiveness that he could put up with at a time. Besides, this way Yuuri could keep Wolfram from rushing ahead.

Behind him, Wolfram grumbled, but he didn't complain. Having the door shut plunged the stairwell into total darkness and Yuuri had to feel his way down slowly with his feet one step at a time, and later by running his hands along the bottom of the stairs above his head. As unnerving as the decent was, Yuuri managed not to trip except for once when Wolfram stepped on the back of his dress.

The stairs ended, and Yuuri paused when he stepped onto a new surface, letting out a small squeak
of surprise when Wolfram stepped down on to him.

"No more stairs," Yuuri whispered. He took a few, shuffled, steps forward, one hand stretched out in front of him with the other trailing along the stone wall. Wolfram put a warm hand on his shoulder and followed. The floor beneath them felt like dirt, worn hard and smooth from use. He could hear Wolfram's steps behind him, his breath. The sound of his own heart pounding in his ears.

There was so much anxious energy built up inside him that Yuuri had to force himself to go slowly. There was no way of knowing which direction would go, if the floor would stop, or if there was someone or something waiting for them in the dark.

And yet, as Yuuri felt his way along the darkness, the dangers of the tunnel were not what what worried him most.

This was it. The actions they were about to take could lead to war. Lead him to having to hurt his friend, or worse, if it turned out that Sara really was behind all of the things that had been done to Wolfram. Yuuri had wanted so badly to believe that Sara was innocent. Innocent of everything but...

But whether he was being bullied by Reyes or anyone else, Sara was still king of this country. Yuuri had given Sara more than one opportunity to talk to him alone back when they were engaged and he hadn't taken any of them. Even if it meant that Reyes would try to hurt him, Sara had to know how much his people were suffering. If anything remotely similar was going on in Shin Makoku Yuuri would have done anything to put a stop to it, regardless of any personal consequence.

Seeing Shou Shimeron for himself had made it all so much more real. Yuuri thought he had gotten better at suppressing the Maou's urge for Justice over time, but this... Every moment tested his will. It had almost been too much, staying inside of Fernan's barn while Wolfram and the others went out to explore the town. Every time Yuuri heard their stories-- thought about it-- the power threatened to rise up and drown him.

It was why he hadn't had the strength to be upset at Wolfram for what he had done. For killing Fernan. Wolfram had only had Ethne inside of him for a short time... Yuuri knew that people had died because of the Maou's Justice. He didn't let himself think about it much but... he knew. He did everything he could to make up for it but he knew.

Yuuri swallowed thickly to rid himself of the sour taste rising in his throat.

Everything about this journey was making him sick. He remembered asking Gwendal if he could write a letter to Sara, back when they had told him that Sara had returned to Shou Shimeron. He remembered how frustrated he had felt when they didn't trust his judgment. How he had wanted to write Sara a letter anyway, but hadn't. Maybe they wouldn't be here if he had just been a better king? If he had taken the time to figure out politics before he had rushed off to see Wolfram. To propose again. And then there had been so much. Lesser Gael and the wedding. And by then Wolfram already had his heart set on... this.

Seeing Shou Shimeron without giving them the chance to hide their secrets. Seeing what Sara had let happen to his people. Knowing that human and half-blood troops were already in position to use force to overtake the city if he couldn't convince Sara to give up peacefully.

Yuuri would do all he could to keep it from coming to violence. He had promised Sara that he would protect him...
There was no way out of this without hurting someone and it was all his fault.

Somewhere up ahead, there was a light so dim that Yuuri had to blink a few times to make sure it was really there. Soon, he was close enough to see that the light was coming from the cracks between a door.

Wolfram must have seen it too because his grip on Yuuri's shoulder tightened. "Wait here while I take a look," he whispered.

Yuuri frowned, but allowed Wolfram to maneuver his way around him. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that Wolfram had much more training at handling these sorts of things than he did, as annoying as it sometimes was, and that they couldn't afford to make any mistakes. Yuuri watched in silence as Wolfram knelt to peek beneath the door, and then up along the edge before he carefully turned the knob. They both waited anxiously, but when nothing happened Wolfram slowly pulled the door open.

Just like in Astor's room, the door to the tunnel seemed to be hidden behind a large tapestry. Faint moonlight was creeping in through the thick fabric and Yuuri let out a shaking breath. Wolfram went through the whole process of peeking again, this time around the edges of the tapestry, before motioning Yuuri forward.

The room beyond the fabric was huge and completely still. After spending so much time in the darkness of the tunnel, Yuuri could see everything easily. Large stained-glass windows covered the walls, and the elaborately cut stone covering the ceiling made Yuuri feel like he had walked into a Gothic-style medieval church. Instead of pews, however, the room was filled with large wooden tables covered with stacks of books and parchments.

Wolfram walked into the room a bit and picked up one of the scrolls. The look on his face made Yuuri come closer so he could peer over his shoulder.

"What is it?" Yuuri whispered.

"Numbers." Wolfram frowned. "No words, only numbers."

Yuuri worried his lip. "But we already knew that, right? That Shou Shimeron's code was in numbers?"

"Coded letters are one thing," Wolfram answered, picking up a book and flipping through the pages. "Everything is in code. Why do they need to put everything in code?"

"Well it would limit literacy," Yuuri pondered aloud, his history lessons coming back to him. "In Japan the language had to be simplified... or really changed from being mostly Chinese letters before the average person was able to read."

Wolfram snorted. "I think we've seen enough to understand how these 'pure' see themselves in comparison with everyone else."

Yuuri sighed. "What now?"

Wolfram replaced the book and looked around. "Well, the only thing to do is move forward. Who knows how long we have until whoever frequents this place wakes up?"

"Right." Yuuri nodded, feeling uneasy. Wolfram had started walking toward the room's only door and so Yuuri followed. Even though wherever they were seemed empty, there was always the possibility that they were wrong.
The room's only door led to a hallway occupied by even more doors. Everything was lavishly decorated, and the air was fresh, though scented with the same type of perfume that was faint in the air of all the other castles Yuuri had been in. It was eerie, how silent and different everything here was from what he had seen of the other parts of Shou Shimeron.

Instead of opening any of the other doors, Wolfram led them down the hall until it ended at a larger version of the spiral stairs they had taken down into the tunnel. This time, however, the stairs went up. Wolfram looked back at him and Yuuri nodded in approval. Neither one of them knew what they were doing now, they just had to reassure each other and hope for the best.

The spiral stairs went up and up, punctuated by windows that gave them an even more complete view of the rings of Shou Shimeron's cities. The tower they were climbing was one of two, separated by a large, empty, courtyard. It was at one of these windows that Wolfram paused, ducked, and pulled Yuuri down with him.

"There are guards on the other tower," he explained in a whisper.

Yuuri was so nervous that he laughed quietly. "Well, at least it's not a ghost town."

Wolfram gave him an odd look and they continued climbing, this time ducking whenever they came to a window rather than enjoying the view.

By the time they reached the top, both of them were breathing hard and Yuuri was sweating, though he couldn't tell if it was from nerves or exertion. After a short hallway, they came upon three doors, the middle one larger than the others. Again, Wolfram looked back at him.

Yuuri made an exasperated noise. "What are we even looking for?" he whispered. "I almost want someone to capture us so we can stop picking doors!"

"Wimp," Wolfram whispered back at him, before reaching out to grab his hand. "We need to know all we can before confronting... Sara. The longer we can keep things on our terms, the better."

Yuuri had to nod. "Fine. I guess we'll take the middle one, then."

Wolfram kept a hold of his hand as he pushed the door open, revealing a room even more piled with books than the one they had first discovered. They took a few steps in before--

"You're losing your touch," came a tired voice. "I heard you coming this time."

Yuuri didn't see the source of the voice right away, but finally he caught sight of a man bent over a pile of books in one of the corners. His back was to them.

They could just go. Walk back out the door and try another. Wolfram seemed to be in favor of that idea because he was slowly backing in that direction. Yuuri swallowed hard and hoped he was about to make the right decision.

********

********

"Hello?"

Camilio jerked himself out of his chair and into reality at the unfamiliar voice. Two girls were standing by the door, but the voice he had heard had definitely been male. Camilio tried unsuccessfully to look at the girls while at the same time scan the room for whoever had spoken.
The blonde girl was trying to pull the one with dark hair out of the door, but the dark haired one wouldn't budge, eyes locked on Camilio.

"Hello?" Camilio stammered, answering the voice but looking at the girls. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so," the dark haired girl said. It was the same voice that Camilio had heard before. "Is it alright if we ask you some questions?"

Camilio laughed. The situation was just so absurd! "I must be dreaming..." he muttered and sat back down at his desk. The anxiety of trying to fix... well, what felt like anything and everything at once really must be getting to him. He must have fallen asleep, though what his subconscious intended by sending him a blonde girl and a boy in a dress he would be happy never to know.

When was the last time he had had a proper sleep? Days? Camilio shook his head. It must have been the cheese he'd had with supper. Fingers was running out of--

"Are you alright?" the boy wearing a dress asked, stepping toward him.

"Oh." Camilio blinked. "You're still here."

The strangers looked at one another. "Um, yes, we're still here," the boy answered. "And you're not dreaming."

Camilio pressed his fingers against his temples and closed his eyes. When he opened them the two strangers were still there. "How did you even get in here? The God Tower is restricted... What do you want?"

"I was hoping you could explain a few things." The boy crossed the room and leaned against a nearby table, facing him. The girl followed close behind, arms crossed and looking like she would rather be anywhere else.

Really, the whole situation couldn't be any more absurd. "Alright," he managed. "What would you like me to explain?"

"Well..." The boy paused, then chuckled to himself. "I suppose I don't want to say 'take me to your leader' but, well, I was wondering if you could tell me who is in charge around here."

Camilio looked between the boy and girl. Were they really serious?

"Not who's supposed to be in charge," the boy continued. "You don't have to say Sara, the king, if it's not true, that is--"

The blond girl interrupted with a loud sigh. "Let's start simply. Who are you?"

Another boy in a dress? Camilio did his best not to appear as shocked as he felt. "I'm, uh, Camilio."

The blonde boy nodded. "Nice to meet you, Camilio. What is your position here?"

"Cleric." Camilio licked his lips. "I suppose you could say Head Cleric now."

"Why now?" The blond asked, coming to sit on a nearby chair.

"Well..." Camilio stopped. Pictured the blood on the polished tile floor. The faces of the men who had taught him, learned with him. "There is no one else," he breathed. He didn't realize how afraid he had been to say the words aloud. To bury the dead. Amidst all of his worries it was easier to pretend that outside these walls, things were as they once had been: good.
Camilio shook his head in shame. No, never good. Just a pretty dream forged from his own ignorance. "The others were... executed for treason."

The dark haired boy gasped. "But why?"

Camilio shook his head again, closed his eyes. Maybe this really was a dream. His mind finding new ways to replay the same information over and over in a new way. Maybe one that this time would help him make sense of it. Help him find a way out. "They wanted to send His Majesty's head to Shin Makoku. A desperate attempt to appease the mazoku. To prevent war."

Silence. So suddenly still that Camilio had to open his eyes. He was shocked to see so much pain reflected in dark eyes.

"But why," the dark haired boy whispered. "Why would anyone think that sending... sending something like that would prevent... We were never-- I never would have allowed it to come to that. Sara must have known that!"

"Even if Saralegui knew it, given the circumstances he might have had a hard time of convincing anyone else," the blond spat.

Camilio had never heard the king's name spoken with such... lack of title. "Who are you?"

Neither of them answered his question, instead they continued speaking as if they hadn't heard him.

"But why would anyone think that sending me Sara's head would stop a war! What kind of a person sends someone a head?!" The brunet was short of breath.

The blond moved closer to his companion and placed a hand on his shoulder. "In terms of a peace offering, it's not unheard of. Especially if the ones who proposed it knew that Saralegui was the one responsible--"

"--But what if they just wanted everyone to think Sara was responsible?! What if they only wanted to put all the blame on him? If Sara was killed, there would be no one to tell us his side of it!"

"Please." Camilio slid down the wall and onto his knees. "Don't kill me. Don't kill me I'll--"

"Stop that!" The Maou snapped, eyes wide.

"But this was no ordinary mazoku."

Camilio swallowed thickly. His knees began to shake. It couldn't be. It had to be a mistake. Mazoku couldn't possibly have gotten past the gates. The God Tower had Houseki built into the very walls. There was no way mazoku could have reached him here.

But this was no ordinary mazoku.

This was their king. The Maou who had single handedly opened up the ground and swallowed half of Shou Shimeron's army-- three of his own brothers.

"Please." Camilio slid down the wall and onto his knees. "Don't kill me. Don't kill me I'll--"

"Stop that!" The Maou snapped, eyes wide.

Camilio covered his face with his arms and curled into himself. They were going to kill him. He would never see his wife and children again. They knew that he had recognized them and now they were going to kill him.
There was only the sound of his heart, of too quick breaths as Camilio waited for the blow to come. But instead he heard someone kneel beside him and gently place a hand on his back.

"I'm not going to hurt you. No one is. Please don't be scared." The Maou's voice was soft. Deceptively earnest.

Or was it?

His Highness had said that the Maou would not bring war to them. The Maou was not the one that His Majesty feared.

Camilio dared to uncover his face, but he could not bring himself to look anywhere other than the floor before him. "What do you want?"

"Not to hurt anyone. Just to make things right." The Maou sighed. "So many people died because of the plague-- because of the bread that Shou Shimeron was selling. So many other things... terrible things happened that led us here. We can't change what happened, no one can change the past but... We want to stop the bad things from happening. Stop the people from dying in your city. The people on the outskirts who are sick and confused... It's important that we know what happened here. Who made the decisions that led to all of this and why."

Camilio licked his lips and nodded. Maybe it was all some sort of mazoku magic, but the Maou's voice was seductively sincere. Camilio took a few deep breaths and tried to remind himself that he had wanted to do something to stop the horrors that he had witnessed long before this. To remind himself that he had known that things were wrong but that he had been too much of a coward to do anything about it before. It was possible that the Maou would kill him, yes, but even if he did... it was also possible that his children would someday live in a better world than Camilio had ever seen. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know." His own voice was soft in his ears. "Where would you like me to begin?"

The blond-- the one that Camilio believed to be the Maou's husband-- wasted no time in speaking. "Why did your fellows believe that sending us your king's head would stop a war? Was it because they believed his decisions had been wrong, or was it an attempt to shift the blame from their own misdeeds?"

"I can't be sure," Camilio managed. "The others didn't include me in their plans-- which is why His Majesty chose to spare me."

The Maou's husband didn't seem to be pleased with his answer, but he accepted it. "Then let's start from the beginning. Why did you begin selling infected bread outside your borders?"

"Well... The Blessing was in particular abundance that harvest, it's true, but... His Majesty wished to accelerate the natural process of selection by the gods..." Camilio took a shaking breath. He was already guilty of treachery, there was no point in holding anything back. "Our army had just been destroyed... It was only a matter of time before our nation was overthrown. His Majesty believed that Shin Makoku was sure to attack and so the only way to rebuild our population of soldiers-- of second class-- was to accelerate the selection. To further ensure our country's protection His Majesty went to Shin Makoku himself to attempt an alliance through marriage..."

"But," the Maou started, "that doesn't really make sense. For one thing we would never have just invaded Shou Shimeron for no reason, but more importantly, why worry about raising an army of second class if Sara thought that I would marry him and create an alliance?"

"Well there was always a chance that you would refuse him," said the Maou's husband. "Or, given
the human's apparent ignorance of your wimpy nature they could have also considered the possibility that you would simply kill him."

"But that's stupid!" the Maou growled, "I've done so much to stop that kind of thinking... Caloria is one of our best allies and Frankshire--"

"Two human nations is far from all. Subaralia has always been apprehensive and if we hadn't adopted Greta they might not even be that. Shimeron still tells its people we serve you human children for meals. It isn't so unthinkable that Shou Shimeron decided to have a back up plan. What is, however, is their timing. Why initiate the more provocative tactic first? There were reports of the plague before Saralegui turned up."

"You're right. I haven't been able to find the logic in it myself." Camilio shook his head. "At the time, the Council of Clerics was so convinced of the threat that they agreed to anything His Majesty ordered without much protest."

"So everything really was Sara's orders..." The Maou's voice was so soft. So sad. "Sara really was behind the plague. All those people dying."

Camilio worried his lip. "You musn't be too hard on His Majesty." His Majesty is very sick. His Guard refused to see it but the truth was there. "We all knew..." he whispered. Camilio buried his face in his palms.

Everything.

Everything he had believed for his entire life was falling apart around him.

What a fool he had been.

Looking back, Camilio could see so many times where he could have-- should have questioned. The times that he had witnessed the suffering of the third class with his own eyes. The times that he had preached to those who suffered most. The clerics were supposed to help them, and yet-- what help were mere words in the face of such horrors? Through his readings, Camilio had learned that it had not always been like this. That before "the blessing", the god's gift was called "black sorrow". The black sorrow that was wept from the grieving soil through the eyes of rye. In the days of old, the Heroes had come to the aide of the people. Helped those who were not chosen to live in some manner of comfort.

But all of that was before the walls had gone up. Before the Pure had forgotten the face of suffering and the second class had learned to look away.

The gods had offered them such gifts; the potential for unrivaled mathematical talent and pure eyes through which to see the world, but the people of Shou Shimeron had proven themselves unworthy.

It was only fitting that fate would send the Maou here to wreak his Justice on them all.

The Maou was here to seek their king and put an end to them and yet... Camilio could not help but see himself as more to blame than their boy king.

"That boy was broken long ago..."

In Camilio's mind, Fingers spoke with the voice of one of his teachers. A man's voice, but one that was aged and wise.

It was one of the first things that she had told him once she knew that Camilio had finally
deciphered her code, her tapping, for what it really was. Words. Letters like numbers that spoke for her.

Camilio had asked her what had happened to her, who had taken her tongue and fingers, and she had looked at him with hard eyes for many minutes before she told him.

Years ago Fingers had worked as the Queen's maidservant. She had been favored among the royal family and privy to many a conversation that required great secrecy. Of course, Camilio had suspected it had been something like that. What he hadn't expected, was to hear of the late Queen's decent into madness. That the Queen had killed her husband in front of their young son and bathed in his blood in a misguided attempt to salvage her youth. Old magic. Old superstition that never would have succeeded. The Queen had brought his Majesty into the tub with her and must have tried to drain his blood as well given the cuts he had sustained, but even at such a young age, the boy must have struggled for his own life. Or at least, that was what Fingers had deduced when she found him. From the few words the young king had managed through his tears as they had pulled him from the tub of his parent's blood.

It was hardly a wonder that the boy king had succumbed to the traumas of his youth. To madness. Camilio had no such excuse for allowing things to become as the were.

A hand touched his shoulder and Camilio gave a startled shout, blinking as he removed his hands from his face and was swept up again in the reality of his current predicament.

"Will you take us to him? To Sara?" The Maou's eyes were sad, but fierce with the kind of determination that only the young possess.

"Yes," Camilio answered, feeling numb. "I will."

********
********

Even as Camilio led them down the tower's winding steps, Yuuri knew that some small part of him still refused to believe that everything that had happened here was Sara's fault. Even though Camilio spoke and acted with so much guilt, his obvious remorse made it difficult to place any blame on him either. Camilio was willing to help them despite the dangers of doing so. Camilio wasn't the one who had come to him in Shin Makou-- claimed to seek his help.

The power inside him boiled. Rippled beneath his skin and cried for Justice. Swirled in eager rage to deliver the punishment that was deserved.

But not yet.

They didn't know everything yet. Yuuri was able to still the need inside him with that knowledge for now, but he feared it wouldn't last.

Yuuri reached out to take his husband's hand, seeking comfort in the solid presence beside him. Wolfram seemed more determined than angry, looking back at him with protective, almost pitying, eyes. Yuuri wondered if he really was as stupid as everyone thought he was. Wolfram has come to terms with the idea of Sara's guilt long before, and so it was no wonder he didn't seem shocked, but at the same time there had been so many instances where it had been everyone else who had been wrong. Hubert, Greta, and even Conrad when Shinou had ordered him to defect to Shou Shimeron. Was it really so wrong to see the best in everyone? The potential for good before the bad?

Still, he couldn't allow himself to forget how many innocent people had died from Shou
Shimeron's "plague". Was it right to let whoever was responsible go unpunished for their suffering? Was it right to punish Sara, like the Justice inside him wanted, when punishing wouldn't change the past—would only hurt another person, or worse.

Yuuri squeezed Wolfram's hand tighter. The plague was only one thing, as terrible as it was. As angry as it made him, Yuuri was still able to think clearly--To hold back the rage and think of all the ways that Sara could help his people. Be put to good use.

He wasn't so reasonable when Yuuri remembered what had been done to Wolfram. If Sara was truly behind that...

Wolfram had been so hurt. So hurt. Wolfram had almost died in a way so terrible Yuuri could never have imagined it. Yuuri had to close his eyes to block out the image of Wolfram, jaw broken, everything so broken in his brother's arms.

If Sara was behind that--admitted it--Yuuri didn't know if he would be able to keep himself from killing him. Didn't know if he would want to.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs Camilio led them out of the tower and across the courtyard in the direction of the second tower. Any guards they passed gave them curious looks, but made no move to hinder them once Camilio ordered them aside. From the corner of his eyes, Yuuri could see Wolfram sneaking glances in his direction between his wary looks at everything else. Yuuri gave the hand he still held what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze.

The farther they journeyed into the second tower the stranger it was that no one seemed to stop them— or even question the actions of their guide. Yuuri was sure that if Ulrike or even Murata turned up with complete stranger the guards in Shin Makoku would have done something more than nod them on their way. Wolfram must have thought so too because as soon as they entered a deserted corridor he questioned their guide.

Camilio stammered his answer in a soft voice. "I've been helping the head of His Majesty's guard. His Majesty is--has--not been well and it would not do for the people to know as he has yet to name a successor... Things are delicate at the moment and we had hoped to avoid an uproar."

"What's wrong with him?" Yuuri asked.

"His Majesty had been... consuming too much of the blessing. A common ailment among the pure but not for such a prolonged period... These last few days, he has been much better, thanks to the efforts of Reyes and myself. In order to frequent the tower as much as became necessary in recent weeks, Reyes raised my status." Camilio licked his lips before continuing. "His Majesty does not know the extent of my privileges. Paranoia is one of the side effects of overuse and we feared how he might react to any changes made without his approval."

Wolfram frowned. "Why would Saralegui be using so much of the stuff when the situation was so 'delicate' to begin with?"

"There is some difference of opinion as to whether overuse is even possible. It is the god's gift to us, after all, and the Pure are the most worthy of the gift." Camilio shook his head. "The visions it brings are thought by some to be prophetic, and the ways it changes the mind are thought to bring the pure closer to the heightened awareness only known to the gods. His Majesty was distraught... and it is likely His Majesty hoped to see some solution to his woes that had thus far alluded him."

"That's no excuse," Wolfram huffed.
Yuuri worried his lip. Why hadn't Sara just written to him? Tried to talk to him? Asked for help? Murata had said that the "plague" was caused by chemicals very close to the Earth drug LSD... He couldn't imagine someone being under the effects of a drug like that for weeks.

They followed Camilio for a while longer in silence before they reached a new set of spiral stairs.

