As I Walked Under Them Towards You

by Simply_Heaven

Summary

Four long years have passed after the war between Nohr and Hoshido. During this time, the royals of both sides have more or less settled down into their permanent roles in court. Politics began to rule who can and cannot marry whom, and so when Leo and Takumi are denied marriage for love on account that tensions between Nohr and Hoshido are too high, they began to court behind everyone's back, vowing to never marry until tensions lessen between their kingdoms.

This plan, however, comes crashing down when Sakura admits that she is pregnant. Unwilling to say who she broke her shrine maiden vows for, to protect herself from public exposure and exile, she is married off to Leo in a hasty, loveless union. In doing so, Leo ensures that he would be able to see Takumi more and never have the responsibilities that came with a real marriage. Takumi is willing to help make it work, as well as everyone else involved, for Sakura's protection. They should have known relations like these always end in heartbreak. But for who...?
Slay me, I feel like I'm betraying the LeoKumi fandom by posting this. Budding Love vs. Established Relationship vs. Sibling Love is go!
It started as me, curiously scrolling through the Takulise and LeoSaku tags to see what was the general opinion of both ships, and while I am still a hardcore LeoKumi shipper, goddamn LeoSaku is also really cute? I can totally imagine sweet Sakura taking the edge off Leo, especially post-Birthright.
Anyways, I've been looking for a good excuse to get into the nitty gritty parts of sibling relationships. All throughout this fic you'll see Takumi absolutely doting on his little sister because, being the little-middle child I guess he was usually the one being cared for and Sakura gives him some pride in being able to look over someone I guess? That's just really fuckin cute. Leo better not touch Sakura while he's around.
Anyways, my college homework is already overdue and I need to do that. Like right now. Hope you enjoy.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

[This chapter has been updated September 24th 2017.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Princess Sakura did not storm through Castle Shirasagi. She would hold herself to that. Instead, she silently exited her private quarters with her chin high, her stoic gaze pale from her recent sickness. Her tight chest heaved with a new heaviness and tenderness that choked her with every breath she took. One, two, one two... In and out...

The longer she walked the length of the hall, the more Sakura felt the ground shaking below her feet, threatening to crumble under her weight. Her face was hot and wet--perhaps Hoshido was entering its humid season? No, that's not right--and she struggled to keep her sobs to a minimum. Ryoma was in his study, Hinoka was testing the food, Takumi was in the library, and Sakura was all alone, making her way to dinner, wondering to herself when was the last time she bled?

Amid the sound of her hammering heart pounding in her chest, Sakura heard quick footsteps behind her, light and agile. Before she turned her head, Sakura already knew who this was and immediately wiped the wet, hot remnants of her nerves with the cloth of her silk sleeve. She took a deep breath, as deep as she could with her friend fast approaching.

“Sakura! You missed lunch today! I missed you sooo much! Everyone was looking for you, even Xander!” Elise called, bounding into the space next to her friend. She leaned over, her twin blonde plaits falling over her shoulders. She had tried meeting Sakura's bashful gaze, but Sakura quickly turned away from her friend, hiding her shame. “What... what’s wrong?”

Elise had grown into a fine young woman after the years they had spent at each others' sides. Though they had first met each other on opposite sides of the battlefield, their two kingdoms clashing out of hatred neither of them could pinpoint, this had all come to a sudden halt when Corrin turned their feud into kinship. Now that Nohr was busy opening up the kingdom to others after years of stagnant decay from the previous rule under Elise’s father, King Xander and the Nohrian delegation had spent most of his time traveling and negotiating. However, he always made time to stop in Hoshido to greet past comrades.

While Sakura and Elise had been so young and naive when they first met, they watched each other blossom and grow with age. They laughed at their hopeless suitors and played jokes on their siblings behind their backs. They shared intimate details about their lives far before telling the rest of their
family. And when they held concerts together, Elise on the violin and Sakura on the koto, she really had felt at home.

“N-nothing!” Sakura stammered, putting on her widest artificial grin in hopes that would satisfy her friend. Her face was still many shades of red and tears still pricked at the corners of her eyes. But on such short notice, it was all she could do to tell her friend *I really don't want to talk about it right now.*

Elise puffed out her cheeks as if she were still a child. “You don’t need to lie to me,” she whined. But when Sakura bit her lip and refused to speak, her expression softened to an almost motherly complexion, something she had learned from her older sister and time. “Please, tell me what’s wrong. Did someone hurt you?”