"His Majesty's chambers are at the top of the tower," Camilio explained, before leading them up.

Yuuri knew that he should be paying more attention to his surroundings, but he was too occupied with his thoughts. With wondering what he would say to Sara when he finally saw him again. He was short of breath and slightly dizzy by the time they reached the top, and Yuuri was suddenly thankful that Shinou had decided to limit the amount of spiral staircases in Blood Pledge Castle to a more reasonable number. Even though this tower was much thicker than the one where they had found Camilio the circle of the climb had seemed even tighter. Camilio led them down a lavishly decorated hall before knocking on a pair of ornate doors.

After an uncomfortable pause, Reyes swung the door open, hair loose and wild and decidedly on edge about such a late-night visit. He took them in with hard eyes, unmoving and silent before inclining his head in greeting.

"Your Majesties, forgive us for not preparing for your arrival in a more befitting manner. Had we known you were coming--"

"You would have greeted us with more swords," Wolfram finished for him, voice clipped.

"Wolf," Yuuri warned, then looked up at Reyes. "I need to talk to Sara. I need him to explain what happened... And talk about what we can do to make things better here. For everyone."

The guard's knuckles were white where he gripped the edge of the door, covering the opening into the darkness beyond as much as he could with his body. "Of course. But I am sure His Majesty would greatly appreciate some time to prepare for a meeting with such esteemed guests."

Wolfram opened his mouth to refuse but this time Yuuri spoke first. "Five minutes," he licked his lips, tried to sound as intimidating and kingly as he could. "Five minutes and know we'll find you if you try to run."

"You are too kind," Reyes inclined his head a second time. "The cleric will bring you to the meeting hall where His Majesty and I will meet your shortly." No one made a move to stop him as he shut the door.

Yuuri turned his kingly-look on Camilio and nodded. Wolfram looked less than thrilled about his decision but seemed to accept it, falling in step beside him as they followed Camilio back down the hall toward the meeting hall.

The meeting hall was similar to the one at Blood Pledge Castle, though somewhat smaller. Large windows, this time filled with clear glass instead of stained, covered both sides of the hall. There was an ornate throne against the wall farthest from them, but other than that, there were no seats to be found.

Wolfram crossed his arms as he studied the room, obviously using great restraint to hold his tongue. Yuuri did his best to send him comforting glances, but it was difficult with all the thoughts spinning around his mind. Surely Sara would feel more comfortable talking to them about possible solutions here than if they had stormed his bedroom in the middle of the night. Pajamas really weren't the best clothes for confidence building after all and--
"Yuuri," Wolfram whispered, making Yuuri step closer to him to hear. "Don't... don't let me destroy the world, alright?"

Yuuri gripped his hand again. "I won't." The idea of Wolfram destroying the world seemed so outrageous sometimes that it was hard to take it seriously. But Yuuri supposed that everything about their current situation was a little bit outrageous. At least reassuring Wolfram--being reassured himself-- was something he could take comfort in. "But you have to keep me from... killing anyone."

Wolfram nodded, worry still clear on chiseled features. It was so hard not to kiss him. "I can't believe we're doing this... dressed like this," he muttered.

Yuuri laughed, voice echoing uncomfortably in the large hall. "Maybe it will make us seem less threatening?"

Wolfram raised an eyebrow at him before shaking his head.

After that, some of the tension and dread went out of his mood and Yuuri was content to watch the doors in silence, eager for Sara to arrive so that they could put all of this behind them. He wasn't expecting the sound that came from the opposite end of the hall.

He and Wolfram both spun to face the unexpected sound. Sara and Reyes had entered the hall, but through a hidden door somewhere behind the room's solitary throne. Sara was wearing white robes that trailed the ground behind him and his hair had been pulled up into a high ponytail making him look more androgynous than ever. Reyes was as dark as his king was light and he had taken the time to rearrange his hair into the familiar braid. Both of them looked different. Older than they had been during their time in Shin Makoku. Worn.

Yuuri swallowed the urge to apologize for bothering them in the middle of the night. Instead he stood up straighter and walked closer to them, pausing only when he was a few dozen paces before the throne where Sara now sat. Until he was close enough that he wouldn't have to yell to be heard.

Wolfram followed at his side and even though they were no longer holding hands Yuuri could feel the heat radiating from him all down the left side of his body. Camilio followed them, too, but he held back several paces behind.

Reyes looked uncomfortable at their approach and made no attempt to hide the contempt twisting his features. Yuuri focused on Sara instead, pale eyes that almost looked through him, rather than at him. "Have you come to punish me?" Sara's voice was soft, he leaned forward in his chair and licked his lips. "I do so love a good punishment this time of night."

Wolfram growled.

"Stop it, Sara," Yuuri snapped before Wolfram had a chance to. "It's time to be serious!"

Pale eyes went cold. "It is, indeed." Then he stood, keeping one delicate hand on the high back of his throne. "It is time to be quite serious, dear Yuuri." A soft, small, smile spread across thin lips. "If you take my kingdom away I'll take your daughter. It's as simple as that."

"What?" Yuuri blinked, incredulous, at the same time Wolfram ground out the same word.

"It's simple really," Sara continued, seemingly oblivious to the obvious threat in Wolfram's voice. "I've given my man very detailed instructions, you see. If any word comes that Shou Shimeron has fallen he is to kill Greta. Something that should be easy for him to do given how obviously taken the little beast is by his son--"
"No." Wolfram's voice was terrible. Dark and hot and Yuuri could feel his power swelling in the room.

Sara only smiled, shaking his finger at Wolfram as if he was merely a naughty pet. "Kill me and you kill her. We wouldn't want that, would we, Sir Belefield? I'm sure any orders you send would arrive quite after the news of Shou Shimeron's fall. Gossip flies on the fastest wings, I've found--"

"Stop this!" Yuuri had somehow managed to find his voice. "You don't want to do this! Sara, why-- We came here to talk--"

"Talk?" Sara mimicked in a shrill voice, eyes wild. "You came here without notice! You never would have come alone-- The Lion of Ruttenburg is here somewhere and more I'm sure of it! Don't lie to me, Yuuri."

"I'm not lying!" Yuuri insisted. "I've never lied to you! We didn't come alone, that's true, but we're not here to hurt you! We're here to help you! Help everyone here that's suffering! You have to know that what you're doing to everyone is wrong! That it's hurting people-- your people-- But you can change all of that! We can stop the infection from spreading in the crops-- take care of people who are sick! You can help us with all of that!"

"Help you?" Sara seethed. "Help you destroy everything the gods have given us-- You may have power, Yuuri, but you are not god. It is not for you to decide who lives and who dies--"

Yuuri could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Of course I'm not! I'm not and neither are you--"

"The gods sent the blessing! The gods choose who lives and who dies, who is sick and who is blessed! It is not for you to come and save those that the gods have damned!"

"Madness," Wolfram hissed, voice low and deadly. "We came here to offer you peace and instead you threaten us. Threaten Greta?"

Yuuri tore his eyes from Sara to look at Wolfram, the heat shimmering the air around him. The gold creeping into his eyes.

"Wolfram stop it. We'll find a way to settle this. Don't do anything you don't want to do." Golden eyes focused on him, flickering into green. The silence rang in his ears as Yuuri watched the power collapse back in on itself, leaving Wolfram shaking and out of breath.

"Your Majesty they truly did come to help," Camilio spoke, soft yet sure. "If you cooperate with them--"

"Silence the traitor!" Sara raged, and before Yuuri could blink the same flash of sharp-- the same whistle to the air before the little girl from Lesser Gael had fallen during her dance-- Camilio cried out-- gripping his face as blood slid between his fingers-- dripping onto his robes. The cleric stumbled to his knees, curling into himself to nurse his wounded face.

The room had gone still. Reyes could hit either of them-- possibly before even magic could react-- but instead of ordering his guard further, Sara was looking at him in shock. Pale face gone white. "Take them to the holding room. All of them. Take them and give them time to think about 'cooperating'. To think about saving their princess. Now!" He backed away from them-- sat in his chair curled up like a scared child. "Now!" He shouted again, eyes darting rapidly between them.

Yuuri took Wolfram's hand, even though it was almost hot enough to burn. "We'll take time to think. To calm down." He looked at Wolfram's face until angry eyes met his and softened. "Okay?"
Wolfram nodded. Muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching with restraint. He gave Sara one long, deadly, look before turning away.

Yuuri couldn't believe it. Everything had happened so fast... Why had Sara said all those things? What did he mean by them...

Greta.

They were trapped. There was nothing they could do... He had to think of a way to make Sara see reason. He had to.

********

********

Wolfram seethed in silence as Reyes led them toward the holding room. Yuuri was in step beside him though both of them were too lost in their own dark thoughts to be much comfort to the other. The cleric shuffled along behind them, sniffing and dripping blood onto the mosaic tile floor.

"If you take my kingdom away I'll take your daughter. It's as simple as that."

How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he seen it before? The stable boy and his father both wore fucking braids. If anything happened to Greta he would torture them until they begged for death.

Like he had...

Yuuri's hand was on his shoulder. Shaking him. Eyes full of worry and just a hint of fear. They had reached the holding room. Wolfram ground his teeth and glared at Reyes before he stepped beyond the threshold, knowing full well that "holding room" was merely the royal version of a dungeon. At least they hadn't had to climb any more stairs.

The holding room was small and had clearly fallen into disuse. White cloth covered most of the furniture and the air was stale and thick with dust. Yuuri and the cleric followed him inside and Reyes gave them a parting nod before the door closed firmly behind them, followed by the heavy sound of a lock sliding into place.

Wolfram was so angry he could barely see or hear or think.

Greta.

That bastard had threatened Greta.

Worse... The fool could have already killed her.

Wolfram kicked what must have been a table hard enough to send it screeching across the floor. The wood hit the stone wall with a loud CRACK and the table-shape beneath the cloth collapsed as it burst into flame. Such a satisfying crackle of sound. The perfume of smoke-- Destruction--

Yuuri's shout was somehow enough to bring him back to the moment and he jumped into action, helping the wimp smother the small fire with some excess fabric that was covering a nearby chair. They were both coughing by the time the fire was out and the cleric looked more terrified of him than ever, huddled and bleeding as he was in the far corner of the room.

Once he stopped coughing, Wolfram managed a muffled apology and busied himself with opening the room's single small window to let out the excess smoke. He could hear Yuuri murmuring
behind him, doing his best to deal with the traumatized cleric. Once the window was open, Wolfram made his way over to where Yuuri was examining the cut on the cleric's face.

"It doesn't look so bad," Yuuri was saying, "It's really not deep."

Upon closer inspection, Wolfram could see that Yuuri wasn't just trying to reassure the man. It really was just a superficial cut, though it traveled diagonally across his face from his temple down over his nose and cheek. "You'll be fine," Wolfram did his best to sound like he cared. "It will be a trophy of a scar."

"My wife will love it..." The cleric's face was so pale next to the blood clotting on his skin and his eyes were wide and unfocused. Poor fool was in shock.

Wolfram growled and gave the man a shake. "Stop that! Focus! It's just a cut. You're not dying."

Yuuri gave him an accusatory look. "There's no reason to be mean!"

"Well he needs to calm down and breathe," Wolfram snapped. "It will take him longer to recover if he doesn't!"

"Fine." Yuuri sighed. "I just wish we had some water. A damp cloth would be better at getting the blood off."

Wolfram stood. Almost stopped breathing.

Could it really be that simple?

"Water," he breathed, looking around the room, "We need some water!" He was shouting now, rushing around like a fool.

Yuuri stood, watching with confusion as Wolfram searched the room. "What? Wolfram, what--"

"Water!" Wolfram said again, he didn't have time to explain more now he just had to find water. Water meant that there was still hope! A few more seconds and there it was, a pool on the ledge--just some collected rain water but it should be enough-- "Water, Yuuri!" He rushed over, grinning madly as he put both his hands on the wimp's shoulders. "We can save Greta! It's our best shot--"

"Explain! Wolfram, I still don't know what you're talking about!"

Wolfram shook his husband. They didn't have time for this! They had to leave now! "Don't you see! Greta is already in danger-- There could already be rumors at the palace about what we're up to-- Whether Shou Shimeron actually falls or not if rumor travels to that stable keep-- She plays in the stables all the time! It's too dangerous! But you-- You can travel though the water! You've been better at controlling it-- taking your family back and fourth-- you can hold time here and go to Earth before going back to Shinou's Temple!"

"What?" Yuuri sputtered. "But-- But what if I make a mistake--"

"--I trust you-- I know you can do it!"

Yuuri shook his head. "I won't leave you here."

Wolfram could have screamed. "I can take care of myself! But Greta... she's still just a little girl! She can't--"

"I know! You think I don't want to protect her as much as you?"
"Then go!" Wolfram pulled the wimp into a hug. "Go and take care of Greta. Make sure she's alright." He pressed his lips against dark hair. "I can take care of Saralegui and all of this. You're the only one who can make sure that nothing happens to Greta."

Yuuri was silent for long seconds. "No," His voice was hard. Firm. "I'm not leaving without you. If I-- If we go, we go together. Conrad and ... and the others can deal with... If Sara wouldn't listen to me... He won't listen to anyone. We have to do what we have to do to take care of his kingdom. To save all the people we possibly can, but you and I don't need to be there for that. What we need to do is take care of Greta."

Wolfram pulled away, cupped his husband's-- his king's-- cheeks with both hands. "Can you do it though? It takes more power to take other people. I don't want to be the reason we don't get there in time--"

"I don't have a choice. I have to."

"I want to be here... but... You're right. It's the only way to make sure we get back to Shin Makoku in time to save Greta. We have to trust the others to take care of Shou Shimeron."

Wolfram rested his forehead against Yuuri's. An hour ago, he couldn't think about anything other than punishing Saralegui for all that he had done but now-- Now nothing mattered except saving their daughter.

"What about Conrad? I don't want them to kill Sara if it can be avoided but if we're missing-- If Conrad or Yozak or anyone thinks Saralegui killed us they'll--"

"You're right," Wolfram interrupted. Then he turned to face the Cleric who was looking at them with wide eyes. "You'll tell them where we went."

"But where are you going?" The cleric asked. "There's no way out."

"He can't tell them!" Yuuri said suddenly. "If we leave him... If we escape and leave him, what will happen to Camilio?"

The cleric stood slowly, and when he spoke his voice was oddly calm. "Don't worry about me. Whether you escape or not I doubt my fate will change. I'd prefer to help-- If I can."

Wolfram nodded, and after a moment Yuuri nodded too.

"I'm sure you'll be alright," Yuuri said. "When Conrad comes-- He'll be the angry one with brown hair and a sword-- Tell him... Tell him we went to Earth, and we'll see him when he gets home. Tell him that we went because we had to save Greta. Oh! And tell him... 'Red Socks' so that he knows we're friends."

"Red socks?" The cleric repeated and Wolfram couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the last request.

Yuuri nodded and thanked the cleric again before he walked with Wolfram over to the window.

"I almost forgot," Wolfram murmured, looking out over the sleeping city, the moonlight shining on stone walls and distant fields. He raised a hand to focus his power-- the rush and relief. "I promised I'd set the signal."

The fire was small. A distant firefly on the horizon. Wolfram regretted that he wouldn't be here to see the whole wretched, contaminated, fields burn to the ground.
"Ready?" he asked, looked at Yuuri with all the hope he could feel. This had to work. *It had to.*

Yuuri answered with a nod. "Ready."

********

********
Whispers from the Rye: Chapter 10

********
********

Somewhere Between Worlds

********

The familiar spin and stretch of water rushing around him was suddenly and violently interrupted by something. Something clinging to him. Something hot and different and Yuuri almost tried to break away before he realized what it was.

It was only a moment of distraction, but it was enough.

They came out of the water sputtering. The skirts of his dress billowed up around him in the cold, cold, rushing water and Yuuri gasped for air-- relief, when he heard Wolfram gasping beside him. Yuuri managed to get enough footing on the slick rocks beneath his feet to stand and hauled Wolfram to his feet. The rushing sound from before turned out to be a long wall of waterfalls, thick strings of white water crashing down. Even though the waterfalls weren't very high, there was enough of them that their sound was overwhelming so close.

Yuuri's teeth were chattering violently as he and Wolfram made their way to the nearby shore, slipping on rocks and using each other to keep balance the entire way. For a terrible moment, Yuuri was sure that they were still in the other world, and if not there, then somewhere on Earth that would be completely foreign and possible hostile, but then he saw a sign in Japanese asking visitors not to enter the water and he let out a sigh of relief. At least they hadn't gone too far off track. He flopped down with a sigh on the bank of thick moss to catch his breath, happy when Wolfram sat down close and wrapped a warm arm around him.

"Where are we?" Wolfram asked, teeth chattering.

Yuuri snuggled closer to his wet husband. "I don't know. Somewhere in Japan at least. The magic-- it was different."

"I felt it too." Wolfram shivered. "Ethne. She doesn't like water-- I thought I was going to lose you."

Yuuri sneezed. "I thought so too, but next time I'll be ready for it."

"You don't think-- We'll still be able to go back in time to save Greta? It's all for nothing if we turn up in Voltaire or Subaralia or--"

"I don't know." Yuuri managed. "I don't... I don't think so. I think... I think I've got the time right." Yuuri wished he didn't have to put so much faith in his ability to control the passing of time in the other world. At least crossing to Earth had gotten easier since the wedding. Taking his whole family back and forth had been so exhausting that just traveling with one other person should have been easy. As long as Yuuri kept thinking about how he didn't want the time in the other world to go by it shouldn't. Well... at least that was how it had always seemed to work before. But before, nothing had interfered with his magic.

Yuuri worried his lip. What if next time he wasn't so lucky and they did end up somewhere where helping Greta would be impossible? "I think I should try to talk to Bob-- before we go back. I can find a pay phone and make a collect call to my parent's. Then I can get Shouri's number... Just to be
safe. I want to go back as much as you do but-- I want to make sure we do this right."

Wolfram nodded. "Whatever it takes." He stood carefully and gathered up the fabric of his dress, wringing out a splash of water. "We should get you out of the cold."

"Right," Yuuri agreed and let Wolfram help him to his feet. Even though the water had been freezing, the weather was warm, and would be getting warmer as it seemed to be just past dawn. His teeth had already stopped chattering. Yuuri took a deep breath, looked up at the sky, and blinked. "Well, I know where we are now."

"Where?" Wolfram followed his gaze. "A mountain?"

Yuuri shook his head. "It's Mount Fuji. We're in the tourist center of Japan. It's a good thing we showed up so early. In a few hours, this place is going to be swarming with people."

They found a marked path not far from where they emerged from the water and more signs that told him exactly where they were. Yuuri had never been to the Shiraito Waterfalls before, but he had gone with his parents and grandparents to climb Mount Fuji one summer when he was very young and he remembered it being mentioned. Even though it was a tourist hot spot, Fujinomiya was still the middle of nowhere and he knew that they would have to get a lot closer to a train station or bus stop before there was any hope of finding a public phone.

It was hard for Yuuri not to let his speedy walk break out into a full run, and he knew that Wolfram was just as anxious to rush, but Yuuri could already feel the tired behind his eyes-- like he had been up all night studying-- and he knew that if he even started to run, he would be exhausted in no time. The rough cotton of his dress was still dripping wet and kept sticking uncomfortably to his legs and from Wolfram's occasional mutterings Yuuri could only assume his husband was having similar difficulties.

As they got further down the trail, they came upon a few salesmen and women setting up their stalls for the day. The wooden booths were sure to sell charms and tokens for good luck as well as the usual tourist fare. It wasn't until Yuuri caught the second person staring that he remembered exactly what they must look like. Yuuri shook his head. Two boys--or girls-- in soaking wet European-style period dresses. He wasn't even sure if it made it better or worse that one of them had such foreign features. Yuuri could feel hot shame creeping its way into his cheeks. It was one thing to dress like this in the other world but Japan...

Wolfram huffed in annoyance and grabbed hold of Yuuri's arm as a particularly tactless middle-aged woman took a picture of them with her cell phone.

"Don't say anything," Yuuri whispered as they hurried along the path. "It's one thing for people to gossip, but we don't want to cause a scene. We don't want to get involved with the police... You don't have any papers so they would probably try to get you deported or--"

"I don't like them taking pictures of you." Wolfram frowned. "Why can't we use her... device to call your brother?"

Yuuri stopped. He had been so focused on his first idea of getting to a pay phone, that he hadn't even thought about asking to borrow someone's phone. "Wolfram, that's a great idea!" He was so happy he kissed him without a thought. They broke apart to the sound of a shrill cry and Yuuri caught the look of shock on the woman's face over Wolfram's shoulder. "Er, I guess we shouldn't ask her... but I'm sure I can find someone else!" He hurried off with Wolfram a little farther down the trail.
Since they were safely out of sight, Yuuri gave his husband another kiss. It was amazing how kissing Wolfram made everything seem less impossible. The kiss was nothing more than a quick brush of lips but Yuuri felt newly optimistic. "Wait here, it will be easier-- well, less strange if I ask them alone, alright? I'll be back as soon as I get in touch with Shouri."

Wolfram looked less than pleased with the arrangement, but he nodded.

Yuuri kissed him one last time before making his way farther down the trail.

It wasn't long before a few tourists passed him going the other way. Besides a few lingering glances, the group seemed to be more interested in the scenery than him and Yuuri was able to continue along unbothered. That group proved to be the first of many and soon the still of the forest trail was filled with the first wave of eager sight-seers. Yuuri thought about asking one of them if he could use their phone, but all of them seemed to be in too much of a rush to want to stop and oblige a stranger's request.

A few minutes passed before the trail widened and Yuuri found a few people starting up their portable ovens to cook fried noodles and other treats for hungry tourists. One of the closest stalls housing one such oven was being equipped by a couple of boys close to Shouri's age with the metal fish-shaped molds for red bean cakes. Yuuri supposed it was a good a place as any to start asking.

"Excuse me," he began, then realized he probably should have waited for them to finish setting up. The metal mold looked heavy and the two boys seemed to be struggling attaching the top portion to the bottom. "Do you need some help?"

Before either of the boys could answer Yuuri was between them, doing what he could to balance the mold. It only took a few seconds for the boys to lock it into place.

"Thank you," One of the boys panted. "Uncle would have been mad if we'd dropped it again."

The other boy was looking at him with more suspicion. "What are you doing here?"

Yuuri managed a nervous laugh as he stalled for time. Why hadn't he decided on what to say before? "Television show," he answered as quickly as it popped into his head.

"Oh," the boy frowned but seemed to accept his answer. "What kind of television show?"

Yuuri stammered, "but it's sort of like a scavenger hunt. I need to find someone who will let me make a phone call so I can find out the next part of the game..."

"You can use mine," offered the boy who had thanked him before. He reached into his pocket and handed Yuuri his cellphone. It must have been three years old and had at least a dozen charms hanging from the side but at that moment it was the most beautiful phone that Yuuri had ever seen.

"Thank you so much!" Yuuri took it even as the boys began to argue between themselves and dialed his parent's house.

His mother picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"It's Yuuri. Listen--"

"Yuu-chan!" his mother squealed into the phone. "What are you doing here? Are you calling from Shin Makoku? What--"
"I'll explain later!" Yuuri interrupted as calmly as he could manage. "I need you to give me Shouri's phone number-- or Bob's if you have it."

"I don't have Bob's number, but Shou-chan is with him in Finland right now."

Yuuri let out a frustrated noise. "Well then Shouri's number."

His mother tutted at him. "If your generation actually learned phone numbers rather than trusting your minds to machines--"

"I know," Yuuri sighed into the phone.

By the time his mother had repeated the number enough times that Yuuri was confident enough that he had it memorized, the boys had stopped arguing and were looking at him suspiciously.

"If you're on a television show where are the cameras?" The second boy asked as soon as Yuuri hung up the phone.

"Uh," Yuuri stalled. "Hidden?" He handed back the phone. "Anyway, thank you so much for letting me use your phone. I have to go."

He turned on his heel and walked away, relieved when neither of the boys tried to follow him. Even though those boys had let him use their phone it was unlikely anyone in hearing range of his last encounter would be nearly so generous. Since there were so many more people around Yuuri decided it would be safer to get Wolfram before journeying any farther.

Yuuri had just turned the first corner along the path when he had to jump back to avoid a woman running down the hill at breakneck speed. He blinked, but was too busy to think anything of it until he reached the place where he had left Wolfram and found him missing.

He jumped when Wolfram revealed himself from behind a tree just off the path.

"What happened?"

Wolfram crossed his arms, bringing Yuuri's attention to a distinctly feminine bag that dangled from one of Wolfram's hands. "I was only trying to ask her if I could use her communication machine and she started screaming!" Wolfram's cheeks were flushed. "I tried to get her to calm down and then she threw her bag at me and ran away. I didn't try to--"

"To what? Rob some poor woman!" Yuuri shouted despite himself. "Wolfram--"

"I didn't do it on purpose, Wimp!" Wolfram studied the ground.

Yuuri groaned. "I can't believe no one caught you-- And it's not as if either of us is exactly hard to describe at the moment." Then he took a deep breath and tried to think about the situation clearly. He sighed. "She should have some kind of ID in her bag... We can give it back once we get everything sorted..." Yuuri shook his head. "I'm sorry I yelled, Wolf." He walked over to take the bag. "I don't like it, but it might actually be the best thing that could have happened. If she has a phone, we can use it and-- I can't believe I'm saying this-- money too. I'll be sure she's reimbursed and then some but under the circumstances, it might be best to find a change of clothes and food wouldn't hurt either..."

"Making sure we get to Greta is much more important," Wolfram said quickly. "I didn't mean to take that woman's bag, but I would do it again if I had to. I would do anything if I had to." There was something dark in Wolfram's voice. Something that reminded Yuuri exactly how far Wolfram...
would go to protect their daughter. What he would be capable of if anything were to happen to her.

...Revenge blinds, the child of hope is lost

Yuuri shivered. He didn't know why that part of the prophecy flashed through his mind in that moment, but it did. The prophecies had been right about so much. Sara. Wolfram being Gael's king. Yuuri had convinced himself that Wolfram would never be capable of so much destruction but now... It could just be because he was so tired but for the first time, Yuuri was truly unsure. What if they failed? What if they couldn't save Greta? What if Wolfram--

"Wolf," he managed, reaching out to cup his husband's cheek. "We'll save her. We'll get there in time to save her-- but even if we don't--"

"Don't you dare start thinking we won't," Wolfram interrupted, green eyes cold. "You keep thinking we'll be there in time and we will be."

Yuuri swallowed. Nodded. He wanted to say more but Wolfram moved away.

"Did you get in contact with your brother?"

Yuuri rummaged through the purse, relieved to find a cell phone inside. "No, but I got his number. I'll call him now."

Wolfram nodded, and watched him put the numbers in while Yuuri tried to wrap his mind around how, after all this time, he could still feel so close to his husband one moment and so distant the next.

*******

Shou Shimeron
Second Ring
Clara's

*******

Conrad swung his blade down hard at the man's hand, catching the razor-like string before it had a chance to fully unfurl. He twisted-- pulled the man to the ground by his own weapon and gave the string a final chop to sever it completely. He was lucky that the few soldiers they had faced had all been right handed. They all moved the same way before they struck-- the same way Reyes had moved before he killed the girl at the palace. Conrad kicked the man in the face-- felt his nose break-- before turning to face the next.

He had pictured fighting with Reyes like this in his mind a hundred times. Planned his motions. Anticipated each attack.

It was a fixation on revenge that had served him well. None of the men who had tried to stop them had come close to succeeding despite the foreignness of their weapons or the superiority of their numbers.

The confidence only added to the powerful rush. The heady feeling of invincibility that made any exhaustion or pain disappear.

It was always like this when he fought. Always like this with Yozak at his back.
Yozak moved when Conrad stepped back to prepare for the next strike-- pulled back in time that Conrad didn't have to limit the force of his next swing in such close quarters. Two bodies acting as one. Even through all the shouting around them-- the sound of wood cracking-- men and women screaming-- Conrad could feel Yozak beside him. Hear his breath.

Conrad didn't know how much time had passed since the men had burst into the weapons check. After the initial scuffle they had moved the fight further into the brothel. It was easier to stop ten men rushing around corners one at a time than it was to face them in the open. Although, all at once, it didn't seem like there were any more men to face.

As quickly as Conrad found himself swallowed in the rush of battle, he was pulled out of it again by still. Silence punctuated only by the groans of men littering the hallway around them and the sound of his own heartbeat.

Yozak was breathing heavily beside him-- face and body wet with sweat-- splattered with the blood of fallen foes. The other man smirked when he caught him looking. Winked. "It's been a while, Captain. It's nice to know that palace life hasn't slowed you. Much."

Conrad snorted in response. He shifted from his fighting stance but didn't sheathe his blade.

The sound of soft clapping made both of them turn.

"Impressive as ever." Marques was grinning as stupidly as he had been the last time Conrad had seen him.

Lucien hit his companion on the arm. "Don't." Then he looked at them. "Are you two alright?"

"Fine," Yozak answered at the same time Conrad asked, "Where are they?"

"They're safe," Marques answered, a little too quickly. "Or they should be. I took them to the entrance of the tunnel but then I had to get Lucien and--"

"And the great fool gave away your location," Lucien huffed.

Marques gave Lucien a wounded look. "Oh, you're so very welcome for the heroic rescue, by the way. Without you I would surely be--"

"Enough," Conrad interrupted.

"We should move before we talk any more," Yozak explained with a pointed look at the men littering the floor before either Marques or Lucien had the chance to answer.

At least Marques had the sense to nod. "This way."

The room he led them to was not far from where the fighting had taken them. It didn't seem as though anyone witnessed their passing as every door they walked by was tightly closed, but Conrad refused to let himself be put at ease. The door that Marques claimed would lead them to the tunnel's entrance was closed behind them before anyone spoke, and Conrad spared only a brief look at what appeared to be a woman's bedroom.

"Well?" Conrad heard himself ask as Marques made his way over to the far wall.

"I left them here," Marques muttered as he pulled aside a tall tapestry to reveal a wooden door. "They must have gone on ahead--"
"Wolf wouldn't have let anyone take them without a struggle," Lucien said, voicing Conrad's thoughts. The room around them was pristine. No evidence of a fight. "Maybe Marques is right."

Yozak slid his stolen sword into its sheath and crossed his arms. "It is the most likely option, especially if any sounds of fighting made it here."

Conrad approached the door that Marques had revealed behind the tapestry. "This way leads to the inner city?"

"Yes," Marques answered. "But I haven't been through. I don't know exactly what's on the other side."

Yozak stepped between them and opened the door, revealing a small dark spiral staircase heading down. "Well, since we've assessed the situation, it's time to move forward, don't you think?" He headed down the stairs.

Conrad ground his teeth. As much as he disliked not knowing exactly where Yuuri and Wolfram were, it was true that the most likely scenario was that the two of them had decided to go ahead without them. And if they had gone ahead, the one thing that Conrad did know with absolute certainty, was that he needed to be there to protect them as quickly as he could. With a glance back at Marques and Lucien, Conrad followed Yozak into the dark.

Along the way, Marques and Lucien explained, in careful whispers, what exactly had happened that had led to their separation from Yuuri and Wolfram as well as how they had come to find the two of them. Conrad found himself not listening through most of it. The past was past. What mattered now was dealing with the current situation as it was presented.

After a few minutes, the tunnel fell into a tense silence, punctuated by the sound of shuffled footsteps along the dirt floor. The ceiling of the tunnel was just low enough that he had to bend his head to avoid unwanted collisions with the uneven stone and Conrad found it easier to run a hand along it as he followed behind Yozak. The tunnel seemed to go on and on, and Conrad found himself drifting back to thoughts that had no business distracting him.

What if his inability to complete the Sage's task had already doomed them all? It wasn't as if the opportunity to pour the Papavir Dreams into his little brother's cup had not presented itself...

Maybe Conrad just hadn't been able to convince himself of the Sage's infallibility. It was one thing when the Sage had been in contact with Shinou but now-- Now the Sage was just a man. A brilliant man to be sure but...

But what if the Sage had been right and Wolfram really was capable of destroying them all? If Conrad had that kind of power and something happened to Yuuri-- Conrad didn't know what he would be capable of.

Except he did.

And Wolfram-- Wolfram had a harder time controlling his temper than anyone.

Conrad ground his teeth and forced himself to keep moving. It was what it was. He hadn't put the potion in his brother's drink. Nothing could change that now.

Eventually, the faint outline of a door became visible beyond Yozak's broad shoulders and their column came to a stop. Yozak checked around the door and must have deemed it clear enough because with hardly a sound, he opened it and slipped into the room beyond.
Conrad placed a hand on the hilt of his sword and followed.

The room outside the tunnel was still. Empty. The tables were littered with books and lit by the pink-grey light of dawn that was trickling in through the stained glass windows.

The stillness of the room was unnerving. Even as they spread out to check the perimeter and found no one and nothing to suspect anything was amiss, Conrad could feel the back of his neck prickle with a sense of unease. A quick look at Yozak confirmed he wasn't the only one feeling off about the whole situation.

As uncomfortable as the situation made him, they had no choice but to move forward. The room only had one door besides the one that led back to Clara's, and so Conrad positioned himself in front of it while Yozak and the other two put their backs to the wall on either side. If there was an ambush waiting for them, at least their opponents wouldn't know at once how many swords they were facing.

For a moment, Conrad considered kicking the door open, but if there wasn't anyone waiting for them, the noise would certainly alert someone to their presence, and so he reached with his left hand to slowly turn the knob of the door, sword at the ready in his right hand.

He was almost disappointed when all that lay beyond the door was an empty hallway, lined on either side with more doors.

The disappointment didn't last long.

As soon as Conrad and the others had walked a few paces down the hallway, doors on either side of them swung open. In a heartbeat Yozak was at his side—Marques and Lucien at their backs facing the other end of the hall. There were a dozen men in front of him— and from the quick glimpse he had gotten at least a dozen at his back.

None of them were holding swords, but all of them were dressed as members of Shou Shimeron's army. Conrad didn't need to see the weapon to know it was there.

"It's been a while," said an all too familiar voice from behind him.

"Reyes," Conrad hissed, wishing that the man was on his side of the hall. As it was he couldn't risk a look behind him, even with the few feet of distance he had, he couldn't afford distraction when it came to Shou Shimeron's string-like blades.

There was a pause, as if Conrad hadn't been the one Reyes had first spoken to at all. "Sir Weller, it is an honor. I do hope you and your companions will be willing to accompany me to the meeting hall. His Majesty will be most... pleased to see you. As I'm sure your King and brother will be."

Conrad could feel his blood go cold with rage. They already had them.

"There is no need for swords," Reyes continued. "I suggest you leave those here."

None of them moved. Conrad was already planning the first steps of his attack in his mind. He couldn't give up his sword. Without it he would be next to useless.

"The other option is we kill you now. And then you really will have no hope of saving them."

"How do we know you haven't already killed them?" Yozak drawled beside him. "Or that you're just too much of a coward to fight us while we're armed?"

"They already had them."

"There is no need for swords," Reyes continued. "I suggest you leave those here."

None of them moved. Conrad was already planning the first steps of his attack in his mind. He couldn't give up his sword. Without it he would be next to useless.

"The other option is we kill you now. And then you really will have no hope of saving them."

"How do we know you haven't already killed them?" Yozak drawled beside him. "Or that you're just too much of a coward to fight us while we're armed?"
Reyes chuckled. "We could kill you now. I would lose many good men, certainly, but you're outnumbered. Swords do have a certain disadvantage in closed quarters that I doubt my men will be troubled by." Conrad could hear boots clicking against the stone as Reyes approached.

"Whether you think I want to kill you now or later-- for me the end is the same. You end up dead. But for you... There is a certain amount of hope offered by waiting. You could have a moment of opportunity. If you fight me now. Die now. None of you will know the chance you might have had."

Conrad watched with his peripheral vision as Yozak lowered his weapon-- felt Lucien shift against his back.

There was no way he could win this battle on his own.

He clenched his jaw as he forced himself to drop his sword-- metal clanging loudly against the stone floor as it came to rest. The others followed his example, and soon, all four of their borrowed blades lay silent on the floor.

"Very good."

Since they were already prisoners, Conrad allowed himself to turn and face Reyes. Conrad could hardly wait to kill him. If Reyes had been looking at him, he would have been sure to see the hatred in his eyes, but Reyes was focused on someone else.

"Take them to the meeting hall," Reyes ordered as he stepped forward to grab a hold of Marques's arm. "This one and I have some business to attend to first."

"Marques?" Lucien's voice was just loud enough to be heard.

Marques turned to Lucien with a poor imitation of his usual smirk. "Don't worry, Luke. I can handle him."

Before any more could be said, there was a flurry of motion from the soldiers surrounding them and Conrad felt a cold line tighten around his neck. Another around each of his wrists.

"Take them!" Reyes repeated, keeping his grip on Marques as the line leashing Conrad to one of the guards urged him forward. The string was sharp, and even that tug was enough to send a warm trickle of blood down his neck. "His Majesty is waiting."

********

Shou Shimeron's soldiers led them down a spiral staircase and into an empty courtyard. Two tall towers took up the northern and southern edges of the yard, white stone turned pink by the rising sun to the east.

The sun was not the only thing creeping its way into the sky, however. Yozak paused with the men leading them to look up at the billowing, black smoke.

"The crop!" one of their captors exclaimed at the same time several of his companions began to murmur about "Fire" and "Magic".

It seemed the Boy Wolf had set his signal. Their men on the outside were probably already in motion.

"What are you waiting for?" said the man that Reyes had left in charge. "We have to bring them to
As tempting as the moment of his captor's distraction was, Yozak could still feel the cold blade of Shou Shimeron's weapon tight against his neck and wrists. As impressive as the smoke from Wolfram's fire was, they would need more luck than a mere distraction to have a chance at escape. Once they remembered their duty the soldiers continued their march toward the other tower. Yozak was the last in their little line of prisoners, behind the captain and Wolfram's corporal.

As dire as their current predicament appeared, Yozak didn't doubt that Marques would happily trade his fate for theirs. Reyes had looked at Marques as if he recognized him, and as there had been no opportunity for them to have met while Saralegui and Reyes were in Shin Makoku, it meant that Reyes must know Marques from somewhere else.

Must have recognized him as a spy.

Yozak doubted that the simple fact that Marques had been wearing the uniform of a Shou Shimeron guard would have been enough to earn him special treatment. Marques had been a spy long before he had entered this city to masquerade as a guard. Marques had been with the men that had nearly tortured Wolfram to death. Yozak had a strong suspicion that one did not go on a mission of such importance without having first been met and approved of by all sorts of interesting people. People like the head of the King's guard.

Reyes had probably assumed that Marques had died with the rest of the men that had captured Wolfram.

But before they could do anything about Marques, they had to rescue Wolfram and Yuuri. Once those two were safe, they could worry about getting Marques out of whatever he had gotten himself into.

Even after everything that Reyes had said, Yozak still wasn't convinced that the other man had been telling the truth. If either Yuuri or Wolfram were in any real danger, Yozak was certain they would have seen, heard, or felt some evidence of the magical repercussions the other would, no doubt, cause.

Of course, there was no way to be sure until they got to the meeting hall, or wherever these soldiers were taking them, and saw for themselves, so Yozak tried to focus on what he could be sure of. Which men had seemed most disturbed to see the fire rising from the east. How many doors they passed before the long climb up another spiral staircase.

Perhaps the most interesting thing that Yozak noticed, was that there didn't seem to be very many guards or soldiers. Far fewer than Yozak would have expected for a tower this size, especially one that held the king. But then again, hundreds if not thousands of men had fallen into the cracks of earth that the Maou's magic had caused closing the box that Maxine had opened. Yozak had always been aware of the possibility that the majority of Shou Shimeron's army had been lost then, but it was a different thing to see it in the abandoned posts and empty hallways surrounding what he could only assume was the royal chambers.

It was hardly a wonder why Shou Shimeron was afraid enough of them to cause so much trouble.

The room the soldiers brought them to, had all the features of every meeting hall that Yozak had ever been escorted to, with one exception. There was no one to meet. The throne at the far end of the hall was empty and their was no sign of either Wolfram or Yuuri.
Their captors seemed equally perplexed, murmuring and looking at each other with worried eyes.

Eventually one of them spoke. "I'll find out what's going on. The rest of you stay here and look after His Majesty's guests."

Three men left with the one that had spoken, leaving them with twenty soldiers. Roughly seven to one. Not the best of odds but there was hope left. The four men who had left had all seemed particularly dedicated to following Reyes's orders, but of those that remained, perhaps five seemed equally dedicated. The rest had been visibly distracted ever since they had seen the smoke. And these men all appeared to be of the same rank. There was no one to look to for new orders. No one to tell the little soldiers how to handle new challenges that were sure to arise.

If their allies on the outside found their way through in time to help them, Yozak had a pretty good idea which of these men would drop their swords in surrender the moment the tide turned against them. The only question was if there was a way to get them to change their minds a little sooner.

The longer it took for the others to return, the more anxious their captors became. Yozak couldn't see the Captain or Lucien's face, but he knew that neither would have much patience to wait for long. The Captain didn't have any patience when His Majesty was involved, and Lucien was probably more worried about Marques's predicament than his own.

Silence in the room was thick. Heavy. It went on for minutes. Tens of minutes, until the distant sounds of battle lured a few of their captors to the window.

"That should be the others," Yozak drawled. "Demon troops not cut out for the first wave like me and the Captain here."

"Quiet!" One of the more dedicated guards hissed, but he wasn't the one that mattered. The one that mattered was the one holding the blade around his neck, and that man was looking at him with wide, scared eyes.

Yozak held the man's gaze. He didn't need to say more. Not now. The seed had been planted.

More time went by and the sounds of fighting outside grew steadily louder. Yozak wouldn't be surprised if there was already fighting in the courtyard between the towers by now. Yozak watched the muscles on the back of the Captain's neck clench and unclench with impatience. There was a thin trickle a blood there too, traveling slowly down below the collar of his shirt. Spots of red leaking slowly through the cloth.

It was at least an hour before the door crashed open-- but it wasn't behind them. A seamless spot of wall opened in on itself on the other end of the hall behind the throne. Two soldiers came out at first, but they were quickly followed by Saralegui, Reyes, and--

"Marques!" Lucien cried before he was silenced by a tug on the string around his neck.

Marques was limp-- slung over Reyes's shoulder like a bag of oats. He made a depressing thunk when Reyes dropped him on the ground to the right of the throne.

Both Saralegui and Reyes looked as though they had seen better days. The King sat carefully on his throne, hands clutching the armrests tight enough for his knuckles to go white. More men entered from the door that had opened. Soldiers in Shou Shimeron colors-- and one man with a bleeding face whose wrists were bound with rope.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Sir Weller," Reyes spoke in a tired voice. "But all those who will be
attending our little... meeting have arrived."

"Where's Yuuri? Wolfram? What have you done with them?" The Captain seethed, "What have you done with them?"

The soldiers that had come in with the king crossed the hall and pulled a large beam from the corner to bar the main door from the inside. So this was their final stand.

King Saralegui laughed and tucked his feet up onto the throne so he could hold them. His voice was so soft Yozak could barely hear it. "Gone."

"Gone." Reyes repeated, louder than his king. "The Cleric claims they went by way of some kind of magic."

The captive with the bleeding face was pushed forward to his knees beside the throne-- next to Marque's body. "Red socks," He said, looking at them with desperate eyes. "They said to tell you 'red socks' and that they were safe-- that they went to save their daughter--"

"Enough!" The king shouted as he stood to stand beside his guard. "So he claims. So the cleric says. But what is more likely than magic? Hm?"

The blade came from a belt at the King's waist-- flashed in the light-- before it disappeared into the chest of his most trusted guard.

Everything went still.

Blood slid down the young King's pale wrists-- soaked into the white fabric of his robes.

Reyes didn't move. He only looked down at his King. Hurt raw on once-cold features.

"How could you do this to me?" The King's voice was shaking. "I trusted you and you let them escape!"

"No," Reyes whispered-- tried to cup his King's cheek. "Never."

Saralegui slapped the hand away. "You conspired with the Cleric!"

"Never," Reyes said again, softer, as he pulled the dagger from his chest and freed a bubbling pulse of blood that was followed by another. And another.

"You only struck his face! You wanted him to live-- to help you free them-- to kill me!" The king was screaming now, voice echoing off the high stone walls surrounding them. "How could you try to kill me? How could you betray me?"

Reyes never answered. Instead he fell to his knees, then crumpled onto the stone floor.

********

********

Saralegui had killed Reyes, but all Lucien could see was Marques-- Reyes's blood leaking in his direction-- it would touch him soon.

Maybe he was only unconscious. Maybe there was still hope.

Sir Grier's voice cut through the fog in his mind. "If this is how he treats his most trusted man, I hate to think what will happen to the rest of us."
Everything happened at once.

Shouting. A pain on is neck before he was suddenly free. Shou Shimeron soldiers fighting Shou Shimeron soldiers. The Captain and Sir Grier fighting-- but Lucien hadn't even moved.

The king was standing on his throne--eyes wide-- face going paler with every moment. There was a crashing behind him-- Once-- Twice-- before the doors that they had come through burst open. Hector leading their men into the room.

Lucien took one step forward and then another until he was running. Until he was kneeling in front of Marques.

It hurt just to be this close to him.

"No," he breathed. "Marques..."

Lucien had been there when they had rescued Wolfram. He didn't need to guess where the human stone was.

He reached out with trembling fingers-- hands-- pulled Marques away from the pool of reddish black that was spreading from Reyes's body. Reyes was dead. Reyes was dead but not Marques. He shouldn't have a dead man's blood on him.

Marques was so cold. Already going stiff. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be real. Lucien could still feel the burn of Marques inside him and now-- Cold.

Lucien pressed his cheek against cold cheek. Felt the human stone hurting him from inside Marques. Still hurting him even though Marques was already--

Dead.

********

Conrad didn't know the name of the man who had tossed him a blade. Men were falling around them-- either from blows or in surrender. The meeting hall was filled with the sounds of battle. Of metal and screaming. The smell of blood and death and fear. Sorrow and pain.

Reyes was dead, but Reyes was not the only one who needed punishment for all that had been done.