Sakura shook her head side to side, staring at the wooden floor. She traced patterns with one foot. She still did not offer an answer. When she felt Elise’s warm hands rest on her shoulders, she lifted her gaze to meet those purple eyes which Sakura had grown to trust above everything.

“You can tell me anything, you know you can, right?” Elise asked softly. And Sakura believed her. She ran a hand through her pink hair, brushing back her bangs. That’s when Sakura remembered that she had accidentally ruined her favorite, old and tattered headband when it fell off her head a few minutes prior, falling into the pot she filled with her sick. She must have looked like an absolute mess, a disheveled, broken mess.

And Elise smiled at her anyway.

Sakura looked away, the tears on her eyes drying slightly. “I’ll tell you after dinner,” she murmured under her breath. But Elise caught it--she always catches whispers--and smiled wider.

“Alright. And if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine,” she said cheerily, sliding her hands down and off Sakura’s arms. “Don’t force yourself. But talking will make you feel better, and my ears are *always* open. No judgement.” She sliced her hand through the air with that last statement, and Sakura felt that her words were absolute.

Sakura nodded. “R-right,” she stuttered, a grateful smile curving the corners of her lips. “Of c-

She had mocked all of her potential suitors in the past. She couldn’t help but feel like this was her
divine punishment for not choosing one, for surely if she did, her current situation would not be happening, and she would be content with the life she would have had, and not worry about her current life as she knew it.

Takumi chuckled, hiding his mouth with the cover of the book in his hands. He looked over the edge to stare at the man sitting next to him. Leo placed one strong hand on Takumi’s thigh and leaned in close. He reached up to bring Takumi’s book down, but it was all for naught. The more he leaned in, the more Takumi leaned back with that same smug grin on his face.

"Tease," Leo scoffed, only slightly frustrated.

"You'll have to try harder than that," Takumi tsked.

Three years ago, whatever relationship Leo had with Takumi began to develop out of obligation for Hoshido’s and Nohr's newly found peace. It had started with sharing their books, one of the very first common interests they had bonded over during the war. Then they had shared their libraries and their favorite reading corners. Many nights, they fell asleep sprawled out on a couch or two, or sometimes they stayed up late to talk about their hopes and dreams, their smiles outlined by window-filtered starlight and a single candle on a nearby table. By the time they had shared small confessions, the world had seemed to make sense. It was not often, after all, they met someone who resonated so deeply with them, like a pair of kindred spirits. They had the privacy of the bookcases all to themselves, trapped in their own world of fiction and history. When they fell asleep on each other’s shoulder while reading, red faced stammers turned into shy kisses. And when they made love in that old oaken nook, the heroes of epics and tragedy were their only witness. Their encounters had been in the same vein for some time now.

For the past three years, their fleeting moments together had been filled with nothing but the two trying to learn how to love the other, and how to manage that love when it was whisked away, when one left for their home country instead of staying in a foreign one. It was difficult coping with the loss of one's other half, no matter how temporary. But they made the best of what little they had.

Ryoma had been the first to know about their secret relationship, by no surprise from Leo and Takumi. They had gone to him first to ask if they could start courting each other—though it was too late for formalities such as that—hoping that he would be more understanding than Xander would be when they went to tell Leo's brother afterwards. Ryoma's only response was, “Royal marriage and courtship is a matter of politics and needs to be handled with care. I’m not going to forbid you two
from seeing each other, but you would be best not displaying your relationship in public or where others can see. I’m happy for you two, I really am, and you’re both brave for coming to me for this. But at this time, you’d both be asking for trouble, as the political climate between our nations would cause such a union to backfire. Perhaps in time, the tensions between kingdoms will be different. It is best to hold off until it is safer for both of you." Xander’s reasoning was the same.

"But what about our sisters?" they asked their older brothers. "Surely they would not stand for this if they knew. They would want us to get married for love, now that we have it. What would they think if we had to wait?"

"Perhaps... it is best not to tell them. They would try to convince you otherwise and I would not hear the end of it. Plus do you really want them teasing you about your love life all the time?"

So they continued to flirt, in private, where nobody could bear witness to them. It was a difficult thing to do.