Saralegui watched him come at first-- eyes wide-- shaking. Like a child. Like he was some sort of innocent child and not some monster behind the death of thousands. Behind his brother's unspeakable torment. The boy king covered his face with his hands-- cowered before him as Conrad raised his weapon.

It was right to kill him. This was war.

But he knew that Yuuri would never forgive him. Yuuri would want him to be spared. Yuuri would never forgive him--

The sound of steel on flesh met his ears at the same time a warm splattering of blood rained against him. But Conrad hadn't moved. Silver hair fluttered in the air as Saralegui's head--a few fingers-- fell-- thumped against the stone floor and rolled.
Yozak stood beside him. Sword red and glistening wet. Eyes sure. Strong.

He had never wanted anyone so badly in his life. Yozak's arm was wet with blood where Conrad grabbed it-- pulled his friend closer.

Friend.

Had it always been so much more than simply that?

The kiss tasted like victory and blood. Teeth and force and right. Hips met-- moans lost in the sounds of battle around them.

And somehow, surrounded by everything dark that lived inside of him, Conrad realized that Yozak was the only one who ever could save him from himself.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle

********

Gwendal dropped a stitch.

His jerk of annoyance must have been the final temptation for Greta's pet. It pounced. Tiny claws caught on the end of the panel he was working on and Gwendal watched in resignation as the dropped stitch fell all the way through his night's progress.

"You should know better than that by now," Anissina said as she poked him with the end of her own needle. "Now you have to start from the beginning."

Gwendal frowned. It wasn't enough that the blasted woman insisted on invading his office, now she insisted on sitting on the edge of his desk, smelling like magic and machine oil and distraction. He surrendered his needles and the mess of string to Greta's cat and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Don't you have something else to be doing?"

"No," the woman huffed. "And neither do you."

Gwendal grumbled and was about to say something, but Greta interrupted.

"No one has anything to do but sit and worry about them." She didn't even bother to look up from the books that Gunter had given her to read.

Gwendal sighed.

He hated waiting. All of them did. Even after all these years it hadn't gotten easier.

As a younger man, achieving this rank had been all Gwendal had dreamed of, but now, the reality of leading behind a desk was starting to chip away at him.

It felt like rotting. Sitting. Knitting. No matter how well Gwendal knew the importance of his roll, at times like these there was nothing to help with the feeling of uselessness crawling beneath his skin.

Gwendal took a calming breath and reminded himself that it would be even worse if he were in the field. Sure, he might be able to improvise and quickly handle one situation as it appeared, but in the
field it was impossible to comprehend the entire picture. Without someone to put the pieces together, they lacked purpose. Lives would be lost. The mission would fail.

Gwendal shook his head. Maybe all this stress had finally induced that early mid-life crisis Mother was always warning him about.

The stress had been getting to all of them. Anissina hadn't been able to focus on her own work for days, and Greta had been spending almost all of her time in the stables playing at swords with the army's newest human recruit. It was a little late for the boy to begin training, but from what Wolfram's men had reported, the boy seemed to be doing acceptably well. The half-blood troops had been controversial at the time, but without them, they could have lost the last war. Perhaps it was time for them to put together a human division...

Gwendal was distracted from his thoughts when Greta sighed loudly and let her head fall forward onto the open face of her book.

Anissina slid off his desk and walked over to rub the girl's back. "It's late."

"I'm not tired," came Greta's muffled voice.

"Of course you are," Anissina teased. "That's what happens to worried little girls who don't eat their supper."

"If I was tired, I would go to bed." Greta sat up so she could glare. "I had a big lunch with Wilfrido, that's all... I think I must have eaten too much."

Anissina frowned. "I could get you some Chamomile tea from the kitchens. Do you think that would help?"

Greta worried her lip. "Yes, please. Thank you, Anissina."

Anissina kissed her on the head before leaving.

Once she was gone, Gwendal gave Greta a worried look of his own. Having His Majesty and Wolfram gone was perhaps the hardest on her. Gwendal wished that there was more that he could do to ease her pain. Anissina, madwoman though she was, seemed perfectly capable of acting as a surrogate mother for the child. Gwendal would never be capable of showing the kind of affection children needed. He had failed with Wolfram. Why should he presume to be better able to provide for his own child? It was part of why he had made the decisions he had.

Gwendal cleared his throat in an attempt to clear his mind and pulled his knitting needles free from his earlier mess. "Any requests, Greta?"

Greta sighed again. "No, thank you. That's alright, Gwendal." She gave him a small smile. "If you make me any more, there will be no more room on my bed for me."

Gwendal could feel the heat creeping into his cheeks. "Right."

Greta looked down at her book for a half a moment before speaking. "No news?"

"Not since you last asked, no."

Greta groaned and slammed her book shut, before crossing her arms and settling into the beginning of a long pout.
Gwendal could feel the wrinkles sinking further into his forehead as he started casting on a new line of stitches. He only had twenty by the time Anissina returned with Greta's tea.

Greta thanked Anissina for the tea but otherwise kept quiet while Anissina berated him for the uneven tightness of his loops. Even as Gwendal tried to lose himself in his work, he couldn't help but notice that Greta hardly touched her tea. That she was slowly leaning forward as if in pain.

He and Anissina shared a look.

"Is the tea not helping, Greta?" Anissina asked.

Greta shook her head. "It's just a tummy ache. It should go away eventually."

"True enough," said Gwendal. "But there's no need to suffer needlessly."

"Gwendal is right. If the tea isn't helping, we can go find you some medicine. Gisela isn't the only one with a talent for healing. I can throw together--"

"It's alright, Anissina," Greta interrupted. "Really. I think I'll just take a hot bath before bed. You were right, I am tired." Then, she let out a large yawn for emphasis.

Gwendal knew better than to think that Anissina had been fooled by the girl's show, but Anissina took pity on her none the less. "Fine," Anissina said. "But if you can't sleep, or you start to feel worse, you are to come and find me at once. Understood?"

"Understood," Greta repeated before leaving her chair to kneel beside it. "Come on, Wolri! Time for bed."

After some brief coaxing with some of Gwendal's yarn, the cat emerged, and Greta scooped it up.

"Goodnight, Gwendal."

"Goodnight," Gwendal answered, before watching Anissina and Greta leave the room. He should have felt relieved to be alone. He always had before. Instead, Gwendal just felt empty. Restless.

The only place his mind could go now was the mission. The castle had been abuzz with rumors that they were starting a full scale war with Shou Shimeron since this morning. Gossiping fools. In reality, the last bird they had gotten from Yozak had informed them that Marques had been found in Shou Shimeron posing as a guard. The deserted corporal claimed to know a way into the innermost center of Shou Shimeron, and Yozak and the others had decided that their best option was to take him at his word, or really, they had decided to trust Shinou, who Marques claimed had been directing his actions since the beginning. Yozak had promised to send another before they set out the following morning and had detailed their plans to sneak through the first set of gates.

As risky as the plan had seemed it was the best option they had. The longer they stayed in human territory, the more dangerous it was for Wolfram and Lucien. Wolfram had already lost too much of his magic-- his life-- to human stones.

Thoughts of houzeki brought back old memories. Desert. Sand and pain. To think that Wolfram had been forced to swallow--

Gwendal was saved from his dark thoughts as Gunter burst through the doors, the Sage and ambassador from Lesser Gael behind him. Gwendal stood. "Did you--"

"Yes!" The Sage answered, moving forward into the room to hand Gwendal the letter.
The room was quiet as Gwendal read. The letter held little new information, only that the plan was starting according to schedule and that it was likely Yozak would not find the time to write again until everything was over. The last sentence, however, made him pause.

*Tell His Grace I never found the time to take tea to the Wolf.*

"I take it you've already read this," he asked the Sage without looking up.

"I have," the Sage answered. "I was going to tell you today, anyway. Sir Grier simply--"

Gwendal slammed the letter down on his desk. "How are we supposed to operate effectively without all of the information?! If there is something you haven't been telling me--"

"I will tell you now," The Sage finished, taking the same seat at the table that Greta had occupied before. "I instructed Sir Grier to give Sir Belefield Papavir Dreams at least once a day after they crossed the border into human territory. The effect would, not only, dampen his suffering at being close to the human stones, but it would also suppress his magic."

"The mazoku's pain as a result of proximity to human stones is a *warning*. Without it the selfish-lo- - His *Majesty* could further injure himself without being aware of it," Gunter admonished. "What were you possibly hoping to achieve by endangering him?"

"I wasn't endangering Sir Belefield so much as I was preventing his endangerment of this world!" The Sage pushed his glasses up until they caught the light of a nearby torch. "Sir Belefield is Gael's True King. The same King who is prophecised to destroy this world if his "hope" is lost and what hope is greater to Sir Belefield than Shibuya? If Shibuya is in danger, and Sir Belefield is angered, there is nothing stopping that anger from destroying everything."

"Wolfram's magic could *save* His Majesty if he were to be in danger!" Gunter raged. "You could *kill* both of them with your intrigue!"

The Sage stood. "Shibuya has *always* taken care of himself before. Shibuya has saved *everyone* countless times! Sir Belefield has not had time to learn to control the god inside of him, and it is too dangerous to this world to risk his rage!" He took a breath. "You trust Sir Belefield's ability to control his anger less than anyone, Sir Christ. I know you are worried for Shibuya. Do not let your fear for him cloud your judgment."

"If you are so sure of your argument, Your Grace, why did you wait so long to tell us of your plan?" Gwendal asked. "Why not tell us of your concern sooner so that we could help?"

"Just because something is right does not mean others will believe it."

Gwendal clenched his jaw. "It was one thing to treat us all as pawns when you had Shinou whispering in your ear, but without such *divine* advantage you are no better than any of us. You may out rank me in the temple, but when it comes to war the final decision lies with *me.*" Gwendal crossed his arms. "Now, what else haven't you told us, Your Grace?"

Even behind glass the anger in the Sage's eyes was plain. "I have lived through more wars than you have studied. How *dare* you--"

"--*Men,*" Anissina interrupted from the doorway. "I leave for ten minutes and I come back to this? Is it really necessary to compare the size of your *knowledge* at every opportunity?"

"Lady Anissina!" Gunter squawked. "I don't recall you being called to this meeting."
Anissina only shook her head at him as she walked into the room and took a seat at the table opposite to the Sage. "Yet another example of men's brilliance."

It was so ridiculous that Gwendal could have laughed. Instead he deepened his frown. Now that Anissina was here, there would be no getting rid of her until the meeting was finished. "It appears that the Sage instructed Sir Grier to drug Wolfram with Papavir Dreams to prevent him from destroying the world should His Majesty be endangered during the mission in Shou Shimeron. Sir Grier has just informed us, however, that he has failed to follow the Sage's instruction."

Anissina narrowed her eyes and waited several moments before speaking. "So nothing has changed. The Sage tried to do something that would alter the current situation but it failed." She paused and looked at each of them in turn. "His plan didn't work so there is no use yelling at one another all night."

The Sage sighed and leaned back in his chair. "We still don't know if Sir Belefield had been properly dosed with Papavir dreams or not."

"What?" Gwendal asked with a glare. "Yozak said he didn't--" "He may not have," the Sage interrupted. "But I had a suspicion Sir Grier's freshly flowered friendship with Sir Belefield might complicate matters, so I also gave the same instructions to Sir Weller."

"Why would you think that Sir Weller would be more capable of giving the drug to his own brother?" Gunter asked with a glare.

The Sage adjusted his glasses. "Sir Weller has been very loyal to Shinou's will in the past, even when it could have hurt the ones he loved."

"You keep forgetting that your will and Shinou's are not the same." Gwendal's voice was cold. "If both of them had given Wolfram the drug--"

"He would have noticed before any kind of overdose," the Sage finished. "I'm not treating Sir Belefield's life carelessly, Sir Voltaire. But it seems to me that the rest of you are being very careless with the fate of this world."

"We have no reason to think that the prophecy that promising destruction is any more likely than the one that promises peace," Anissina pointed out. "Wolfram is happy now. He has His Majesty and Greta to protect. I think it would be wise to put some faith in him."

"Each outcome is still equally likely," came a soft voice from the back of the room. "His Grace had me test the probabilities at the King's wedding ceremony."

Gwendal had almost forgotten the Taibhshear was there.

"Each outcome was equally likely at the time of the wedding," Anissina countered. "It's likely a few nights of wedded bliss could have changed that."

"Anissina!" Gwendal looked faint. "You shouldn't say such... things about His Majesty!"

Anissina merely rolled her eyes.

Gwendal let out a groan and buried his face in his hands. Whatever the Sage had done, it didn't change what any of them could do now. Arguing all night wouldn't help His Majesty or Wolfram. The only ones who could were with them in Shou Shimeron.
Gwendal sighed. He hated waiting.

*******

*******

Everything hurt.

Wilfrido twisted against the rope binding his wrists to the wooden pole behind his back, feeling the pull against raw, wet, skin. It felt like all his blood had done was make his bindings tighter.

The struggling made him lightheaded and so he paused to breathe, focusing his efforts on the side of his nose that wasn't clogged. The cloth that had been stuffed into his mouth and then secured by another knot around the back of his head was soaked through with spit-- almost impossible to suck in air.

Once again, the panic, the tears, threatened to well up and choke him.

*He didn't want to die.*

Wilfrido forced himself to breathe. To focus.

That was something the mazoku soldiers had taught him. Panicking was the quickest way to get yourself killed.

If Greta's father hadn't put him in training, he probably would have struggled himself to death by now.

If Greta's father hadn't put him in training, maybe his own father wouldn't want him dead.

*"They'll kill you anyway, once I take care of the girl. They'll kill you worse than this, too. Don't take this as anything other than an act of love."*

It was the last thing his father had said to him. Before he had climbed down the ladder to the stables.

Wilfrido had watched the top of the ladder disappear once his father reached the bottom. Making sure that even if he did manage to escape the ropes there really would be no way out. He had heard his father open up the pins to free the horses. They would spook once the fire started. If wouldn't do to have someone hear them and come to his rescue.

If only Wilfrido hadn't been so stupid. If only he had managed the courage to warn Greta sooner. To tell one of his trainers.

But he had been too *stupid* for any of it. He had thought his father... That he could change his father's mind. That his father wasn't really a bad man. That his father would change his mind about the mission once he spent more time with the people here. More time with Greta.

Greta was going to die, too, and it was all his fault.

Now, the only thing that Wilfrido could hope for was that his father was caught. That his father's plan would fail. That someone would notice the fire before it killed him.

Or maybe, his father had changed his mind? Maybe there would be no fire.

Greta was the princess. Greta was guarded all the time. It was late-- she would be safe in her chambers. There was no way his father could get anywhere near her.
She would be safe. Her father's men would keep her safe.

There would be no fire and someone would find him and Greta would be safe.

Wilfrido managed to convince himself of it long enough to steady his heartbeat. There was nothing close enough to him that he could use to cut the ropes. He had tried rubbing the knot of cloth on the back of his head against the rough wood behind him, but so far, it hadn't helped at all. His face was swelling from where his father had hit him, and the cloth around his face had no stretch. His whole head was pounding and he could barely breathe.

It was the first time his father had hit him in more than a year. When they had first come to Shin Makoku, Greta had noticed his bruises and must have told someone because his father was interviewed by one of Greta's father's men. It had raised enough suspicion that his father had stopped hitting him altogether after that.

Greta had done so much for him, and now, he couldn't even save her...

Wilfrido had managed to wrench one of his wrists into a funny angle. It felt like if his hand could just squish a little bit more he could make progress--maybe get free-- but every time he tried it hurt so much his body made him stop.

And then he smelled the smoke.

Maybe someone had made a fire in the yard and the wind had carried it south. Or maybe his father had lit the hay like he said he would.

It was dark in the loft. Outside, the night was cloudy, but Wilfrido's eyes had adjusted enough to see the first creepings of smoke make their way through the trapdoor in the floor. The flickering shadow of light.

*He didn't want to die.*

Forcing himself to forget about the pain, he threw himself forward-- this time focusing on the twist of his wrist instead of the rope--

It seemed like, for all the pain, the sound of his wrist breaking should have been louder than the soft *pop* somewhere behind his ears.

He must have fainted for a moment because when he was able to think again there was smoke filling up the rafters above him and an orange glow coming from the open square in the floor. He tried to cough but instantly regretted it-- almost choking on the fabric stuffed so close to the back of his throat.

His wrist was throbbing with his heart and he *screamed* inside his head as a few more twists freed his injured right hand. Once that was out the ropes were loose enough to struggle through and Wilfrido was free. He fumbled with the knot behind his head for a few moments with his left hand, loosing it enough to pull it down over his chin and spit out the wadded bundle of cloth that had been stuffed into his mouth-- and the smoke was worse than ever-- stinging his eyes. Somehow, Wilfrido managed to slide the loop back up to cover his mouth and nose.

Cradling his right arm and hand, he stumbled forward to look down the opening in the floor. It was almost impossible to see through the smoke. Everything below was in flames.

*No way out.*
But he couldn't panic. Panicking wouldn't save him. Wouldn't save Greta.

He had to think.

The tree next to the barn had branches near the window-- but Wilfrido had tried to reach them before. Tried and always failed. Even if he tried to jump there was no way he could hold on with only his left arm-- let alone climb his way down.

But he had jumped once. He had eaten some of the King's cookies and thought he could fly. That time, he had only broken his leg.

Wilfrido's stomach lurches as he looked down out of the window. There were dark figures moving near the castle. Distant shouts.

They must have noticed the fire.

"Help!" He tried to shout-- but his voice was raw-- it only made him cough more.

Last time, he had only broken his leg...

Wilfrido took a deep breath. The sooner he got out of this burning barn, the sooner he could tell someone. The sooner he could do something to help Greta-- something to stop his father.

His heart jumped into his throat when he forced himself to fall.

Two seconds of fear before the dark.

********

Earth
Japan
Mt. Fuji

********

Wolfram sipped his frothy green tea and winced as he burnt his tongue for the second time.

"It helps if you eat the sweet," Yuuri muttered vaguely from across the table. "Makes it less bitter."

Wolfram frowned. It was so hard to sit here. Still and quiet. He wanted to yell at Yuuri for thinking about anything other than getting back to Greta. He wanted to squeeze the prettily decorated glass teacup he held until it shattered and pain sliced through worry and fear. He wanted the communication device they had found in the woman's purse to chirp-- for Bob to call and tell them the best place to travel between worlds given this new variable.

They had already fought so much.

Wolfram had tried to convince Yuuri that it would be faster if Yuuri returned to Shin Makoku without him. Without Ethne to pull them off course, it would be easier for Yuuri to get back in time-- in the right place-- to save Greta. But Yuuri was convinced that once he brought himself back to the other world, he would be too tired to be of any use. He couldn't save Greta if he fainted the moment he got through.

Wolfram glared at the table. He hated waiting. Yuuri had claimed that the caffeine in the tea would help him stay awake and Wolfram had agreed to sit in this little... tavern without walls, but it was
uncomfortable sitting on the floor and the tea was only making his empty stomach churn.

At least they were no longer wearing soggy dresses. Yuuri had used some of the money from the purse Wolfram had accidentally stolen to buy them new clothes. Now both of them were wearing pale blue robes decorated with white designs, along with the baggiest pants that Wolfram had ever stepped into, also in the same pattern. Yuuri had said they were traditional garments for men in spring, but Wolfram couldn't help but feel uncomfortable in such flimsy cloth.

For a moment, Wolfram had been relieved to see the various swords for sale in one of the stalls, but upon further inspection, they had been little more than painted toys. Toys with no handguard and a false blade on only one edge. So much for finding anything useful in this world.

Wolfram growled and finished his tea in one painful gulp before setting the empty cup down loudly on the wooden table.

Yuuri gave him a weary look. "Just... complain already. It's... I don't like it when you're this quiet."

Wolfram crossed his arms. "I know you find it exhausting when I complain. You need your strength."

Yuuri laughed, tiredly. "It's more exhausting thinking about why you're not complaining."

Wolfram humphed.

Yuuri shook his head, smile tugging the edges of his mouth. "Why don't we think about food instead? I can't be the only one who's hungry."

Yuuri called over the old woman who owned the place and talked to her in Earth. Wolfram could only assume that he was ordering food, but it still made him uncomfortable not to be able to understand anything that was going on around him. Uncomfortable to put so much trust in anyone, even if it was Yuuri. Even though he loved Yuuri...

Wolfram shivered.

It had been difficult to let Yuuri take the lead in the tunnel. Difficult but necessary. It had only taken a few footsteps before Wolfram's mind had been back in that place. Running blind fingers along different walls.

No way out.

Wolfram knew he was being a fool. That only children were supposed to fear the dark. But after everything... it seemed like no matter what he did or where he went the darkness was there. Buried inside his heart. Waiting to swallow him whole. Burn its way out of the darkness of his heart and--

Wolfram closed his eyes. Opened them again.

He wouldn't think about that. Now wasn't the time.

It wasn't long after the old woman had taken Yuuri's order that the little machine cherped and started to blink. Yuuri picked it up in seconds and started talking to it, pausing occasionally to listen. Wolfram could feel the anxious energy coiling in his blood. He wanted to go, now. To save Greta Now.

He almost growled when the old woman returned with two bowls full of steaming noodles and placed them on the table in front of them. Yuuri was still occupied with the machine, but he
gestured that Wolfram should eat.

Wolfram wanted to throw the bowl at something, but instead he picked up the impractical eating-sticks that Earth people used and stabbed at his noodles. If he weren't preoccupied with worrying for the life of his only daughter, Wolfram might have enjoyed the food. As it was, he was he could hardly taste it. Wolfram grit his teeth and forced himself to eat. He would need all the strength he could get.

Wolfram was nearing the end of his meal when Yuuri put the little machine back down on the table and sighed.

"Well?" Wolfram asked, putting down his sticks.

Yuuri grinned. "We're lucky. We're so-- We're close to where we need to be. I was afraid we might have to get on a plane and go to another country, but it turns out that one of the lakes nearby has enough residual magic that it should propel us to Shinou's Temple as well as any other highly magical location." The wimp ran a hand through messy hair and sighed. "I was worried that sleeping would be unavoidable, but we can go now and be there before dark."

"Eat before we leave," Wolfram said quickly, eager to get on their way but still aware enough to be prudent. "You need your strength."

For a moment, Yuuri looked like he was going to argue, but he nodded.

Soon. Soon they would be back in Shin Makoku. Wolfram would be able to save Greta. His precious child.

His hope.

********
********
Whispers from the Rye: Chapter 11

********
********
Somewhere Between Worlds
********

It was drowning with no way out. Drowning paralyzed. Blind. Desperate to move, to breathe, to \textit{live}. But breathing meant dying and moving meant dying and in order for Greta to have a chance Wolfram had to keep still. To let Yuuri's magic drown the fire and move them between worlds.

Last time he had tried to breathe-- to move-- and it had nearly cost them their only chance at rescuing their daughter. Wolfram wouldn't make the same mistake again. He \textit{wouldn't}.

The crushing weight contracted around him and for one-- almost unending-- moment there was only cold. The edge of death. But then there was light and sputtering and glorious glorious air and it was over. They had made it through.

It was night, but Wolfram could recognize the walls of Shinou Temple's inner courtyard easily.

"Your Majesty!" a guard shouted, her voice high with shock. "What are you doing here?"