Finally, after much struggling, Leo managed to press his lips to Takumi’s cold cheek, then on his temple, then his nose, and finally his mouth. Takumi accepted him, wrapping his arms around Leo’s shoulders. Their eyes fluttered closed as they kissed, lazy and soft, but no less loving than the other hundred times they had kissed before.

"You know that I am leaving soon," Leo said when they broke apart. "You want to spend our final couple weeks acting like this?"

Takumi grazed his fingertips under Leo’s jawline, gingerly leading him into another kiss. Their time was limited indeed, and with invisible servants at every corner, they had almost none to themselves. Still, Leo's frustration over Takumi’s lack of advances and Leo's fight for affection, as if Takumi was something precious and worth fighting for was too good not to take advantage of.

"We have time."

Sometimes they wished they could marry. But royal marriage was a matter of politics. And even if marrying between kingdoms was a certain way to secure an alliance, perhaps their older brothers were right. They would only be asking for trouble.
Sakura shivered as she sat at the dining table. Everyone slowly filed in: starting with Elise, who sat next to Sakura, then Hinoka, who didn’t quite know what was wrong with her little sister but didn’t say anything, then King Xander, who nodded towards everyone with nothing new to say, then Camilla, who already had a suspicious glass of sake in her hand, then Leo and Takumi, who came in shoulder-to-shoulder looking slightly miffed at the world,—or maybe that was their default state of being?—and finally King Ryoma and Queen Kagero, who looked the perfect mixture of calm and hectic after going through a hefty load of paperwork in his study. Takumi sat at Sakura’s other side, gave her a once over, and gave her a suspicious smile. She smiled back, playing innocent for now.

Shrinking under the gaze of others, Sakura felt her conscience weighing in on her. I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this, she thought, tapping her fingertips rapidly on the surface of the table. Food was served and everyone quickly took advantage, the din of the meal easing all of their worries. Ryoma and Xander lead most of the conversations that night, mostly in regards to current events in Hoshido’s capital, Cyrkensia’s newest performers, and the silly little peasants who come to court just to beg for food and money. Kagero, as always, stayed silent and observed everyone with a keen eye. Old habits die hard.

“I never thought that Elise would finally find a husband to her liking,” Ryoma remarked, nodding towards her across the table. “Seems like only yesterday you two were running around the castle with your instruments.”

Elise giggled behind her hand, shooting a glance at Xander. Sakura stayed silent. “What can I say? He was quite the charmer, I couldn’t say no,” she said, reciting the lines that she rehearsed when she was alone.

Ryoma sighed, leaning back in his seat. “If only Sakura would do the same,” he drawled, sidelong glancing his youngest sister. “Life’s too short to wait.”

Sakura nearly choked on her fish, swallowing her bite with a giant gulp. Her face went red, and she stared at her plate hoping nobody would notice. “I-I-I don’t know about t-that...” she stuttered, finely carved chopsticks shaking in her grip.

Luckily, Hinoka took over for her. “Don’t force the poor girl into anything,” she grumbled, poking at her food warily. “Isn’t her happiness above everything? I mean, Takumi isn't married yet.”

Takumi looked up from his food, placing down his bowl of miso soup with a gentle clink on the table. “Don’t bring me into this,” he sighed. “You didn’t get married until last year, and you barely
see each other.”

“But that’s because of the war,” Ryoma said, “that she couldn’t marry sooner. We’ve had peace for four years now, that’s plenty of time.”

Hinoka stared at her older brother, slowly chewing her food with an unsatisfied grimace on her face. Sakura could guess what she was thinking. That doesn’t change the fact that her older brother is still unhitched, yet the littlest one is being pushed harder than ever.

“In our defense, neither is Leo,” Xander shrugged. “He’s been helping me manage my time in restoring Nohr, so he hasn’t had much time to worry about that.”

From the corner of Sakura’s gaze, Leo rolled his eyes.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Camilla cooed, leering at him from over the rim of her wine glass. “My marriage has its ups and downs, but it’s nice to return to someone at the end of a long trip.”

“You left that woman with a child all alone,” Leo mumbled, resting his cheek in the palm of his hand. “I’m sure Flora loves having full access to the castle while we’re all gone, though.”

Camilla takes at him, waving her hand dismissively. “Don’t be so pragmatic, darling.”

There was a short pause in conversation, a hesitant silence that made sweat bead at Sakura’s temple. Should I say it now? she thought, tapping her chopsticks against the table rhythmically. While everyone else doesn’t have anything else to say?

She took a deep breath.

“Sakura, you’ve barely eaten anything,” Hinoka remarked with a look of concern. Sakura shut her mouth. “Are you alright?” Everyone else in the dining hall turned to look at her, and just like that, all of her little confidence was whisked away in one fluid motion. Sakura stared at her plate, already feeling sick. She placed down her chopsticks and took a deep breath, not meeting anyone’s eye.

I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this, Sakura repeated in her mind. At her side, Takumi’s
warm hand found her wrist, the gentle touch scalding. She flinched away from it and stood so quickly, she nearly fell backwards from her own force.

“I need to go,” she whispered, already turning to leave the hall. Her stomach churned in all new ways, and she felt bile start rising to her throat. She needed to get out of there before she made an even bigger fool of herself.

Before she could leave, however, Elise grabbed her hand, preventing her from disappearing for the rest of the night. “Wait! You said you were going to tell me something after dinner, and now you’re going to lock yourself away from everyone,” she said, intending for Sakura to keep her promise. “I know how you work. What is it that is so important?”

Everyone looked up at Sakura with varying degrees of raw concern. Kagero’s piercing eyes never left hers. Camilla clicked her tongue and leaned over the table to express her engagement in Sakura’s troubles. The little, innocent Princess Sakura, hiding secrets? Unheard of.

The entire room sat in wait. It was too quiet. It was quiet enough to hear the blood rushing in her ears and her heart drumming in her chest. If someone dropped a pin, at least the noise would be something to take Sakura’s mind off the limelight.

“I...” she gulped, her face red and hot. Her body shook with great force, yet Elise kept a firm grip on her hand to keep her from falling. “I... I-I’m... Err...” Embarrassed tears began to prick at the edges of her eyes. May the Dawn Dragon smite her where she stood.

Kagero placed her cup of tea down with a grace she had only learned to have in recent years. “So the rumors must be true,” she said to herself in a voice that rarely ever wavered. "Ryoma, I told you about it the other night..."

Now the attention was diverted to the queen and Sakura felt a weight lift from her shoulders. But that did not stop her from wondering exactly what rumors were being said about her.

As far as she could see, everyone was confused, especially Ryoma. “Impossible,” he stated. “You expect me to believe that my little sister, who spent her life growing up amid the local shrine, devoted to a life of purity, went off and had... Illicit relations with a man she isn’t married to?”

"I'm confused,” Hinoka said from across the table.
"As am I," Camilla seconded.

“I may not know the specifics from some months ago,” Kagero said, looking calm at her husband. “However, it is my duty as a queen and a former ninja to listen to what is happening around me, to assess the situation of the castle and leave no room for error. It would seem the gossip that we discussed previously is true." She turned to Sakura, who flinched. "The maids have been watching you very closely over these last two or three months, Sakura, and decided it wasn’t a coincidence they didn’t find--” she glanced at all of the men at the table-- “spots on your clothes during your monthly time. And it is my job to listen to their worries.”

Everyone slowly turned back to Sakura with wide eyes. There was no way someone as shy as her would stray from her princess honor, right?

“No way,” Elise mumbled, slowly shaking her head with purple eyes the size of their dinner plates. Her grip on Sakura’s wrist fell. “I know Sakura... She wouldn’t... You wouldn’t, would you, Sakura?”

She didn’t say anything, just turned her back on her family to hide like she did when she was scared. Like when she was a child.

Ryoma cleared his throat. “I... see...” It was obvious from the way he grit his teeth that he was close to losing his control which, judging by the amount of tasks he was able to manage on his own with very little sleep as a king, was no small feat. “If that’s the case, then... Sakura, go to your room. I will see you there when dinner is over. You are dismissed.”

As she left, she heard faint whispers among the royals, of sharp, scalding words she was not meant to hear. Sakura walked away from them all, her first tear running down her right cheek.

To her surprise, Hinoka was the first one to visit.

“I, uh, thought you might still be hungry,” her older sister muttered, setting a tray of bread and soup
beside her sister. Sakura laid down on her futon, staring out her window wistfully, thinking of everything she had done wrong. She slowly turned to her sister, a grim expression on her face.

“... Thank you,” she whispered, eyeing the bread with disdain.

Hinoka carefully sat on the edge of the futon, forcing Sakura to scoot up and rest her shoulders on her frilled pillows. Sakura waited to be punished, to be scolded by her sister. She looked up at her expectantly, but nothing came.