"Greta!" Wolfram coughed through water as he hauled himself toward the edge of the fountain. "Is Greta alright? Where is she?"

The guard blinked. "As far as I know the princess is safe in her bed asleep, but I still don't understand why--"

"Horses. We need to get to the palace at once. Yuuri--" He looked back, expecting to see Yuuri climbing out of the fountain behind him, but instead he saw him sitting, pale, mouth and nose just barely above the surface of the water. "Yuuri!" he said again, rushing back to pull his husband further upright. "Wimp! Say something!"

"...m'fine, Wolf. Find Greta." And then he went limp completely.

Wolfram held him tight. Pulled Yuuri up into his arms so he could carry him like a child, shifting his weight so that Yuuri's head was resting on his chest. "The falls. We have to get him to the waterfall inside the temple. Now!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

And then he was running, wet fabric clinging to his skin. They passed more guards on the way. More footsteps pounding against marble floors. Yuuri was cold in his arms. Wet weight-- but Wolfram was sure he could feel him breathing.

The guards must have been able to get word ahead of them somehow because when they reached the bottom of the stairs leading to the Inner Chamber the sentries were already pushing open the heavy wooden doors. He was halfway through the room before he noticed Ulrike standing beside the falls.

"Why would you do such a thing?" she scolded. "Traveling between worlds takes a huge amount of magical energy!"
Wolfram didn't bother answering. He just kept running, jumping over the rim of the pool once he reached it. Wolfram didn't stop even as the magic water stung his legs. Didn't stop until Yuuri was resting under the falls.

Wolfram knelt to cup his husband's cheeks with both hands-- make sure the little streams of water weren't running over his nose or into his mouth. Dark lashes fluttered but didn't open.

"Don't worry," Wolfram whispered. Kissed chilled lips. "I'll make sure Greta is safe. You just worry about getting your strength."

Yuuri mumbled something unintelligible.

"Reckless." Ulrike's voice behind him. "You boys treat death as if--"

"Is it reckless to risk everything for the life of our child?" Wolfram turned and glared. "The stablekeep is a spy sent by Saralegui ordered to kill Greta if there is so much of a whisper that we have gone to war with Shou Shimeron! Greta spends time every day with that man and his son and I let her!"

Ulrike's eyes had gone wide with shock. "There has been no word of trouble from the palace-- perhaps you are not too late!"

"Go." Yuuri's voice was so soft. "Don't wait for me. Go now, Wolf."

Wolfram gave his weakened husband one last look before nodding. Setting off at a run for the door. The guards had better have prepared the horses or there would be hell to pay.

********

********

Shin Makoku
Blood Pledge Castle
Meanwhile

********

Greta couldn't sleep.

Her stomach felt like it was trying to eat its way out of her body. Like someone was slowly pushing a knife inside.

She rolled over and curled onto herself. It helped a little, but Greta still wished she had managed to finish the chamomile tea that Anissina had given her. She had had tummy aches before when she was worried about her fathers and so she hadn't wanted to make a big deal of it, but this time it felt different. Worse.

Even Wolri seemed to know that something was wrong. Normally he wasn't settled in bed unless he was on her stomach, but tonight he seemed content to curl up on the pillow beside her head, watching over her with wide green eyes.

Greta sighed and shifted again. If only she could fall asleep. Sleeping would be so much easier than feeling like this. So much easier than worrying if Yuuri and Wolfram were still alive.

What if this time they never came back?

The imaginary knife in her stomach twisted and Greta could feel tears threatening to form in her
eyes. It hurt. Why did it have to hurt so much?

Greta hadn't eaten since her picnic lunch with Wilfrido during his afternoon break from training. The kitchen women had packed a whole basket full of fresh fruits and finger sandwiches, and her guard, Edwin, had escorted her down to the stables so that she could share the treats with her friend. Greta couldn't think of anything that could have made her sick. Well, nothing in the food, anyway.

Normally when she went down to visit Wilfrido she got to spend time with him alone. Edwin would wait somewhere nearby and Wilfrido's father was always busy doing something, but this time Wilfrido's father had sat down with them for most of the lunch. She had been as polite as she had been trained to be on the outside, but on the inside it was probably the most awkward lunch she had ever experienced.

Greta supposed that now that Wilfrido had started his training and was away from the stables for most of the day his father was probably lonely without him. She worried her lip. Sometimes it was hard not to be selfish.

Wolri stood up and walked over her down to the foot of the bed, ears perked toward the doors.

There were voices outside. Muffled voices, but voices all the same. Greta frowned and shifted up to sit against her headboard. This area of the palace was usually quiet this time of night. The hallway outside was well lit, casting light into the moon-lit darkness of her bedroom. Normally the line of light was only interrupted by Edwin's feet, but now there was another set of shadows.

Greta jumped out of bed. There must be news about her fathers! Gwendal had promised that they would wake her if there was any news. She raced to the door and pulled it open. Blinked.

What was Wilfrido's father doing here?

Edwin was frowning. "While we appreciate your concern, I can assure you the princess and her pet are quite safe."

"But I saw a black cat inside!" Wilfrido's father growled. "I don't want any trouble because the princess' pet died in my barn."

Edwin sighed and shook his head. "Is your Wolri in there with you, Princess?"

"Yes," Greta answered. "Why wouldn't he be?"

Edwin knelt and put a hand on her shoulder. "There is a fire in the stables. The other guards are doing everything they can to put it out but--"

Greta blinked. Edwin just stopped talking. His body had jerked in the middle of his sentence and he stopped talking. Something dark trickled out between his lips.

The weight of his hand on her shoulder increased. Edwin was falling forward. He would have fallen on top of her if she hadn't stepped back.

And then he was on the floor. There was blood on the floor. Blood leaking around the handle of the knife sticking out the back of Edwin's neck.

Wilfrido's father pulled it out-- but that only made more blood--

Black blood shining on the floor.
"Edwin?" Greta breathed.

She must be dreaming.

Wilfrido's father was looking at her with cold, dark, eyes and Edwin was bleeding on the floor. Edwin was dead. Wilfrido's father had killed Edwin.

"Why?" she asked, stepping back into the darkness of her room-- mind racing too fast for her to follow.

Wilfrido's father moved forward as she moved back, closing the door behind him so that there was only moonlight. Moonlight and a man with a knife.

All at once Greta was running-- diving under her bed. She should scream, she realized too late. But when she did her voice seemed broken and small and useless.

"Now, now, Greta." There was the sound of metal-- a sword being pulled free from a sheath. Wilfrido's father must have taken Edwin's sword. "It's not polite to scream at your guests."

"Why?" Greta asked again, voice half scream, half whimper. "Please stop! If you don't-- If you don't leave right now my fathers will kill you!"


Closer.

Greta moved from the side of the bed closest to the footsteps just in time to avoid the blade that sliced down-- down all the way to the floor. It caught one of the wooden slats beneath the mattress and the wood made a horrible CRACK as it split. Greta shrieked and scrambled to a new place as the blade withdrew-- came down again beside her leg.

Even though Greta could fit beneath her bed there wasn't that much room. She couldn't move fast enough to avoid him forever. Greta used the wall behind her headboard to push herself away before the blade came down again and winced as she scrambled over something hard.

Something hard. She reached back to touch it. Sweaty fingers on hard smooth steel. A handle.

Greta pulled the little sword from its scabbard without a sound as she moved to a new location beneath the bed. Having the sword made it harder to move but suddenly everything seemed a little less hopeless. Now there was something she could do.

She didn't have to be the victim.

Instead of moving away from the feet the next time the blade came down Greta moved toward them-- striking out as fast as she could at leather boots.

This time the scream wasn't hers.

Greta moved back-- to the opposite side of the bed and out. Out where she could crouch-- bed between them-- while Wilfrido's father clutched one of his ankles and cursed at her. It was too dark to see how deep her blade had gone, but she hoped it would at least be enough to slow him down.

Wilfrido's father had a longer reach but Greta was sure she could be faster.

The only problem now was that she was in the corner farthest away from anything useful. The bed
was keeping Wilfrido's father away but it also separated her from the window. From the balcony she could climb down into the gardens. The door was to her left, but if her sword hadn't cut deep enough there was still a chance that Wilfrido's father could catch her before she reached the doors.

"You'll pay for that, Princess." A hiss.

Greta tightened her grip on her sword. She was in her best fighting stance. Ready. Even though she was shaking. "Why?" she said again. "Wilfrido--"

"You killed him you little whore! You left me no choice!"

She barely had time to blink. The older man lunged-- one step up on to her bed-- over-- sword swinging down. Greta jumped back-- hit the wall-- sideways onto the floor. Somewhere he was above her and she struck out again-- hit air-- rolling and scampering and running and somehow across the room. She was almost at the door when she slipped-- slick and wet on the floor-- sword flailing up-- catching-- catching flesh. More hot wet on top of her. Slippery shapes. Screaming. Wilfrido's father had dropped his sword. He was standing over her. Falling over her. Holding his stomach and making the most terrible sounds. Part of her sword was still stuck in the leathery fabric on his shirt but it had ripped straight through him sideways. Greta let go but the sword still hung there-- she crawled back-- slipping-- always something slippery and hot around her. Smelling like blood. Like that girl who had died dancing.

And then she was on the balcony. Moonlight on her hands. On the trees in the garden.

She had to disappear. Everything had to disappear.

It was all a disappear. It was all a dream.

Just a bad dream.

********

********

His horse was lathered with sweat by the time Wolfram reached the first gate and his own heart was thundering in his chest.

Wolfram had seen the fire the moment the gates of Shinou's temple had been opened. A fluttering light of dread leading him on, black smoke bleeding into the sky and covering the stars. The fire had grown as he approached, but once he had reached the city it would disappear behind tall buildings or a curve in the road. Not seeing it was worse. Not seeing meant his mind was free to paint his worst fears on the backs of his eyes.

Guards had left with him from the temple, but when he reached the city gates Wolfram was alone. The sentries drew their swords-- yelled for him to halt.

"MOVE!" Wolfram roared. "Make way for your king!"

The sentries moved. All but one. One of his own.

"I request verification, sir. You're supposed to be in Shou Shimeron."

Wolfram would have promoted him on the spot if he wasn't so furious.

"Open the gates, Roberts!" he growled, yanking up on the reigns. The tired horse made a noise of protest before sliding to a stop. "Or do I need to relieve you of your eyebrows before you move?"
Roberts looked at him with fearful blue eyes for a too-long moment before nodding. "No, Sir. We'll make way for you at once!"

"Good," Wolfram snapped. "While you're doing it tell me what's on fire."

"The royal stables, Your Majesty," answered another man. "Those blessed by water and ground have already been called to drown out the blaze."

Something inside of him went cold. Empty. "Greta?"

Roberts gave him a puzzled look. "The princess is safe in bed. Your Majesty must certainly recall placing Sir Edwin in charge of her protection. He has been most diligent, Your Majesty. There is no way he would allow her anywhere close to danger."

By the time Roberts had finished talking the gates had been fully opened and Wolfram wasted no time in urging his horse forward up the hill toward the palace.

_I hope you're right._ Wolfram prayed as the horse raced along the road.

_Greta._

It was on this road that he had told her Yuuri was never coming back. In that field of flowers that they had shared a summer picnic.

Something as out of place as a fire had to be part of something more sinister. _A fire in the royal stables._ When Wolfram got his hands on that _bastard_ of a stablekeep the man would wish he had died in his own fire. It would surely be quicker than the one Wolfram planned to roast him in. _How could he have been so blind?_ Wolfram had been so worried about the boy and Greta's potential feelings that he had hardly given the father a thought.

If anything happened to Greta it would be all his fault. If only he had paid more attention Greta wouldn't be in danger.

This time when Wolfram reached the gate the horse reared in protest at the sudden stop and Wolfram nearly lost his seat. The guards looked just as shocked to see him as Roberts and the others had before but they quickly yielded to his demands and then Wolfram was finally inside the palace gates.

All that remained of the royal stables were blackened beams and a few spots of fire clinging to the higher places. The ground was wet with mud even where he stood. Evidence of all the water that had been conjured to keep the fire from spreading. Soldiers were still shouting out orders and rushing from one place to another and the creeping dread that he had arrived too late swelled in his chest.

Amidst all the yelling and hustling of men surrounding the area a familiar voice jerked Wolfram from his frozen moment of panic.

"Brother!" he shouted. "Gwendal!"

His brother's gaze was on him at once. A moment of shock flashed across schooled features before the older man was approaching him in long strides.

"Where is Greta?" Wolfram screamed even though Gwendal could have heard him if he didn't. "Is Greta safe? Did you capture the stablekeep?"
As soon as he was close enough, Gwendal put a heavy hand on Wolfram's shoulder. "What are you doing here, Wolfram? You're supposed to be in Shou Shimeron." The fingers on his shoulder tightened, keeping him in place.

Gwendal didn't believe it was him.

He didn't have time for this.

"When I was little I conjured fire into the shape of a cat and when it climbed on your lap it burned you. When Weller went missing with Yuuri you gave me the button from his sleeve and told me not to become like you. When--"

"Enough." Gwendal's grip loosened but didn't go away completely. Another hand came up to cup his cheek. Look at his face. "Wolfram, what are you doing here? What's happened?"

"Greta!" Wolfram said again. Backing up. Suddenly desperate to see that his daughter was safe no matter what even his brother might say to reassure him. "Yuuri and I came through water-- through Earth-- to come back here! Saralegui had a man here-- the stablekeep-- Saralegui ordered him to kill Greta if it looked as if we were going to war with Shou Shimeron. He's been under our noses the whole time, and I let Greta become friends with his son."

And then it was too much to be still. He turned. Ran. Up the steps and through the doors and down the hallways. His brother's footsteps pounding behind his own as they raced to the royal wing. To Greta's chambers.

It felt like the floor had been pulled away from him when he saw the number of men outside of Greta's door. Soldiers. Medics. Everything was numb. Everything except his heart-- pounding drowning out his thoughts.

"What's happened here?" Gwendal's voice boomed beside him.

"Didn't Sir James tell you?" asked a young soldier that Wolfram couldn't name. "He was sent just a moment ago to inform you of--"

"Greta?" Wolfram demanded. It felt like he had whispered but he must have shouted because suddenly everyone was looking at him.

"She's safe," answered a medic. "There was an attempt on her life, but she is safe, Your Majesty."

"Where is she?"

"She was taken by Lady Florence to bathe. Lady Anissina has been summoned to see to her as well. The princess will feel better once she's cleaned up."

Wolfram had to steady himself against a nearby wall. His head was so light-- like he might float away if the heavy weight of dread still lodged in his heart wasn't keeping him down.


"Sir Edwin and the stablekeep are both dead, Sir Voltaire. The princess was found, unharmed, under the hedge below her window. From what we can make of the scene, Sir Edwin was stabbed from behind and the stablekeep... Well, he appears to have been killed later..."

Wolfram hated the way the young soldier's eyes flicked to him when he was meant to be reporting to his brother. As if Wolfram was something to be afraid of.
Wolfram moved forward, moved the man out of his way as he made his way into Greta's room. Inside was dark but there were torches along the wall and so he lit them with a thought. The room flared into brightness. Blackish red-- congealing blood-- covered the floor directly inside.

Edwin's body had been moved-- propped against the wall. His eyes had been closed.

The stablekeep was face down in the worst of the spreading red wetness on the floor. Wolfram kicked the body once, and then again until he could see his face-- the way his organs were spilling out of the red cavern that had kept them in. His face was almost unrecognizable. Covered in dried blood. Edwin's sword was still clutched by cold dead fingers but another glint of metal was twisted in the leather vest the man had worn over his cotton shirt.

Familiar silver.

There had been no one to save her. He hadn't come in time to protect her and his little girl had been forced to save herself. To take a life.

Wolfram was so **angry**. So proud. So sick that his little girl had seen such bloodshed.

He was supposed to protect her. From this. From everything.

Gwendal's hand was heavy on his shoulder. "It's done. There is nothing you can do now but wait. Be here for Greta when she is finished with her bath--"

"Finished washing off the blood," Wolfram whispered. Eyes drawn to the trail of red leading to the window. *The princess was found... under the hedge below her balcony..."

Gwendal tightened his grip. "She will be happy to see you." A pause. "You should not scare her more by showing her your fear. Stay calm. Greta was able to protect herself because of what you taught her. She is a strong child."

Wolfram nodded. Allowed himself to be led from Greta's room and down the hallway to where a chair had already been prepared outside of the royal baths for him to sit in. "She'll be happy to see Yuuri, too. Yuuri is recovering in Shinou's falls..." And then it hit him. "The boy. Is he in custody? What--"

"The boy was found outside the stables. The medics think he will live but he has yet to wake."

Wolfram sighed. Sat, now that there was nothing else for him to do but sit. "I want to talk to him when he wakes."

"Don't we all." Gwendal frowned.

Wolfram could feel the restless desperation-- the heat-- threatening to rise within him so he buried his face in his palms and tried to even his breathing. "She really is unharmed?"

"Yes," Gwendal's voice reassured him. A warm hand on his back.

Wolfram went tense. "Don't stay here for me. Take care of things-- make sure the boy hasn't woken." He looked up into his brother's eyes. "It will only make me feel worse if things were handled poorly because you were here with me." He ran a hand through his hair. Sighed. "Her room should be cleaned-- or maybe we could switch her room-- or maybe it would be best if she stayed with me and Yuuri--"

"I thought you wanted me to take care of things," Gwendal interrupted.
Wolfram managed to nod. "Right. But I... I wish Gisela was here. These medics--"

"Were trained by Gisela and Julia before her. Greta is going to be fine, Wolfram. Try not to scare her with your worrying when she's done with her bath." He gave Wolfram a long look. "I won't be gone long."

"Go," Wolfram crossed his arms. "The castle's seen enough fire for one night. You don't have to worry about me."

Something dark passed over Gwendal's face before he left and Wolfram couldn't help but cross his arms tighter-- holding himself together-- as he sat in his chair. Was everyone always going to be so afraid of him? Was he always going to be so afraid of himself?

There had been moments tonight when Ethne had been close to the surface. Moments when Wolfram had felt the white hot heat burning up inside him. The moment he had walked into Greta's room and seen the blood...

But they had told him Greta was alright.

What if they had lied? What if they had only told him that because they were afraid of him? Afraid of the prophecy.

_The whole world burns._

The next moment Wolfram was standing-- banging on the decorative double doors leading to the royal baths.

He didn't expect for Anissina to be the one to open them. "What are you doing?" she hissed at him. "Are you trying to scare her?"

Rage shrank into shame in a heartbeat. "I'm sorry-- I just-- I was afraid she wasn't really alright-- That they had lied-- Greta's alright, isn't she? She's alright? Can I just see her? Please, Anissina, I--"

"Stop that," Anissina ordered. "You can see her once she's finished her bath." Then her face softened and she shook her head. "I'll tell her you're here, though. That should help--"

"Yuuri is here too-- He's just coming once he's recovered-- We're both back--"

"All well and good," Anissina nodded. "I know you're scared, Wolfram, but acting scared isn't helping anyone right now. Go find something useful to do. I'll send someone to find you once Greta is settled. I promise."

Wolfram must have given her some sign that he had agreed because the next time he was fully aware of himself he was staring at a closed door.

"Something useful," he muttered to himself before turning to glare at the men that Gwendal had no doubt left to watch him. "Where's the boy?"

* * *

The boy had been put in one of the servant's quarters closest to the stables to recover. According to the medics he had suffered severe smoke inhalation before falling and there was evidence of binding around his wrists and face.
He looked so small and pale and broken lying in the tiny bed with the sheets pulled up under his neck. He had long hair. Wolfram remembered that he had always had it braided or in a ponytail of some kind. Like Maxine. Like Reyes. Like his father.

The medics had refused to leave Wolfram alone with him.

Wolfram clenched his hands and sat stiffly in a chair beside the bed, eyes never leaving the boy's face. Had he known? Had he been a part of his father's plot to kill Greta?

Sitting here doing nothing was only making him more angry, and since no one seemed to want that, Wolfram felt somewhat justified as he reached over and gave the sleeping boy a good hard shake.

"Your Majesty!" One of the medics shouted in protest at the same time Wilfrido opened his eyes. Dark eyes that went from bleary to wide with fear within an instant.

"Is Greta alright?" His voice was rusty, broken from the smoke. "I tried to tell. "Tears were running down ash-stained cheeks, making pale trails down into the boy's ears. "I didn't panic. I tried to tell. Sir Edwin is always protecting her--"

"Sir Edwin is dead," Wolfram informed him with a hiss. "Your father killed him."

"Oh." Wilfrido closed his eyes, tears still making their way down his cheeks. "Before you kill me please just say Greta's alright. She has to be alright..." Those were the last words that Wolfram could make out before Wilfrido broke down into sobs and the occasional broken, "I'm sorry."

It would have been a lie to say that Wolfram didn't consider killing him. If Wilfrido hadn't seemed so genuinely concerned about Greta, Wolfram probably would have. Instead he picked up a clean cloth from the table nearby and tossed it on the boy's face. "Wipe your face and stop crying. I want to know what happened."

A few tense minutes later Wilfrido had stopped crying and was sitting propped against the headboard. One of the medics had insisted on concentrating a bit more healing magic on his wrist, now that he was awake, and Wolfram had barely managed not to yell at her for doing her job. Barely.

Once the green light of magic had faded, Wilfrido managed to look in his direction, but still wouldn't meet his eyes. "I didn't know that father meant to do it when we came-- I knew-- I knew that we were supposed to be spies but not... Greta was my friend. She was human too and... She's okay, right? You would have killed me already if she wasn't."

"She survived your father's attempt on her life, yes." Wolfram had his arms crossed and he dug his fingers hard into his arms as he continued. All this pressure inside of him had to go somewhere.

"I'm told she will be fine."

Wilfrido started to cry again, and Wolfram tried to see him for the child he was. A terrified child.

_Greta must have been so scared._

"Enough," Wolfram growled. "How did you end up outside the barn?"

"Father tied me up and set the barn on fire," the boy sniffled. "But I got out. I got out..."

"Wolfram!" Gwendal's disappointed voice interrupted. "What are you doing?"

Wolfram looked to the door to see not only Gwendal but the Sage. "I'm talking to the boy. What
"It looks like the boy might feel more comfortable talking to someone he's not afraid will kill him if he says the wrong thing," the sage said with an easy smirk. "Don't you think so, Sir Belefield?"

Wolfram glared. "I wasn't going to hurt him."

"I'm sure you weren't," said the Sage. "But we came to tell you that Shibuya has been sent for. And..." He looked at Gwendal.

"Greta should be finishing her bath soon," his brother continued. "She'll want to see you."

Wolfram was on his feet at once. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

* * *

Wolfram didn't know what he had expected.

It wasn't this.

It wasn't for Greta to hardly look at him. Hardly look at anything. She was holding one of the stuffed toys that Gwendal had made for her and staring at some distant bit of space that only she could see. The medics had put her in Mother's bed. The bodies had been removed from her room but there was still blood on the floor and-- and so they had brought her here. To this other bed. To try to fill her head with other thoughts.