Finally, Hinoka took a deep breath. “You know you can always tell me anything, right?” she asked, her voice cracking. Sakura nodded without a second thought. “And... you can always come to me about stuff you can’t go to our brothers for, right?” Sakura nodded again.

Hinoka leaned back, resting her weight on her strong arms. Sakura always marveled how Hinoka kept off so much weight even after the war. Her stomach was flat and muscles ran across her arms and thighs instead of fat like on Sakura. Yet Hinoka wasn’t gaunt, her cheeks were not hollow. Sakura assumed that, in the middle of the night, she would sneak out and, regardless of what Ryoma said, would go out and continue training with her lances. Sakura wished she had that much stamina.

“You know, the maids tried to accuse me of being pregnant as well,” Hinoka laughed to herself, staring up at the white ceiling. “They said it was because they didn’t find bloody small clothes when they did the laundry. And for a while, I believed it. I started having all of these symptoms that I was pregnant. I got morning sickness, I gained a bit of weight. But then I remembered three months in, ‘wait, I’ve never been in bed with a man before.’ Then the symptoms went away.” She took another deep breath and exhaled. “To this day, I haven’t had my period for seven years.”

Sakura shot up in bed. “Seven years?!?” she exclaimed.

Hinoka nodded slowly. “I don’t think my husband will ever have a child with me at this rate. I keep telling him that we could always use a fertility spell, but he keeps refusing it, saying he wants to do it ‘the proper way.’ I don’t know what to do, but... I’ll have to make it work for him.” She smiled down at her younger sister, but it wilted as soon as it came. “I suppose you aren’t going through the same thing.”

Sakura lowered her gaze and slowly shook her head.

Hinoka paused, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. Then she opened her mouth with a slight
nudge to her sister’s knee. “... Who was he?” she whispered.

Sakura shook her head again.

“You won’t tell me?” she pressed.

"..."

“You can tell me anything.”

Sakura stayed silent.

Before Hinoka could say something else, there was a knock at Sakura’s bedroom door. The door was ajar to begin with, and from the crack it made, familiar amber eyes peered through. “Is Sakura taking visitors?” Takumi asked.

“Yeah, come in,” Hinoka said. Takumi slid the door closed behind him and approached the futon, deciding it was best to kneel on the floor at the side of the mattress, looking down at his little sister. He rested his hands on his knees, his head cocked into a slight bow to keep his presence low. The last thing he wanted to do was scare his sister.

“Ryoma is saying things he shouldn’t say,” he confessed, his voice surprisingly soft. “He’s saying that he wouldn’t have minded if we were peasants, but because of our status, if people were to find out you were pregnant out of wedlock, they would riot and your reputation would be forever ruined, as well as everyone else in our family.” Sakura tensed up at these words, not knowing what to say.

“He says that... That if you go through with it... Then he can get you a nice cottage on the outskirts of the kingdom in a discreet place. You would live in solitude, away from the kingdom.”

“You can’t actually expect Ryoma to force her to do that,” Hinoka barked, crossing her legs on Sakura’s bed. “He can’t force Sakura to do anything. Why don’t we just broadcast her pregnancy to the entire kingdom, no, the entire world if she does that?!”

Takumi flinched at her outburst. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” he said. “He’s going through his options to salvage her reputation, but there aren’t many. Unless he had another idea, he’s heavily leaning towards privacy. In other words, exile.”
Exile?! Sakura thought, clenching her duvet in her small hands. Her knuckles turned white like her
kimono. “I-I don’t want to be alone!” she cried, looking at Takumi wide-eyed. “I c-can’t raise a baby
by myself all alone! I wouldn’t be able to see you guys again, I wouldn’t be able to attend festivals
anymore, or see the cherry blossoms, or, or, or see Elise ever again!”

She brought her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and sobbed. Takumi stood
first and leaned over, rubbing slow circles into Sakura’s back. Hinoka followed suit, sliding across
the bed next to her little sister and wrapping her strong arms around her small frame. Sakura leaned
her head onto Hinoka’s shoulder and cried, tears streaming down her face.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” Hinoka cooed, leaning her head on top of Sakura’s. “You’re surrounded by
family that loves you no matter what. We’ll all support you no matter the decisions you or Ryoma
make.”