For a moment Wolfram was sure that Greta was the only one inside, but then he saw Anissina sitting in a tall chair beside the bed, Greta's cat perched in her lap. At least the mad woman wasn't yelling at him for once. She only watched him cross the room toward his daughter with cold blue eyes. Wolfram could hear Gwendal and the Sage come into the room behind him but it didn't matter. Only Greta mattered.

"Greta." As he said it Wolfram realized it must have been the first sound he'd made because all at once Greta was looking at him.

Brown eyes filled with tears. "Wolfram?"

The next moment Wolfram was sitting on the edge of her bed-- holding her as she clung to him-- hot tears against his neck. "Thank the gods you're alright. Greta-- gods-- we were so worried. I'm so sorry I wasn't here to protect you. I'm so sorry."

Greta only held him tighter-- cried harder-- and Wolfram never wanted to let her go. They had put her in the pink nightgown that Greta had had made so they could match.

"Yuuri will be here soon," Wolfram continued, desperate to reassure her. "He brought us through Earth and back when we heard you were in trouble."

Greta was trembling in his arms, clinging to him so hard it hurt, but she had stopped crying. "That explains the bathrobe."

It took Wolfram a moment to realize that Greta was talking about his Earth clothes. It was so ridiculous. Such a normal statement after everything that had happened. "Greta," Wolfram said again because he could. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner. I'm so-- I'm so proud of you, though. You defended yourself--" Greta went still and so Wolfram stopped, pulled away enough to look at her. "Greta?"
Her eyes had gone distant again. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't-- I don't even remember what..." She worried her lip. "I know his father was bad but... Wilfrido... Is he--"

"He's alright," Wolfram assured, a little more sharply than he would have liked.

"His father said he killed him," Greta continued softly. "He said he killed Wilfrido-- That it was my fault--"

"Nothing was your fault." Wolfram pulled her closer, up into his lap so he could hold her-- it felt good to have her weight in his arms. Like he could protect her from--

Blood.

There was blood on the bed where Greta had been.

Wolfram couldn't tear his eyes away from it. "Anissina..." His voice was so far away. "They took her to bathe-- She should be-- Why is there..." There was blood where she had been sitting-- the back of her nightgown.

Greta was crying again and Anissina was saying something but none of it made any sense.

What had the stablekeep done to her before she killed him? Something that would leave her bleeding between the legs... Something she would never recover from... Something he could never make right.

Saralegui would pay for this.


Sound and feeling. Thoughts. All of it was white. Hot.

But calm.

Wolfram knew what he had to do. How he had to do it.

But it would be alright. He just had to put some distance between himself and the castle first. Down to the harbor. A deserted place by the sea. His magic would reach across-- burn Saralegui and his entire castle-- entire kingdom-- the whole world burns.

Nothing left but ash.

Ethne was in him. Writhing in the pleasure of his rage. But Wolfram wouldn't let her out so close to Greta. He wouldn't let old words win.

Wolfram might burn Shou Shimeron-- Himself-- The sea would boil between his power and Shou Shimeron but Wolfram would keep control. He would have his revenge. His justice. There was no other choice.

Ethne laughed.

********

Yuuri filled his lungs with fresh night air and let it out with a sigh. The road from the temple was sloping down and as Yuuri leaned back to keep his balance in the saddle he noticed just how bright
the stars were where they peeked out between the clouds. He always felt like this after spending
time beneath Shinou's falls. Clearer somehow. Like the water had washed away the fear along with
his exhaustion.

Or maybe the fear had gone when the riders had come and let them know that everything was
alright. Greta was fine. Wolfram was fine.

The nightmare was over.

The nightmare was supposed to be over, so why were there more men on more horses racing
toward them?

And then the moment of peace was over and the fear came back up like bile and Yuuri was urging
his horse forward. Faster. Until the distant shouts of "Your Majesty!" made sense over the sound of
his heartbeat thrumming in his ears.

Yuuri was out of breath by the time he reached them. "What's going on?"

"It's His Majesty--" one of the men began.

"He's not stopping," another finished. "He's left the palace but we can't stop him! His Grace sent us
to retrieve you at once!"

"Wolfram," Yuuri breathed. The pieces were falling together in his head. What all these soldiers
coming to warn him might mean.

"Yuuri... don't let me destroy the world, alright?"

"I won't," Yuuri promised as he urged his horse forward, between two of the men on horses to
leave them all behind. "I won't."

At first he was simply racing toward the castle, but then he saw the light. A spot of sunlight
blinking in and out between distant buildings.

Wolfram

It seemed like hours before they reached the gates. Even though the sentries knew they were
coming, Yuuri still had to stop his horse while they waited for the gates to open and it made him
want to scream. For a moment Yuuri was surprised that the Maou wasn't stirring along with his
own need for action, but then he remembered that he had just used a huge amount of power to
travel between worlds.

He would have to stop Wolfram on his own.

"Shibuya!" Murata's voice cut through the cold fear clouding his vision.

What if he couldn't do it on his own?

"Shibuya!" Murata was running out the gate in his direction-- ordering another man from his horse
so he could mount. "The great fool won't listen to anyone--"

"What exactly is happening? What is Wolfram--"

"Ethne. It's her power, not his. Although Sir Belefield must still have some small amount of control
or we wouldn't be standing here talking about it." Murata threw something at him-- Morgif--
The sword let out an ominous bellow as Yuuri caught it at the scabbard. "What do you expect me to do with him?"

Murata didn't answer. He only urged his horse through the path the sentries and other guards had made into the city, leaving Yuuri no choice but to follow.

Instead of traveling up the king's road toward the palace, Murata took him south. It was agonizing. They were traveling against a current of fearful citizens-- families-- leading their young and old toward the city gates. Evacuation.

Sweat trickeled down the center of Yuuri's back. He could feel the moisture on his forehead and upper lip and only then did Yuuri realize exactly how hot it was. Hotter than should be possible in the night.

They had to weave the horses down narrow allies to avoid the crowds and Yuuri found himself wondering more than once how Murata knew where they were going-- found himself hoping more than once that his friend wasn't simply following the heat. They were nearly at the docks when things began to brighten. Like a baseball stadium had turned on its lights somewhere beyond the buildings up ahead. It was around that time the horses refused to budge and the two of them had to dismount, Morgif moaning his complaints as they continued along on foot.

"What exactly is going on?" Yuuri asked suddenly, finally having found his voice through his thoughts. "Wolfram wouldn't-- Greta is fine. They told me Greta was fine. Why would Wolfram--"

"Greta is fine," Murata interrupted with a growl. "The others are trying to slow him down so you have a chance of talking some sense into him before he loses what little control he seems to have left."

Yuuri wiped the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve. "But why? Wolf's not-- He should have been happy once he found out Greta was safe. Why would he--"

"He thinks the stablekeep raped Greta--"

"WHAT?"

"But she's just got her first moon's blood. Sir Belefield saw it and leapt to the worst possible conclusion. It didn't help that Greta didn't know what it was either--"

"Why doesn't someone just explain that!" Yuuri was almost out of breath with worry. With the heat.

Murata made an exasperated noise. "I don't think he can hear us. Our last hope is that he'll be able to hear you."

MaHoooooooooooooooooooooo Morgif agreed, squirming in Yuuri's hand.

Yuuri tried to calm down. It wasn't as bad as it could be. All he had to do was get Wolfram to listen to him. Greta was fine. They would all be fine.

So why was he running?

The buildings thinned toward the docks and they had enough space to rush side by side, jumping over upturned crates and piles of garbage and other things. When they turned the final corner both of them stopped. Yuuri had to bring up a hand to shield his eyes against the light. A bit of sunlight gliding down the empty market space toward the sea. Darker shapes running up ahead. Distant
shouting and places where the earth seemed to rise suddenly out of nowhere.

"Wolf," Yuuri panted as he tried to catch his breath, almost incapable of believing it. He squinted-- could see the bright shape was a human one. So white hot that when he looked away the image was still with him-- burned into his eyes. Yuuri wondered if he looked like this when he was lost in the Maou's power.

But then the time for wondering was over.

The air was thick as Yuuri barreled through it, almost stumbling more than once as he ran down the steep incline. The spare uniform the temple had given him to change into was stuck tight against his skin, heavy with sweat, but Yuuri was glad for the weight of it as he approached. The heat on his exposed face and hands was close to unbearable now. Yuuri could see the air around Wolfram bending with the heat he was putting off-- whole body bright hot white-- his clothes must have burned away, Yuuri realized, as he got closer. Wolfram's hair was still golden, though, golden--red and crackling in a wind that Yuuri couldn't feel.

"Wolfram!" Yuuri shouted, when he couldn't run anymore-- instinct protecting him from the pain of moving forward. "Wolfram, stop!"

Wolfram kept walking, pace steady and filled with purpose. He didn't so much as falter.

Yuuri licked his lips, paused, before running again, around Wolfram so that he could stand in his way. For a few moments Yuuri felt like he was watching it all from the outside. Gwendal and other men in the distance-- raising barriers of earth-- soaking them with water-- or maybe they were soaking things so that the world wouldn't catch on fire-- Yuuri was so hot it felt like he would catch fire. How could Wolfram possibly survive in the center of it all?

"Wolfram!" Yuuri shouted again when he was standing in the other boy's path. Wolfram was only a few yards in front of him, close enough that he could see the green of his eyes-- brighter now-- with the way the power seemed to illuminate him from inside.

Wolfram didn't seem to hear him.

Yuuri had to take steps back as he approached, shielding his face as much as he could with his arm. "Wolfram," he tried again. "Wolfram, Greta is fine-- Greta will be fine, just stop this and listen to me!"

Finally, green eyes on his. "Greta will never be fine." His voice was booming, mixed with another that wasn't his. "Saralegui's man tried to kill her. Raped her. Greta will never be fine again and Saralegui will pay for it!"

"It's a mistake! Greta wasn't raped! Wolfram, just calm down and think about this. Saralegui--"

"Don't you dare protect him. No one can protect him!"

"I wasn't trying to protect him! Saralegui needs to face the consequences for everything that he's done, but that doesn't mean you have to be the one to do it, Wolfram. Please, stop this!"

Wolfram didn't stop. "You are not the only one capable of serving the gods' Justice, Yuuri."

The next thing Yuuri knew he was on the ground-- it was cooler-- but his arm-- hurting. Someone-- Murata-- was pulling him to his feet.

"Shibuya, are you alright?"
Yuuri managed to nod. Wolfram was closer to the shore now-- or had he just been moved farther from it?

Had Wolfram really used his power against him? Wolfram would never hurt him. Wolfram would never--

"Shibuya!" Murata's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Shibuya, you've tried talking. We have to try something else now."

"What?" he managed. "I'll just talk to him again. I won't mention Saralegui this time and maybe Wolfram--"

"Will kill you." Murata's face was dark. "Maybe he'll kill you before he kills the rest of us."

"Wolfram would never--"

"Never what? Blast you a dozen yards across a field with his magic? Burn the skin off your arm-- Shibuya, it's not Wolfram anymore and we have to do whatever is necessary to protect this world."

Yuuri was dizzy. He looked down at his right arm-- saw the cloth seared into his skin-- almost fainted before Murata shook him again. "What?"

Maoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooou, Morgif answered from the ground beside him.

Murata nodded. "You're the only one with the power to stop him."

"No," Yuuri shook his head. "Even if you convinced me it was the right thing to do-- I can't. I used too much magic traveling between worlds--"

"Did you forget about me again, Shibuya? Even though I can't use magic on my own, I can make yours stronger." Murata grabbed his hand. "We might not be able to stop Ethne completely, but we may be able to force enough power out of her that she can't destroy quite as much of our world."

"Murata, I can't. Let me talk to him again-- Let me try to get through to him!"

Murata sighed and shook his head. "I can't stop you from trying. I never could stop you from doing what you wanted, Shibuya. I know you love him. I know that if you survive this and he doesn't you'll hurt for the rest of your life. But I also know that you love this world. You love the innocent people, the children you haven't even met. I know you wouldn't let them die to protect yourself or one person-- even if that person is Wolfram."

Yuuri let out a sob. When had he started crying? His arm hurt and Murata was saying such terrible things and how could this be happening?

But it was happening. It was happening and Yuuri had to face it. He took a deep breath. He would get Wolfram to listen. He would keep his promise to Wolfram.

Anything else was unthinkable.

Murata was still holding him up by his good arm but after that they switched so that Yuuri could put the other side of his body closer to Wolfram once they circled around. It was hard not to cradle his injured arm against his chest-- hard to make the buzzing in his head stop long enough for him to think. Hard not to think long enough to realize that now his uninjured hand was free to wield Morgif if he needed.
If he needed.

This time when he stood directly in Wolfram's path green eyes were on him before he had a chance to say anything.

"Move."

"Wolfram," Yuuri tried, softer this time. "Please... look at me. Think about what's happening-- the things you said to me in Shou Shimeron. Wolfram, you don't want this. You don't."

"You're right." For a moment it almost sounded like Wolfram. Green eyes softened-- the stifling heat seemed to contract-- before the heat was worse. Wolfram raised his hand, palm facing Yuuri. Facing Murata and all the countless others behind them and beyond. "He doesn't."

Everything happened at once.

Power came at him-- hot-- impossibly hot. Power came through him-- stirred the power inside-- and even though Yuuri didn't have a chance to decide if he wanted it or not the Maou stirred within him. Morgif screamed. Everyone screaming. Power-- Pain--

Justice

********

********

Wolfram was sitting in his room. His childhood room, with Gwendal's stuffed creatures piled up on the bed and the closet full of itchy clothes he hated. It was safe here, he somehow knew. But it was wrong.

He ran his hands over the coverlet. They were bigger than they should have been. He was older. Something had happened-- was happening-- but he couldn't quite think what it was.

Wolfram stood. If there was something happening he should help.

"No need to worry, my Bright One." The woman was standing in his room like it was the most natural place for her to be. Red hair so dark at the roots it was almost black and body barely covered by a thin grey dress. It was unnerving how strange her presence wasn't.

"Who are you?"

She laughed. Red lips twisted around a smile. "I am Ethne. The mother to your fire. Come and sit with me. I will answer all, and all will be well." She crossed the room and sat beside the place that he had been sitting. Gestured for him to join her.

He did. "Why are you here?"

"I am here for you." She cupped his cheek. "To help you."

Wolfram frowned. There was something familiar about the gesture. "You're not... Yuuri."

Yuuri.


His head hurt-- everything hurt.
Ethne made him look at her. "Stop that. When you think it hurts. Don't hurt, Bright One. Let me make it better. Let me take care of you. You've always wanted someone to take care of you, isn't that right?"

"No," Wolfram breathed, clutching his head against the pain. "I don't need anyone. I can take care of myself."

Ethne laughed again. "You know that isn't true. You need them, you always have. But when they needed you, you couldn't help them, could you?"

Wolfram stared at her. The way her face twisted into something dark. "No."

"Yes." She moved closer to him, hands turning everything she touched to black. Black spreading on the coverlet beneath them. Her eyes were a burning white. "This world is nothing. A failure. A place unworthy of life. It needs to be reborn for the good of all things. Reborn from us."

He couldn't move. She was holding his shoulders now and it was burning him-- Everything black. Everything ashes.

"He doesn't love you," Ethne continued. "He couldn't, now that you've failed him. Let Saralegui's spy rape his daughter. He'll never forgive you. Neither of them will. The only way to stop it is to start over. Let go and let me--"

Wolfram shoved her back-- stumbling across the room to lean against a wall and catch his breath. There were voices in his his head-- his heart--

\textit{Wolfram, you don't want this. You don't.}

Yuuri?

"Get out!" he screamed. "GET OUT!"

Ethne laughed at him, but when he opened his eyes she was gone. All that was left was the scorch mark on his bed.

But he was still here. Why was he still here?

He crossed his arms-- held himself as he slid down the wall. Maybe Ethne was right... But even if Yuuri and Greta forgave him he would never deserve it. Never be worthy.

Just when Wolfram was beginning to notice how dark the room had become there was a knock on the door. For a moment Wolfram thought he had just imagined it but then the knock came again, softer but still there.

Wolfram stood and crossed the room to stand beside the door. What if it was Ethne, back to laugh at him?

The knock was so soft-- barely there-- and somehow Wolfram knew it was his last chance.

The girl behind the door was red of hair like Ethne-- but it was lighter, decorated with tiny braids woven together in places with colored string. Her skin was pale-- painted with blue patterns that spun across every inch of her skin, even below the edges of her near shear dress. She couldn't have been much older than Greta. "May I come in?" she asked.

Wolfram stepped aside and held the door open for her. She smiled up at him and entered the room.
"You shouldn't stay here," she told him once she was inside.

Wolfram blinked at her. "I don't want to stay here."

"You do." She took his hand. "If you didn't want to be here, you wouldn't be."

"What do you mean?" he growled, jerking his hand from her grasp. "Who are you to tell me what I want?"

The girl stood up straight. "I am a Faithe. I was called Frith, while I was alive."

Wolfram stared at her. Only the Faithe of Gael wore markings like that. He should have known. "But how? Faithe... You're human. You can't use magic--"

"Walking the web of souls is not magic, Sir Belefield. It simply is. The Faithe can read pieces of the web of souls when we live, to weave the prophecy, but it isn't until we die that we can truly see."

"So am I dead?" Wolfram realized the thought made him sad. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live with Yuuri and Greta.

Frith shook her head. "You are not dead-- but you don't have much time." She took his hand again. "You cannot defeat Ethne alone-- but you are not alone. Even here his soul cries out for yours. Together you can do anything."

"Yuuri?" He somehow knew. "But how?"

"Stop being so afraid." She smiled, blood creeping from a cut in her neck that hadn't been there before. "Hurry."

As suddenly as the room had appeared it was gone. Everything. The scorched bed and the bleeding girl and the knowledge that Yuuri and Greta didn't love him.

Wolfram was in his own body again and even though it hurt and he wasn't the only one there-- he could feel Yuuri calling.

All he had to do was reach out and meet him.

********

********

The world was ending and Murata was at the center of it all. The Maou's power clung to him like a vice, pulling power from him that should never have been there-- was too much-- was too strong. All of Ethne's heat was momentarily blocked by Yuuri's power. Power that was almost moving through him instead of coming from him.

*The sea*, Murata realized through the fog in his mind-- through the fog that was everywhere. *We're near the sea.*

Shibuya's blue light was all around him. He could barely see the bright white-hot red that had engulfed Sir Belefield. The blue light only lasted for another moment before everything seemed to merge. The heat was back-- soaking wet heat-- the air was so thick with it that breathing was like sucking in mouthfuls of water but he couldn't stop himself from taking breath after breath.

Murata was on the ground before he realized that Shibuya was no longer holding his hand. The
ground was so comfortable-- The sword was singing to him-- Morgif abandoned on the ground to his side.

Two forms blending to one nearby.

So white. So dark.

* * *

Murata was in the garden again.

"I thought you'd gone for good." Murata reached for his teacup.

Shinou smirked at him, blue eyes shining through the sunlight warming his face. "I never could keep myself from you."

Murata sighed. "I suppose we'll be spending more time together, now that I'm dead."

"Dead?" Shinou laughed. "Not yet, my pretty sage, not yet."

"What?" Murata blinked. "Why else are you here-- You used up too much power--"

"I used up a lot of power, it's true." Shinou stood, walked around the table to kneel beside him. "I had to rest after taking care of so much--"

"Meddling," Murata interrupted as Shinou cupped his cheek. "You're always meddling."

Shinou nodded, smirk firmly in place. "I can't help meddling when it comes to you."

"Idiot," Murata managed before the kiss.

* * *

Waking up was exhausting.

Murata rubbed the caked sleep from his eyes so he could open them and stared at the ceiling. The bed was comfortable and large and it would have been the easiest thing in the world to just close his eyes again and sleep.

"Your Grace, you're awake!" A medic was sitting in the chair beside his bed. She put a cold cloth on his forehead that smelled like tea. Lavender. "You need your rest."

Murata pushed her hand away and forced himself to sit. "Well, it appears as though the world hasn't ended, so I should have plenty of time for rest later. Wouldn't you agree?"

The woman pouted but made no move to stop him. "As you will, Your Grace."

His head spun for a minute when he stood but it passed. "Where is everyone else? Shibuya--"

"His Majesty is sleeping. As is His Majesty, Sir Belefield. Ulrike believes both of them should be waking soon. We did not expect for you to wake so quickly, Your Grace."

Murata rubbed his eyes. "Well, I'm sorry to be so unexpected. Where are my glasses?"

The woman grimaced. "They were destroyed during the Incident, Your Grace. I can have several pairs brought in for you to try if you'd like--"
"Fine," Murata growled. He could see well enough to get around without them. Mostly. "I'm going to go talk to Ulrike, bring them there."

"Certainly, Your Grace. But Ulrike is in a meeting with Sir Voltaire and the ambassador from Lesser Gael and--"

"Where?" he interrupted. Murata was in no mood for her to tell him that they had asked not to be interrupted or some other excuse for him to stay in bed. The last thing he had been aware of was a clash of gods that had been prophesized to destroy the world. Clearly, that hadn't happened, but what had?

Ten minutes later Murata was standing in front of the double doorway to Shinou Temple's inner chamber wearing a fresh uniform but still lacking in functional glasses. The sentries moved aside for him without question, though one of the women gave him a disapproving look.

He didn't bother to knock.

Either their meeting was a silent one or conversation had stopped for him as he crossed the room. Murata had to squint to see that Gwendal and the Taibhsear were standing at the falls with Ulrike. There was an unfamiliar blur beside the pool, and as he approached Murata was able to discern that it was a cot. A cot occupied by someone with distinctly blond hair.

"Your Grace!" Ulrike greeted when he was close enough to join their little circle of three and make it four. "Are you feeling well? We didn't expect you to wake for days! His Majesty was able to be placed into the falls to aid his recovery and Sir Belefield seems to be improving with him, but we were worried about you. Without Shinou's power there was nothing we could do but wait for you to recover on your own."

"You know me, Ulrike." He managed a smile. "Full of surprises. Besides, I had to come find out why we're all not dead."

Gwendal frowned. "We have several theories--"

"They're not theories!" the Taibhsear interrupted in a huff. "The joining of magics in such a way couldn't have been anything else!"

Murata raised an eyebrow. "Anything other than what?"

"Anam Cara," the Taibhsear answered. "The two kings joined their souls-- their magic. It explains everything."

"Well, it certainly explains the fog," Gwendal grumbled. "It's been two days and no one can see more than a few paces in front of their feet."

Ulrike shook her head. "Their Majesties were already married! If their magic were to join it should have done so at the ceremony."

"Perhaps if it had been a proper ceremony," the Taibhsear countered. "These new traditions only dampen magic's potential. Not to mention that if the Anam Cara had not occurred then Our King would not be recovering as a result of the His Majesty Yuuri's placement beneath the falls. Our King's power is now so closely knit with fire that, as you saw yourself, placing him in the healing waters did as much harm as good. Yet as the water heals His Majesty Yuuri's body and restores his magic, the connection of Anam Cara between them allows the healing effects to benefit Our King as well. Their magic has been joined. Woven together like the threads of prophecy. It's plain to see."
Murata raised a hand. If it went on like this Ulrike and the Taibhsear would be bickering for the next hour. "So assume that what the Taibhsear says is true about Anam Cara. Fire and water mixed and we got steam instead of a world of ash. The peaceful prophecy was completed after all. What do we have to be so conspiratorial about that we need secret meetings in Shinou's Temple?"

"Well the steam doesn't seem to be going anywhere," said Gwendal. "What few reports we've gotten say that the steam has covered the continent-- from Frankshire to Caloria and even to Shou Shimeron."

"We've gotten reports from Shou Shimeron?" Murata asked. "What happened?"

"Saralegui is dead," Gwendal answered. "Conrad and Yozak are leading efforts to maintain some level of peace. There is a cleric there who has made himself useful and is liked by the people, so gaining their trust has gone better than expected."

Murata hummed in approval. "Shibuya should be pleased. Once he wakes he won't want our troops there for long."

"I imagine he won't," Gwendal agreed.

A knock on the door turned all of their attention.

"May I see them?" Greta's voice was small, though it carried easily across the open chamber.

"Of course," Ulrike answered. "Just try not to wake them, you know they need their rest."

The girl nodded before running into the room. She went past them to jump on the cot beside the falls where they had placed Sir Belefield. Murata squinted over toward the falls and could make out another cot half-under the healing waters. He could only assume that that one was Shibuya's.

Murata wondered if the Taibhsear was right about Anam Cara. He couldn't think of another explanation for how Shibuya's magical recovery via the falls could have such a direct effect on Wolfram, and such a huge merging of magic would certainly have a physical manifestation. Could the steam of their union be the first prophecy's peaceful mist?

"When are they going to wake up?" Greta asked. "Murata woke up and you said he would wake up last because he wasn't made for so much magic. Wolfram and Yuuri are made for the magic and--"

"Don't worry, Greta." Gwendal moved to stand beside his brother's cot. "They'll be fine. We just have to be patient."

"I'm sick of being patient," Greta whined. "I've been worried about them for weeks! It was supposed to be over when they came back but now it's only worse."

"I'm sorry, Greta." The voice was so soft that Murata barely heard it.

"Wolfram!" Greta squealed and threw herself into her father's arms. "You woke up!"

"I woke up," Sir Belefield agreed, maneuvering himself into a sitting position. "Yuuri?"

"Ugh," Shibuya groaned. "I'm fine. Wet, but fine." He sneezed.

Murata shook his head, but couldn't quite stop the smile from spreading on his lips. He reached up to adjust glasses that weren't there and rubbed the bridge of his nose instead. "Well, we're all happy to hear it."
Hopefully they would all manage to stay "fine". For a while at least.

******

Two Months Later
Tokyo, Japan
Earth

******

Wolfram didn't think he would ever get used to how different Earth was. Jennifer and Shouma had taken them to eat at a nice restaurant, but the people there had made them take off their shoes and put them in little boxes before they had been allowed to go inside. Wolfram had done his best to act like he knew what he was doing and thanks to Anissina's earpiece he could understand what people were saying to him well enough not to embarrass himself, but he still had spent the entire evening feeling generally overwhelmed.

For most of their visit they had been eating Jennifer's cooking or going out to "western" restaurants, but before they returned to Shin Makoku Yuuri had wanted to eat traditional Earth food. Wolfram had wanted to support him, but had he known that traditional Earth food consisted mainly of raw fish and cold noodles covered in sticky slime, he might have reconsidered. Yuuri had laughed at him for making a face after eating the raw grated yam mixture that had had the consistency of ejaculate but managed to taste far worse. Wolfram didn't know how anyone could manage to eat that with a straight face. Luckily, they had ordered some sort of fried vegetable platter for Greta and so Wolfram had been able to steal a few bites from her plate after she had fallen asleep with her head against Yuuri's arm.

Wolfram smiled as he remembered how cute they'd looked. They had let her sleep for a while before leaving, and Jennifer had snapped a picture that she'd promised to take out of the picture machine for him before they went home to Shin Makoku the following day. It wasn't particularly late in the evening, but Greta had been out shopping with Jennifer since the early morning and so Wolfram couldn't blame her for being tired. He was tired too, if for a different reason.

Earth houses had the thinnest walls that Wolfram had ever been subject to. Every footstep-- every word-- if you listened you could hear anything, and so even though he and Yuuri had been allowed to sleep in the same room they had barely touched in the past week. Before that had been the journey to Lesser Gael and the voyage across the sea to Gael proper to sign treaties and meet the approval of the elders, stopping everywhere in-between to assure humans and demons alike that the fog that had covered the land for several days was not a precursor to some sort of new threat. Their week on Earth was supposed to be a vacation after nearly a month of traveling and diplomacy. An opportunity to spend the quality family time they had sorely needed. Wolfram had to admit that it had been wonderful spending time here, as strange as Earth was, but family time aside, Wolfram could hardly wait to get Yuuri back to their royal bedchamber for some proper husband time.

The Earth clothes only made things worse. Wolfram was used to the stiff lines of their uniforms, as tailored as they were, but Earth clothes left Yuuri's neck and collar bone exposed more often than not and combined with the way Yuuri looked at him when he wore his jeans-- the memories of their wedding night-- it was becoming more and more difficult not to pull Yuuri into some dark corner and--

"Wolfram?"

He blinked. Yuuri gave him one of his attempting-to-be-conspiratorial looks and Wolfram
narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"I still need to buy a few more things before we go back tomorrow. Do you think you'd be up for some more shopping tonight? Stores will still be open for another hour or so."

"Oh and you can take Wol-chan to karaoke or go dancing somewhere once you're done," Jennifer encouraged in her high voice.

"That sounds lovely," Wolfram managed. He didn't know what the first thing was, but dancing sounded akin to torture without being able to take Yuuri home and ravish him after. Still, he would be glad to get some time alone with the wimp.

"Papa and I will take Greta home," Jennifer continued. "You boys should go and have a nice date!"

"Are you sure?" Yuuri asked, looking at Greta. "You can come with us if you want."

Greta shook her head, eyes widening in something close to fear. "No. No more shopping. Please."

Jennifer laughed. "Oh Greta, I'm sorry if I wore you out! It's just so much fun going shopping with a little girl of my own!"

Greta gave her grandmother a smile. "Don't be sorry. It was fun spending time. I just hope there will be room for everything in my closet."

Jennifer beamed and hugged her. "Oh we're going to miss you so much! Make sure you come and visit us again soon."

Wolfram couldn't help but smile. He was glad that Greta had another woman to confide in. After the circumstances surrounding her first blood Greta had been loath to speak to either of her parents about coming into her role as a woman, and it would be a lie to say that Wolfram wasn't a tiny bit relieved to be able to hand off the conversation to someone better suited for it. Wolfram hoped that Jennifer had been able to make her feel more comfortable. As much as Wolfram had grown to like Anissina, she did occasionally lack the ability to communicate without being terrifying, and the idea of her as Greta's primary informant while Gisela was still in Shou Shimeron was frightening to say the least.

Yuuri stayed close to him as they made their way out of the restaurant, brushing against his arm in the tiny mechanical box that moved them from one level of the building to the next. Wolfram could smell him. Feel the heat of him through the cloth of both their sleeves. He took a deep breath of fresh air as the door opened on the outside and they stepped out of the box. The last thing he needed was for his pants to get too tight for him to walk. He would have to make Yuuri pay for being such a tease. Soon.

Luckily Wolfram was able to maintain his composure through their goodbyes until Jennifer, Shouma, and Greta had made their way through the crowds toward the train station and he and Yuuri were left on their own.

Yuuri gave him a small smile and took his hand. "We wouldn't want you getting lost in the crowd," he explained, tugging to lead him in the opposite direction.

Wolfram could feel his cheeks go hot. He didn't think Yuuri had ever been so demonstrative with him in public on Earth. "Well maybe we should go somewhere less crowded." Wolfram gave the wimp's hand a squeeze then shifted the position of their hands so that his thumb was pressing into Yuuri's palm. Small circles.
Yuuri shivered and moved their hands again to interlock fingers as they walked. Palm to palm. Yuuri was out in front, leading as the crowd pressed in from both sides. The sun was going down, reflecting harsh orange-red off the glass windows of the high metal buildings and making him squint against the glare. Yuuri kept on. Past glowing signs covered in earth scribbles and over smooth stone roads that seemed impossibly clean given the number of people who lived in this monstrous city.

Eventually the crowds began to thin and the roads slanted up. The clothing and machine shops became less frequent and instead there were small restaurants with curtains for doors. Alleys filled with boxes and dark places where two might slip away.

After minutes of walking Wolfram was growing impatient, and so the next small crack between buildings that Yuuri tried to walk them past Wolfram stopped and tugged the wimp inside.

"Wolf, what--"

Yuuri's lips were so soft. Warm. He made a noise-- a huff-- as the air went from his lungs when Wolfram pressed his back against the stone wall. Yuuri kissed him back just as hungrily for a few, blissful, seconds but then he was pushing him away.

"Wolfram." Yuuri had broken the kiss, but he couldn't stop Wolfram from licking the sweat from his neck. That spot beneath his ear that never failed to make him squirm. Yuuri was hard. They both were. "Wolfram wait. We can't-- ah-- do this here."

Wolfram only pressed their bodies closer. Brought his leg between Yuuri's legs. Up. Until he could feel the hard bulge of tight balls and the underside of his cock. He grinned. Yuuri must have tucked himself up before they left the restaurant. Otherwise he would be trapped down one leg of the tight denim like he was. Wolfram snuck a hand up Yuuri's shirt-- dragging teeth against Yuuri's neck-- as his fingers followed the top edge of Yuuri's jeans until they brushed against the smooth slick head of his partially-exposed cock.

"Wolfram," Yuuri breathed. "Please wait. I-- There's a better place to finish this. We're almost there." He covered Wolfram's hand to stop his fingers. Raised his other hand to cup his cheek and make Wolfram look at him.

Yuuri's eyes were black. Dark. Pleading. His lips were already beginning to swell and Wolfram wanted to fuck him right here against the wall but Yuuri was already sliding out of his grasp. Wolfram moved his hand from Yuuri's cock. Made sure Yuuri watched as he licked the wetness from the tips of his fingers.

"I'm sorry," Yuuri swallowed. "You know I want to too... but it will be worth it. I promise."

Wolfram made an exasperated noise and tried to fix himself inside his jeans so he could at least walk. Yuuri's button down shirt was loose and long enough to cover him, but Wolfram's shirt was tight and only went to his hips. "Wherever we're going it better be close," he huffed.

Yuuri didn't seem to be able to look away from the source of Wolfram's discomfort. He reached out to trail a soft touch along the hard line of it. Made a small sound as Wolfram shuddered. "I don't want to be interrupted. Here--" He handed Wolfram the satchel he was carrying and gave his crotch another meaningful look. "I don't know how long it will be until someone comes by. If we go there then..." Yuuri worried his lip, eyes wide and pleading.

Wolfram took the bag and positioned it in front of his discomfort before crossing his arms with an exasperated huff. "Well then let's go."
The place that Yuuri brought him to was unimpressive on the outside, blending in with the surrounding dust-covered walls, but inside it looked as disturbingly clean and grand as the many indoor shopping centers that Jennifer had dragged them to during their visit. There were glowing signs and tiny scribbles above a desk where a middle-aged woman was standing in front of a computing machine. There were several large sofas lining the walls and the shining marble floors were covered in thick rugs of intricate design.

"Wait here," Yuuri said, before heading over to talk to the woman behind the desk.

Wolfram shifted the satchel that Yuuri had given him to better cover his crotch and moved to stand with his back to one of the walls near the desk. He wasn't quite close enough to hear what Yuuri was saying. He could only watch as the woman frowned, but accepted the Earth money Yuuri gave to her.

A few moments later the woman handed Yuuri a key and his husband came over to take his hand again. Wolfram didn't miss the glare Yuuri shot the woman as he pulled Wolfram through a set of doors to the left of the desk.

"What was that about," he asked.

"Nothing," Yuuri grumbled. "Just 'stupid Earth prejudices'." He tugged Wolfram closer by the hand and put a quick kiss to his cheek. "She's probably more comfortable with high school girls and businessmen. I shouldn't let it get to me."

"That's right," Wolfram agreed, though he didn't know about the high school girls and businessmen Yuuri was talking about. The important thing was that Yuuri was defending them here. The place that had taught him that loving Wolfram was impossible and wrong. Wolfram's chest felt warm and light and he didn't think it was possible to love the wimp more.

They paused as Yuuri pushed the button to call the mechanical box down to their floor and Wolfram could barely stop himself from touching Yuuri. From starting all over again only this time Wolfram knew he wouldn't be able to stop. "I'm proud of you, wimp," he said instead.

Yuuri squeezed his hand. "Me too."

The metal box arrived with a ding and they stepped inside. It was so tight inside the box as it moved them up, just enough room for two. He and Yuuri were pressed together. Front to front. Wolfram could taste his breath. Wanted to taste his lips. They were hovering-- millimeters apart-- leaning closer-- when the box stopped. They almost didn't make it out before the door closed again.

Wolfram felt bad that Yuuri had spent his Earth money on what could only be an inn. He didn't think he would last more than five minutes once they walked in the door. The first time at least. After so long without properly indulging in his pretty wimp Wolfram was sure he would be up for another round after a quick break, and then he would be able to take his time. Slowly. Kissing Yuuri everywhere until he was begging for it. Cheeks flushed. Swollen lips parted as his breath escaped in desperate pants while Wolfram slid his cock inside the slick tight--

"Wolfram," Yuuri mumbled as they came to a halt in front of one of the doors and Yuuri slid the key inside. "I--"

"Enough talking," Wolfram interrupted. He pushed Yuuri inside the dark room and closed the door
behind them.

This time Yuuri didn't fight when Wolfram pressed him against the wall. Wolfram slid the satchel from his shoulder and it fell to the ground in a forgotten thump as Wolfram tried to touch Yuuri everywhere. Fingers tangling in black hair-- moving down his back to squeeze-- pushing their groins even *closer* together. Wolfram heard his breath catch in his throat as Yuuri rocked against him, hands coming between them to undo the button on Wolfram's jeans.

*Gods* it was good to have some of the pressure gone. Some of the cloth that separated them out of the way. Moments later Wolfram had Yuuri's pants undone as well-- pushed down his legs enough to free all of him-- feel the weight of his balls in one hand as he pressed their shafts together with his other-- with Yuuri's hand squeezing them together from the other side. Wolfram didn't need light to see the picture they made in his mind. Cock to cock. Hot flesh sliding together. Sweat and precome quickening the motion of desperate palms. Yuuri was panting in his ear-- wet breath-- Wolfram could hear his own shuddering breaths coming faster and faster. Faster. *Closer.*

Yuuri's scent was all around him. Flooding his mouth and nose and body. His skin was so hot--drowning him in *more* as each jerk of their hands brought him closer--closer--*there.*

"Too soon," he managed to grunt before it was all too much-- Yuuri made a strangled cry and Wolfram could feel Yuuri's erection throb against his own. Wet. Pulsing wet against his palm where he had shifted to catch the worst of it. Yuuri was trembling in his arms. His own knees trembling.

Breathing in the dark.

Wolfram moved his head to catch Yuuri's lips in a lazy kiss. Warm and slow. Wet and perfect. They kissed until the come in their hands was more sticky than wet and Yuuri pulled away with a distressed whine. He grumbled something and shifted in an odd way against the wall behind him.

"What--"

"I can feel the light switch with my back. I don't want to touch it."

Wolfram laughed. "Wimp. Use your other hand."

"Shut up," Yuuri managed, close to laughing himself, before the lights in the room blinked on. "See," he was grinning. "You're not the only one with the gift of hands-free illumination."

Wolfram rolled his eyes and was distracted at once by the room. They had stayed in inns on Earth before when they had gone in search of Bob and so Wolfram had assumed he had a good idea of what to expect.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The bed was on the ceiling, hanging from thick chains where the four posters should have been. The sheets, coverlet, and pillows were a deep black, accented in places by patterns that could have been roses and an overlay of lace at the edges.

The bed was only the first thing that Wolfram noticed. He had been expecting a bed. He hadn't been expecting the other decor. The large mirror in the far corner of the room. The manacles and whips and thick leather rods that were displayed along the walls. At least, Wolfram hoped they were only for display.

He looked at Yuuri.
"Oh my God," The wimp was blushing as dark as Wolfram had ever seen. "I didn't know. Wolfram, I-- there were themes. I thought medieval would be more familiar-- like the palace not-- not some sort of SM dungeon."

"Themes?" Wolfram asked, trying to understand. "What do you mean themes? Why should an inn have themes?"

"It's not an inn," Yuuri mumbled. "Well it sort of is... It's by the hour not the night. They're called 'Love Hotels'. I've never been somewhere like this before! I'm so sorry, Wolfram!"

Wolfram didn't know what to think. He was glad that Yuuri had never been to what seemed to be an inn meant exclusively for sex. Once he might have been outraged that Yuuri had even known that a place like this existed at all, but he was comforted by the suspicion that Yuuri had only discovered it because he had been as eager to spend time together alone as Wolfram had been. Now that some of the tension had already left them the whole thing seemed ridiculous. Wolfram was too sated and happy to be angry. "So people on Earth come to places like this to have sex... Is... Are these things common?"

"Sort of?" Yuuri admitted. "It can be hard for couples to get privacy..."

Wolfram shook his head. "It's a good thing you're coming home with me then."

Relief lit up Yuuri's face along with his grin. "A very good thing." He gave Wolfram a quick kiss. "Come on, the bath should be normal enough at least. Let's get cleaned up."

Thankfully the bathroom was less 'themed' than the rest of their room and it wasn't long until both of them were settled in the bath, Yuuri's back leaning comfortably against Wolfram chest. There was one of the dispensing machines that were so common on Earth in one of the corners, and Wolfram watched the lights blink as he ran his fingers leisurely against Yuuri's wet skin. Unlike the dispensing machines on the corners of the street that seemed to be limited to beverages this one was filled with strange boxes covered in earth scribbles and pictures of partially naked double blacks. "What are those?" he asked, and watched the red creep up the back of Yuuri's neck.

"Oh," Yuuri mumbled. "I think they're toys... Probably lotion and condoms too."

Yuuri had explained to him before about lotion and condoms, but he didn't know why there would be toys in a place like this. "Why toys?"

Yuuri groaned and tried to curl into a little ball in his arms. Wolfram kissed the back of his neck and wrapped his arms and legs around him tighter. "I don't know..." Yuuri sounded pained. "Porn? Tenga... dildos..." He made a frustrated noise like he knew that Wolfram didn't understand the words he was using. "Fake body parts basically," he explained. "For... sex."

"The kind of thing for people who like 'themes'?" Wolfram teased against Yuuri's neck. He tasted like water and sweat. "It sounds like this sort of thing is common here."

"Sort of?" Yuuri admitted. "Just pretend it isn't there."

Wolfram snuck a hand between Yuuri's leg and torso to play with a nipple. "Already forgotten about it."

Yuuri relaxed a little and twisted around to kiss him, bringing up a wet hand to tangle in Wolfram's partially dry hair.

The bath was large and sloped and clearly meant for this kind of activity and Wolfram was quite
comfortable taking Yuuri's weight as they kissed. He was smiling so much that the kissing was what was difficult. Somehow after everything-- after so much fear that Yuuri really wanted a woman-- fear that Yuuri really wanted Weller-- it was finally starting to feel real. Something had changed after Ethne had tried to use him to destroy the world. Maybe it was the relief that everything was over-- that everything he loved was safe. Maybe it was that he finally had something to offer to their marriage as Gael's King-- that no one could say he had pursued Yuuri for power rather than out of love. Maybe it was the Anam Cara-- that their magic had been permanently bonded-- that was lending him confidence.

Or maybe it was just Yuuri. Just Yuuri loving him back for long enough that it had finally crashed through all the doubt and fear that Wolfram had buried himself under for so long.

Yuuri had twisted around completely in his arms and his hand had made its way between them to pull at Wolfram's still hard cock beneath the water-- tugging just hard enough that Wolfram found himself rocking his hips with the motion of his hand. Wolfram tried to reach between them to return the favor but as soon as Wolfram had a good grip Yuuri was pulling away-- standing up and reaching for the fluffy towels that had been left beside the tub. He tossed Wolfram a teasing look as he started drying himself. "I want you to be more comfortable than the tub. I have something planned."

"Planned?" Wolfram raised an eyebrow before he stood and picked up his own towel. "What exactly is it that you have planned, wimp?"

Yuuri took a few steps toward him and used his towel to rub at Wolfram's hair. They were standing close enough that Wolfram could feel the heat coming off his skin from the bath. Perfect skin that was so different than his own. Tea-colored milk. Wolfram had to taste it. There was a drop of water running from Yuuri's collarbone onto his chest and Wolfram followed it with his tongue as he pressed his thumb against one of his nipples and teased. Yuuri stopped drying his hair for half a second. Sound catching on the quick inhale. Wolfram's own towel was forgotten in his other hand as he leaned forward to suckle the other nub while Yuuri shivered and tried to continue drying him unaffected. Wolfram had learned rather quickly that Yuuri's nipples were particularly sensitive-- almost as quickly as he had learned that Yuuri would be embarrassed by that sensitivity for as long as it took for Wolfram's tongue to make him forget.

When Wolfram moved to tease the other nipple with his lips he looked down in time to see Yuuri's cock twitch, liquid already gathering at the slit. Wolfram was on his knees before he thought of it, mouth pressed against the smooth skin of Yuuri's stomach. Lower. Sliding his cheek against hot damp skin before he spread his lips around the head of Yuuri's cock barely managing to suck before his husband backed away.

"Wait," Yuuri said again. Wolfram was starting to hate that word. He stood and followed Yuuri a few steps back until he was pressed against the blinking machine. But even when Wolfram thought he had the wimp trapped he slipped away again, rushing into the room too quickly for Wolfram to even properly enjoy the sight of his naked rear.

Oh yes, Wolfram was going to enjoy making Yuuri pay for saying 'wait'.

********

********

Yuuri's hands shook as he fumbled through the bag that Wolfram had dropped beside the door. For a moment he thought he had lost it. That it had fallen out somewhere in the city or his mother had found it or--
But there it was. At the bottom beneath his scarf and wallet. He let out a sigh of relief as he stood.

"Please, don't get up for me." Wolfram's hands were warm on his waist and his voice was hot on his neck and Yuuri could feel himself blushing all over again as he realized Wolfram had been watching him bent over to rifle through the bag. Yuuri turned around to face him, bumping noses now they were so close. He wondered if they would always be the same height or if in twenty years one of them would be taller. If in twenty years the feeling of Wolfram's hands on his hips will still make his skin tingle and his heart seize up with joy and wanting and the tiny sliver of fear that he could ever lose this.

He had come so close to losing this. Too many times to think about and so instead of thinking Yuuri pressed his forehead against Wolfram's and breathed the hot dampness of his breath. Tasting kisses without feeling them. Feeling the tug of almost kissing instead. "Wait," he shuddered and felt Wolfram tense, pressing his thumbs **hard** into Yuuri's hipbones.

Wolfram was naked and it was impossibly distracting and so Yuuri closed his eyes. "I have something for you. For us. Your mother insisted I take it with me and I don't even want to **think** about how weird **that** is but I thought maybe now could be the time to use it." He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "As long as that's okay." Wolfram made an impatient noise but didn't try to kiss him or trap him against the wall so Yuuri took a deep breath and continued. "Go lie down."