“Things will work out,” Takumi said, finally sitting on the edge of the futon. He continued his
ministrations on Sakura’s back. “Just give him time. It’ll be okay.”

Outside the bedroom, Leo leaned against the thin with crossed arms, listening to the voices inside.
Takumi had told him to wait before they headed back to the library, that he absolutely needed to
console his sister, and Leo could do nothing but oblige. It wasn’t in his nature to be emotional and go
out of his way to cheer someone up, so Leo stayed silent on the matter.

What a scandal the Hoshidan bloodline would have to deal with. An illegitimate heir was a tricky
thing to handle in terms of inheritance. Because Ryoma’s son Shiro was a healthy bundle of energy,
the passing of the throne to Sakura’s child would be unlikely, illegitimate or not. That did not stop
this from damaging part of the royal family’s reputation. Part of him was sorry it would be directed at
Takumi’s sister, but part of him was grateful it wasn’t happening with his own family. If Elise got
pregnant out of wedlock, no doubt the punishment would be harsher. News spread quickly with a
kingdom full of echoes. If Elise could not be sent away quickly enough, Xander would probably
have to put her to death just to keep the people from rioting. And doing such a thing would destroy
the king for certain.

While Leo was waiting, he heard someone walking his way. He looked up and saw Ryoma, looking
as if he had aged ten years during their time apart. “Prince Leo,” he regarded him with a stern look.
“What is your business here? I assumed since King Xander issued an assembly among your family,
you would be there as well.”

“King Ryoma,” Leo said back, uncrossing his arms and instead folding them behind his back. “I am
simply waiting for your siblings to leave Princess Sakura alone. I was going to go to the library, but I
did not know Xander called an assembly.” He pushed off the wall and passed the king with all the pride of an arrogant prince. “If you could, please tell Takumi where I went.”

Ryoma looked between Leo and the door to his youngest sister’s room and back again. For the past half hour, he had been pacing in his study, wondering what he could do to rectify her situation. And for the entire half hour, he was at a loss.

“That’s because of the war that she couldn’t marry sooner.”

“In our defense, neither is Leo.”

He had known why Leo did not marry, had known for some years now. It was under his assumption that as long as he stayed unmarried, he could see Takumi as long as they liked without repercussions. Ryoma had said this arrangement was fine for now. He was ardent in not revealing their relationship to the rest of their family and respected their privacy in the matter. But this was not a matter of private relations where neither man could get pregnant, this was a matter of exile or hate for his little sister.

He made his way back up the hall, a new idea formed in his head. Within the next hour, he would need to find Xander.

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“Absolutely not,” Leo said, taking a sip of his tea. He sat across from his older brother in the sitting room sofa, a thick book in his lap. Xander sat straight-backed and stiff, peering down at his little brother from his plush reading chair. “I will not marry her just to save her reputation.”

Xander waved his hand. “It will be a sexless marriage,” he said, as if it fixed anything. “None of us are expecting you love her or keep having children with her after she gives birth.”

“So what’s the point, then?” Leo asked through gritted teeth. “To act like a happily married couple for a year and then act like strangers with only a signed piece of paper to let the public know otherwise?”

“The point is...” Xander started, standing up and pacing slowly about the room. “…To fix the reputation of an allied nation’s princess, to have Hoshido in our debt for decades to come, to secure an even larger sum of Hoshido’s exports and use of their land, to permanently secure our alliance to
them via marriage... There are so many possible things that can come from this union that can help Nohr become stronger than ever now that the stakes are high.”

This time, Leo did snap. “You used that exact same reason to keep Takumi and me from marrying years ago!” He slammed his cup of tea onto the the table, spilling the brown tinted liquid everywhere. “And now you’re using the exact same reason to push me into a marriage I don’t want?! Do you realize how cruel that is, Brother?!”

Xander gestured with his hands for Leo to calm down. “I understand how you must feel,” he said, and before Leo could spit more venomous words at him, he continued. “However, this is an urgent matter. King Ryoma made it clear to me that he is desperate to not have to force Princess Sakura into exile. He is willing to do near anything to protect his dear ones, and this is something we can take advantage of. All you need to do is appear by her side in public and act like it is your baby when it’s born. You can continue seeing Takumi as you did before and she would never ask you for the same treatment. It is not a difficult thing to do. Do you love your kingdom enough to go through with it?”

"You plan on milking our greatest ally dry?"

"Nohr is our homeland, she needs the resources. Would you not do the same?"