Wolfram raised an eyebrow but did as he was told. "Any particular way?" he asked before lounging on his back, propped up on his elbows with green eyes fixed expectantly on Yuuri's.

"That's fine." Yuuri swallowed, gathering his courage, before he followed Wolfram onto the bed.

The small glass bottle and its contents were already beginning to warm in his hand. At first Yuuri hadn't known what it was. It could have been cologne or shampoo or something other than oil based lubricant. But this was Cheri and so of course when Yuuri had poured a small drop onto his finger it had had that familiar slickness. But there had been more to it than that. Yuuri caught a whiff of something he hadn't smelled in years but had never forgotten. It was the same sharp, almost floral smell that had led to the slap that had started it all.

But Wolfram didn't hate him now. The smell wouldn't make him angry anymore.

Yuuri had let his imagination run wild over thoughts of what it would do. Now that Wolfram's strongest feeling towards him was love and occasionally lust. Yuuri had imagined so many things. Wolfram completely at the mercy of his touch-- trembling beneath his hands-- feeling as lost in feeling as Wolfram made Yuuri feel every time he was inside him.

It wasn't as though Yuuri didn't want to top occasionally. He did. It was just that every time he tried Wolfram would touch him and Yuuri would come so quickly that it only made sense for Wolfram to be the one to take command. That or Yuuri would remember the first time that they had had sex- remember the way that Wolfram had turned away from him after-- how oblivious he had been at the time to Wolfram's pain. Or worse, Yuuri would remember their wedding night. When Yuuri had **tried** to do what he was supposed to but he had been so lost in wanting that he had-- Wolfram had bled-- Yuuri had healed him after but the image of the smear blood on his cock-- no matter how small-- was so terrifying even now that Yuuri had been reluctant to really insist on topping since.

It didn't hurt that Wolfram was so impossibly good at fucking him either.

But not tonight. Tonight Yuuri would finally make Wolfram feel as good as had Yuuri felt all those
times. Tonight he would make Wolfram come in ways he never had before.

Yuuri crawled onto the bed next to Wolfram and held out the bottle for him to see. He worried his lip. "Alright?"

Wolfram's impatient face only became more impatient.

Yuuri took a shuddering breath and pulled the stopper out of the lid. When he did it a small amount got on one of his fingers and so Yuuri held that out, under Wolfram's nose so he was sure to smell it. "Alright?" he asked again.

Wolfram rolled his eyes at him and pulled Yuuri down into an eager kiss. Yuuri was barely able to keep the bottle from spilling in his hand. He hadn't wanted to use the stuff without Wolfram's permission, but the kiss seemed to grant it. Wolfram's mouth was so warm. Demanding control the way he always did. Wolfram's hand was tangled in his hair and Yuuri's weight was pressing down onto the beautiful body beneath him and everything was wonderfully good.

Now that he had permission Yuuri forced himself to break the kiss, straddling Wolfram's waist and using his free hand to pin one of Wolfram's above his head. Wolfram didn't fight him but his eyes held challenge. Green eyes already dark with wanting. Pale skin gone pink along his cheeks. Beautiful.

Yuuri didn't have to tell him not to move. Wolfram was still as Yuuri spilled a few drops from the bottle along his chest before replacing the top and putting it aside. Yuuri moved Wolfram's other hand up above his head before releasing him. Yuuri would be needing both his hands. Wolfram would have to stay still on his own.

Yuuri used the tips of his fingers to gather some of the oil and rub Wolfram's nipples until they hardened. Teasing circles. Watching skin darken and swell with delicate abuse. Wolfram's eyes never left Yuuri's face and he never made a sound, but Yuuri could feel his breathing quicken beneath his hands. Yuuri wondered how it would feel. How much of an aphrodisiac the smell and essential oils really were. His own nipples ached in sympathy and Yuuri shifted back until he felt the tip of Wolfram's cock bump against his lower back. Wolfram rocked his hips up slightly, already eager for more contact.

Wolfram made a move but Yuuri was faster, catching his wrists in both hands and baring down with all his weight-- taking the opportunity to suck at the place where Wolfram's collar bone met his neck, not caring if it left a mark.

Mine.

He must have said it aloud because Wolfram stopped fighting him. Instead he arched his back, encouraging Yuuri to lie more on top of him. Yuuri shifted-- but instead brought himself up so that less of him was touching Wolfram, before he slid down his body to capture Wolfram's cock between his lips. Wolfram arched into him at once-- his gasp only making Yuuri take him deeper. Swallowing. Until his lips were nearly pressing into Wolfram's stomach and he would have been choking if it wasn't so good. So good and so Yuuri did it again. Over and over until Wolfram was gasping with every shallow breath and he was trembling trying to keep still.

Yuuri would never have dreamed he would ever love sucking cock so much, but it seemed to be the only thing he could do better than Wolfram in bed and so he took advantage of it whenever he could. Now if only he could make Wolfram make such delicious sounds with other parts of of his body. Yuuri pulled back to catch his breath, hand taking over what he couldn't as he ran his tongue along the swollen head. Wolfram's hips tried to move up-- to make Yuuri take more-- until the little
huffs of air sounded like little huffs of "please" and Yuuri knew that whatever was in the oil must be working because Wolfram had never given himself up to him quite so much before.

When Yuuri removed his mouth completely so that he could reach across the bed for the little bottle of oil, Wolfram made a choked sound so distressed that Yuuri had to kiss him. Wolfram threw everything into the kiss at once and for a moment Yuuri couldn't believe that Wolfram had kept his hands above his head-- hadn't reached up to crush them together-- Yuuri felt crushed in this-- in the power and the wanting and the knowledge that it was finally happening.

Too soon Yuuri had to break the kiss and lower himself slowly down Wolfram's pliant form, spreading Wolfram's legs so that this time when he swallowed his cock he could also press a slick finger into Wolfram's hole-- feeling everything go tense and still for a moment before Wolfram relaxed. Wolfram was so hot inside. So tight. So slick with the oil on his finger. Yuuri hadn't even put it in completely but now he did, moving slowly until he reached the knuckle, giving Wolfram's cock a particularly insistent suck as a reward.

Being inside of Wolfram, even like this, made Yuuri let out an eager noise. Wolfram's cock was leaking in his mouth and Yuuri could taste him, could feel the pounding of Wolfram's heartbeat against his lips and soon his cock would be inside of Wolfram. Yuuri had been wanting-- fearing-- this moment for so long.

He had spent hours picturing Wolfram-- Wolfram like this-- imagining the sounds Wolfram would make-- the way his cock would look disappearing inside him. Yuuri had pictured other things too. What if he wasn't able to hold out long enough? It hadn't helped when Wolfram had pointed out the toys in the vending machine-- it was too close to the dark thoughts in his mind. Even if Yuuri couldn't hold out with his own for long enough, it didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy fucking Wolfram with one of those things. Watching pink skin stretch around plastic as Yuuri fucked him. Yuuri would be able to do it for hours that way. Press against that place inside over and over and over again until Wolfram came without Yuuri even having to touch his cock.

Wolfram begging to come. Begging--

Wolfram made a frustrated noise above him and rocked his hips down onto Yuuri's finger-- which he suddenly remembered to move. After a few twists of his wrist he added a second-- slowly-- feeling Wolfram's thighs tighten around him as they trembled.

He would make sure that Wolfram was prepared properly this time. This time there would be no mistakes.

When he pulled off of Wolfram's cock this time there was a satisfying pop and Wolfram whimpered for all the time it took for Yuuri to flip him over-- making sure that Wolfram's backside was up and in perfect reach. He put both fingers back inside and watched them disappear, pulling aside a perfectly rounded cheek with his other hand so he could see, lowering his tongue to slide along the stretched edge of Wolfram's hole. After a few moments he removed his fingers all together and replaced them with his tongue and Wolfram's heavy breathing turned to keens. To garbled-- unintelligible words-- while Yuuri tried to get his tongue deeper into Wolfram than he ever had before Yuuri tried to use a thumb to pull him wider open-- push deeper deeper-- until his mouth was sore and his own cock was aching with neglect.

Yuuri reached blindly for the tiny bottle again and found it between his knees. He barely managed to get the bottle open, his hands were so slick and shaking, but he did. Wolfram almost sobbed when Yuuri put three fingers into him-- pressing-- where he knew Wolfram would feel it most until his pretty prince was rocking back onto his fingers so hard that Yuuri hardly had to move them at all.
Wolfram's skin was flushed-- sweat making him shine-- he had buried his face against the mattress, no longer holding himself up with his arms, and his cock hung heavily between his legs. Dark. Balls drawn and tight and so close to bursting that Yuuri couldn't resist reaching between his husband's legs with his other hand to squeeze. Wolfram trembled and his cock throbbed but he didn't come-- not yet-- it was too soon. Yuuri removed his fingers and positioned himself at Wolfram's stretched hole without thinking.

He had wanted to wait. To watch Wolfram unravel more. Longer. Forever. But his body was out of his control and his cock slid into Wolfram so much more easily than it ever had before and before Yuuri realized it he was buried to the hilt and gasping-- so close to coming just from this.

"Please," Wolfram was saying, voice raw, "Fuck, Wimp. Just plea-h"

Yuuri's hips snapped forward and Wolfram bit the coverlet to silence himself.

"No," Yuuri heard himself say as he reached forward, tugging on Wolfram's shoulder until he struggled to support himself on his elbows instead of being half-collapsed onto the bed. "I want to hear you."

Another thrust and Yuuri's eyes were drawn between them. Watching everything get wetter and darker and louder as flesh slapped against flesh. Once or twice he slipped out completely, spreading the wetness of oil and precome up between Wolfram's cheeks, before sliding back inside on the next thrust-- both of them groaning in relief after the absence of connection.

It was too good. That was the only reason he hadn't come. It must be so good that he had broken his own body or else he never would have been able to last this long. Wolfram shifted under him-- hand reaching to tug clumsily at his own cock-- Yuuri would have stopped him but the impossible tension inside of him chose that moment to break free and he was burying himself over and over and over into tight heat and Wolfram was so solid under him and his heart was thundering thundering inside his chest while his nerves hummed and he shuddered over and over. Each pulse should have been the last but it seemed to go on forever until it stopped. Until everything stopped and both of them collapsed in an exhausted, sticky heap.

Yuuri slid out, feeling a lingering pang of wanting at the sight, and they rolled into a more comfortable position. For a long time the only sound was their breathing. Yuuri's entire body was sore and aching, but it was a good sore, and Yuuri felt as good as he ever had in his life. Good but also unexpectedly exhausted. He didn't know how Wolfram managed to do this on a regular basis. If sex was always this exhausting he didn't know how often he would be able to do it. Maybe it was a good thing that Wolfram seemed to prefer it.

"Guh," Yuuri managed a while later, and Wolfram mumbled something that might have been 'wimp', which after all that was just so ridiculous that biting him on the shoulder was the only thing that made any sense.

"Ow," Wolfram said, quite distinctly this time, and pouted.

The fear was immediate and cold. "I didn't hurt you did I? I--"

"No." Wolfram interrupted. "Not with the biting and not with... with anything."

"Really?" Yuuri grinned. "So it was okay? It wasn't too much... with the... the oil and all..."

Wolfram looked at him for a long time. Then something happened. Something changed and everything that had been open and sated about Wolfram's face went close and tens. "You thought
that was some of mother's... Suberela Tea Flowers... or or... Mazoku's breath... You idiot."

"What?" Yuuri blinked. "Wolfram, I thought-- I thought you knew what it was-- that you were okay with it. I never meant to-- to drug you--"

"IDIOT!" Wolfram said, louder this time. "You stupid stupid Wimp! Why would you think you needed something like that? How many times have I-- do I need to tell you how much I love you before you believe it? Why would you think you needed something like that?" Wolfram's cheeks had gone a dangerous splotchy pale and he was already moving to sit at the other end of the bed, arms crossed defensively over his chest as he leaned against the headboard and glared.

"I'm sorry..." Yuuri's voice was small. "It's just... I never... You haven't let me since... and I thought."

Wolfram let out an exasperated sigh and shook his head. "Well there was nothing in that oil but a pretty scent. The process of removing the stench from bearbee secretions is appallingly expensive but--"

"Oh my god." Yuuri felt like he was going to be sick. "Don't ever explain to me what a bearbee secretion is."

"But" Wolfram continued, "There was nothing in it that made me feel any differently than I would otherwise." Somehow his expression softened. "If anything, it seems to have affected you."

********

"What do you mean?" The wimp asked. "I didn't feel any different than I usually do."

Wolfram snorted. "Because you always have that kind of confidence." He blushed. Yuuri had been so... commanding. Part of Wolfram had been on edge-- scared-- at first-- the whole time, really, if he was honest with himself. He had been scared of his own body. Of how easily Yuuri could make him do and feel anything. Of how much Wolfram wanted everything about this other person. It was terrifying to show that to anyone, even Yuuri, even now.

Wolfram liked the feeling he got when he was topping-- a feeling of control he didn't really feel comfortable giving up even after everything. When Wolfram was topping he could focus entirely on Yuuri. On making Yuuri lose himself in feelings only Wolfram could evoke. It had been good with Yuuri just now. Yuuri deserved to be able to enjoy the same feelings of control and comfort that Wolfram did. Everything had been better--felt better-- than Wolfram should have allowed himself to feel but still...

Unsettling.

Bad Things tended to happen whenever Wolfram lost control. The Sage had told him what Wolfram-- Ethne-- had done to Yuuri's arm. Even if the waters had healed Yuuri completely Wolfram still knew what he had done. How badly Yuuri had been hurt because of him. How close the world had come to ending because of his own loss of control.

"But," Yuuri was saying, "I-- I just wanted to do it right. Without hurting you, I mean. I'm so tired of hurting you. I never want to hurt you. I guess I did it again though, without meaning to like always." The wimp looked so small, so defeated, hugging his knees down by the foot of the bed. "I'm sorry."

Wolfram couldn't stand it. He sighed and opened his arms, relieved when Yuuri was across the bed
and snuggled into him in seconds. "No. I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm sorry you felt like you needed that kind of thing."

His own fears aside... those were his fears. Wolfram didn't like the thought of them affecting Yuuri. He wanted Yuuri to be comfortable with him. Always. To never have any reason not to love him.

Yuuri squeezed him tighter, arms wrapped around Wolfram's torso, and pressed his face into the side of Wolfram's chest. "Well... maybe it's not all bad. Now that I know I don't need anything to be... to be less wimpy." There was a small smile on the edge of Yuuri's lips and whatever frustration and fear still lingered was washed away in warm Yuuri Feelings.

"Wimp." Wolfram smiled in spite of himself.

Yuuri made a pleased noise and looked up at him. "You know I've figured it out, right? That 'wimp' is Wolfram for... for another feeling entirely."

Wolfram's cheeks went hot. "Sometimes," he admitted with a huff, ruffling black hair with his fingers. "But most of the time it just means you're a wimp."

Yuuri laughed.

********

********
Sunlight shone slanted through the high windows of Anissina's laboratory, making the glass beakers and welded metal twinkle in the early light. The air was fresh and only hinted at yesterday's minor mishap with the calibration of rub-my-feet-kun and Anissina was eager to get a few hours of peace and productivity in before the men arrived.

Still, if she was honest with herself, she did feel bad for worrying them so much yesterday. Both kings had arrived panting and pale-faced minutes apart, demanding to know if she was alright. Demanding to know if their child was alright.

Anissina couldn't blame them for being so worried. Not only was this process still highly experimental, but they had already suffered two failures. The first Anissina hadn't even told them about, it had been so early that no one had noticed but...

Anissina had never been slowed down by failures before and she wasn't about to start now. Especially when the results had become so spectacular. So full of hope.

Gisela would be in for her morning check soon, but so far there had been no signs of irregularity with the pregnancy. A mixture of Earth science and her own unsurpassed genius had made it possible. The relevant genetic information had been taken from both Yuuri and Wolfram and placed within her own egg. For once Anissina's lack of magic had been a blessing. Since it was so low on its own, it wouldn't interfere with the twice-daily doses of magic she got from the fathers-to-be.

Anissina sighed and shifted on the high wooden stool she sat on, before reaching down to rub her sore and swollen ankles.

"Have they gotten any better?" Gisela asked from the doorway. "You know I can't use my magic but I can make a rub of pepper butter--"

"Don't worry," Anissina huffed. "I'll live."

Gisela chuckled at her as she made her way into the room and plopped her bag of medicine onto Anissina's work table. "I'm sure you will." Her face had already softened as she smiled and looked at how round Anissina was getting.

Anissina turned in her seat so the other woman could have an easier time poking her and checking on the Little Experiment. "I suppose it was silly of me to think I could get some work in this morning."

Gisela shook her head. "You might have some luck, yet. Their Majesties are quite distracted with Princess Greta's departure. Humans grow up so fast..."

"They do." Anissina agreed, ignoring the sadness in the other woman's eyes. The Little Experiment had called Gisela back from Caloria. No one but the best could be trusted to handle such a delicate
"I can't believe they agreed to have the wedding in Shou Shimeron."

"It makes sense though," Gisela countered. "The people still trust Camilio. Even if Wilfrido is his younger brother and rightful heir by human laws he still grew up in Shin Makoku and is marrying a 'demon' princess. Hopefully by having the wedding there at least the people of Shou Shimeron will know their prince places some value on his homeland."

"I never said it didn't make sense." Anissina smirked. "I only said I can't believe her fathers agreed to it."

Gisela smiled and rolled her eyes. "Of course. Well, another day and you're perfectly healthy. The both of you. If you want I can leave you to your work."

Anissina looked longingly at the recovered parts for rub-my-feet-kun. She might have a few hours yet...

"I'll see myself out," Gisela sighed, smile still tugging at her lips. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Thank you," Anissina called out before the door closed, already intent on dislodging a bit of metal from a rubber spring.

She was able to make an hour's progress before a craving for pork pudding brought her down the winding stairs to the kitchens where she found Sir Grier flirting with the kitchen girls while he slipped oatmeal cookies into a leather pouch.

He gave her a not-so-guilty look and winked. "Good morning, Lady Anissina. You're looking quite round."

Anissina glared and crossed her arms under her breasts. "You'll be the round one if you eat all those cookies."

Sir Grier laughed. "True enough. I thought I'd take some extra for the road. You won't tell on me will you?"

"I don't think anyone minds about the cookies, but if you're not careful I'll tell Sir Weller how you were getting them." To Sir Grier's left one of the girls tittered behind her hand.

"But Anissina," he whined. "They're the captain's favorite."

She rolled her eyes. "Go on, then."

He kissed her on the cheek as he left and Anissina rubbed the wetness away with the back of her hand and grumbled. She had expected Wolfram and Yuuri to be all lovey and ridiculous but having Yozak and Conrad making eyes across the table was almost too much at times. It felt like everyone was pairing off around her.

She rubbed the swell of her stomach. At least she had someone too now. For a while at least before she had to...

Anissina blinked back the tears as she plopped a large portion of pudding into a bowl. Stupid hormones. At least she knew she was being irrational. Now she only had to make the feelings stop.

When she returned to her lab Lucien was standing guard beside the door and Anissina knew that Greta would be inside waiting for her. Anissina still had to blink every time she saw her. Even now Anissina expected to see the little girl who used to help her with experiments and run around the
castle with her kitten, not the grown woman who was standing in her lab now, long brown hair twisted up into a bun to protect it from the dirt of the road.

"Anissina!" Greta grinned and ran to hug her once she was spotted. At least some things didn't change. "Oh I'm so glad I got to see you before I left. I'm half afraid Wolfram and Yuuri will change their mind if we don't leave soon." She pulled away to rub Anissina's belly. "At least they'll have someone else to over-protect in a few months." She chewed her lip. "Someone who won't get wrinkles before they do."

Anissina drew the girl in for another hug. "No one will ever replace you in their hearts. You know that."

Greta smiled and rubbed her eyes. "I know. I'll miss you. I'll miss everyone." She forced a laugh. "It will be nice not to be the only one growing while the world stands still around me."

"It will also be nice to finally marry that stableboy of yours, I imagine."

Greta blushed. "That too." She moved away to lean against one of the work tables. "You know, I wish you'd talk to Gwendal."

Anissina's cheeks went hot. "I talk to Gwendal all the time."

"That's not what I meant," Greta pushed. "He's old and stubborn and a 'man'. He needs you to talk to him if there's any chance of--"

"Greta," Anissina interrupted. She didn't have to say anything else. The girl stopped and sighed and came over to give her a final hug. "Take care of yourself," Anissina sighed into the girl's hair. "I know they're sending Conrad to guard you which means you're getting Yozak as well but be careful. You may be a human but those people will always see you for a mazoku princess."

"I know." Greta kissed her cheek. "I'll be careful." She drew away and looked at the door. "I'd hoped Lucien would be able to protect me too-- he offered-- but with the houseki..."

"You made the right decision," Anissina said. "Besides, if I recall Wilfrido was starting to get jealous."

"Oh, please," Greta huffed. "Boys are so ridiculous."

"That they are," Anissina agreed. "Now run along and save Wilfrido from your fathers. I'll be down with the rest to see you off in a bit."

"I'll come back to visit, you know," she said at the door. "I promise."

Anissina nodded and watched her go, not trusting her voice. The castle already felt empty without her.

Even from her tower Anissina could hear the horses and carriages being prepared in the courtyard down below. Filling them with crates of wedding presents and other things the princess would require to set up the life she was accustomed to in her new home. It was a good thing they would only have to carry them to the docks. A procession that laden with goods would take months to reach Shou Shimeron at a grueling pace, but it was only a week's journey by Lady Cheri's Free Love.

Anissina fiddled with a broken portion of the small engine she had made for her latest experiment and sighed, tightening her grip on the screwdriver she held when she heard the knock outside her
door. Just when she was starting to get things done.

"What is it?" She didn't bother looking up.

Heavy boots clicked toward her. "You didn't ask for my help yesterday."

Anissina humphed. "You didn't want to help." She didn't doubt that it was true. She hadn't been able to find Gwendal yesterday when she had wanted to test her latest invention and so she had convinced Dorcascus to use his magic. She shouldn't have been so impatient.

Gwendal sat in the stool beside her. "I was in the barn. There was another litter."

Suddenly there was a small fluffy ball in her lap. Eyes closed and squirming. "You idiot! Where's the mother."

"She didn't make it." Gwendal's voice was soft. "I thought we could figure something out for this one."

Anissina sighed and closed her eyes. Gwendal always did have an impressive soft-spot when it came to cute things. "I'll do what I can." She opened her eyes and looked at the little orange fluff ball. It seemed to know she was watching so it squeaked as it shivered closer into the cup of her hand. "Poor creature."

"Hmm." Gwendal nodded gravely and reached toward her. She was sure he was going to take the kitten but instead he grabbed her leg and pulled her foot into his lap. She was about to yell and snatch it back but then he started rubbing.

"If you stop I'll kill you," she said instead and let her eyes fall shut.

Gwendal chuckled and rubbed his thumb into the arch of her foot. "You always did have the cutest toes."

"Idiot." Anissina blushed. "Don't say things like that."

Gwendal didn't say anything, but the silence in the room was comfortable and Anissina was already thinking of ways to make goat's milk more suitable for a kitten.

*******

*******

THE END

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!