"Spoken like a true king..." Leo pinched the bridge of his nose, knitting his eyebrows. “You say that, but even you know that this opens a whole new world for things to happen.” He took his cup of tea again, ignoring the puddles on the table around it. “I won’t stop seeing Takumi, this is definite. And I want you to promise something to me, if I decide to agree.”

“What is it?” Xander asked.

His little brother paused, pursing his lips. “... If Sakura were to... Pass... Due to complications or anything, then Takumi and I are to be married without further question.”

Xander knitted his eyebrows. “I cannot guarantee that. As you know, royal marriages are a matter of-”

“--a matter of politics, I know.” Leo took another sip of his tea. It was growing cold. He didn’t like the taste anymore. “Look, Brother... My position is at your side, helping you govern so you don’t go mad.”
“I understand,” Xander said, sitting back down in his seat and folding his hands. “And I am forever in your debt for your efforts. However, this is something not just I am asking of you, but something our Hoshidan allies are asking of you as well. Ryoma has confirmed that this is the best course of action. Despite the tension between our countries, Nohr will prosper with Sakura’s dowry. The riots, the rebels... they will just need to be suppressed somehow.”

"If it was that easy, then why didn't Takumi and I get married long before?"

"Nobody said that this was going to be easy."

Leo tapped his nails against the polished clay cup, holding the lukewarm tea in his lap. “How does Takumi feel about this?”

“Ryoma is telling Takumi now, but I would imagine he would be thrilled learning that you above everyone would be protecting his precious little sister from a lonely future.”

"That's horseshit and you know it."

"Language, Dear Brother."

Both of them fell into a silence. Leo stared at his reflection in the cold tea, tapping away at the side of the white cup. The book in his lap was forgotten. He gazed back at his own russet eyes, dejected.

Xander landed a strong hand on his shoulder. “You should be glad,” he remarked, and Leo lifted his tired eyes to look at him. “This way, you’ll be able to see Takumi all the time, and your wife would never hate him, or demand you love only her. Life will continue virtually the same, only you need to keep up airs in public. As I said, nobody expects more of you. You can still assist me in running the country. All will be fine.”

Leo ran a hand over his face, threading his fingers through his blonde hair. He sighed. He licked his lips. He paused. 

“... I’m not moving to Hoshido.”
“Does that mean you will do it?”

“I assume Sakura will need to move to Nohr with us.”

“Does that mean you approve?”

"Nohr's profit from this must be more than enough to handle our worst winters. Remember that."

"Is that a yes?"

“Just... I'll think about it...”

“You have my gratitude.”

Chapter End Notes

I really don't know if it's worth continuing? Like, halfway I was like "will people actually like this?"
Tell me what you guys think. You guys like the relationship dynamic or find it interesting? Also I'm planning to split Leo evenly between Takumi and Sakura in later chapters, neither ship is really a side ship. Leo will just have to manage.
Also, I like to think that a lot of the female units who spend lots of time training have secondary amenorrhea (?), including Hinoka. My cousin has this condition, and her doctor says it's because she has a very low level of fat in her body. Her body doesn't have enough stored nutrients to hold a baby, so she hasn't had her period in two years now. Since there's a bunch of girls in Fates who train excessively like Hinoka, Hana, Effie, etc. they probably have very low fat levels and therefore don't get their periods. Of course, this doesn't make sense if they are S-ranked, but you know what else doesn't make sense? The entire plot of Fates. Boom, I said it.

Feedback me, reader-senpai.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Leo discovers girls.

[This chapter has been updated September 26th 2017]

Chapter Notes

I forgot to mention, since I hc Sakura and Elise to be 14 in Fates and each sibling 3 years apart, Sakura and Elise are 18, Takumi and Leo 21, Corrin wherever they may be 24, Camilla and Hinoka 27, and Xander and Ryoma pushing 30.

When two royals marry, usually they will go stay in the richer kingdom's castle or a house in the capital. Hoshido has a bit more wealth than Nohr as of now, but Sakura is moving to Nohr because of reasons described in the chapter.

Takumi may be a bit OOC always but all with good intent. I love me some sibling bonding time and his support with Sakura sucked balls. I am salty.

Also, imagine everyone has at least an A support with everyone if you wanna know what their relationship is like.

For an extra dose of angst, listen to Satisfied from Hamilton and imagine that in Takumi's voice. I think this accurately describes his feelings.

Almost 8k chapter is on. Unbeta'd.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the hours before her impromptu wedding ceremony, Sakura was alone.

Elise had been in the room previously to help fix her hair and dress her in her white gown. Ryoma and Xander had bickered excessively over if the ceremony was to be Nohrian or Hoshidan. When it came down to location, they decided that it would take place in Hoshido but be a traditional Nohrian ceremony. Since there were no chapels in Hoshido, they informed the local shrine priest a week prior and she promised to make accommodations for the royal couple.

Sakura did not like her white dress. It was too tight over her torso and she was worried about tripping over the massive frock everywhere she went. Why did she have to show off so much? Why was “pushing up her breasts” considered a good thing during a wedding? Sakura did not understand, but thinking about her in-law-to-be Camilla made her wonder if it was just a popular style in Nohr altogether, for women to have large breasts and show them off for the world to see. Sakura still did
not quite understand, especially since her own were so small in comparison.

To show his support for the wedding, Takumi had enlisted the help of Oboro for the making of the dress. Ever since the war had ended, even though Oboro’s enmity towards Nohr never fully faded away, she had been open to studying different styles to expand her old parents’ tailor shop. Customers had praised her for carrying on their legacy, and she had stayed good friends with Takumi during these years. Many times, Sakura stood on the stool, watching herself in the looking glass as her dress took form before her eyes. Many times, she broke down.

Now, she was in her room, alone with the completed dress hugging her torso tightly, a white veil on the bed behind her.

Sakura sat in front of an old wooden box covered with dust. She couldn’t remember the last time she looked at the contents, only that the day she locked it up in the box and hid it in her closet was the day Hinoka said she was too old to play with dolls. Now, she unlocked the simple latch, and as if something were to jump out at her from within, lifted the lid cautiously. Inside, as they were the day she had forgotten about them, were the dolls of her siblings. Remade in their image as well as her young hands could, immortalized in felt and yarn.

Sakura reached for Hinoka’s doll, the red yarn for her hair falling flat despite its many layers. She remembered trying so hard to capture her determination, but it was difficult with big black buttons for eyes. The doll was soft, stuffed with wool that had been compressed after years of laying on it while she slept.

Then she took out Ryoma’s, with dark brown yarn in a wild array around its face. She had been at a loss for what his dragon mask should be made of, and in the end sewed a piece of red cloth over the doll’s crown in the shape of the mask. Looking back at her handiwork, she did not do a very good job, but every stitch was so full of love that she couldn’t take it apart.

Takumi’s doll had always been her favorite. After he had grown up and became distant, he mocked her for sleeping with dolls for years. But she could never really part with them until Hinoka helped her come to terms with her age. Sakura held the soft felt in her hands, running her fingers through the long silver dyed yarn. She liked to think the doll was modeled in the image of Takumi before he became distant. The doll’s mouth was sewn into a permanent smile, recalling the days when they would play together while court was held, and they would laugh at little childish jokes while their mother shushed them when they got too loud.

Mother.
Sakura had made a doll of the late Queen Mikoto at one time. She remembered running up to her stepmother to show it off. Mikoto smiled widely, scooped her into her arms, hugged and kissed her. Later, after her nightly bath, Sakura found the doll half-charred on her floor, parts of her stuffed limbs still burning under red hot ashes. She had not known back then as she was too young, but many staff members still held a fierce devotion to her father King Sumeragi’s first wife Queen Ikona. The maid had been caught but not punished. She never attempted to make another doll in her image.

Instead, Mikoto’s doll had been replaced by Corrin. There was a time when Sakura thought about her step sibling a lot. But nowadays, Corrin hardly crossed her mind. Sakura reviewed her handiwork, stitched with a wiser, steadier hand than the rest. She caressed the tufts of silver yarn fondly. She wondered how Corrin was doing.

In a moment of gentle, wistful emotion, she took up her dolls and squeezed them against her chest one by one like a crying baby. Oh, how it would be hard parting with her family.

“You’re handling this surprisingly well.”

Leo had expected Takumi to be against the whole thing. He expected the other man to throw a fit and break at least one nose (hopefully not his own) when he heard about the marriage. It was true, for the first two nights, Takumi had been extra moody. Leo noticed the quick hardened stares he gave Sakura behind her back, but those quickly diminished into love and sympathy. There was no way he could stay mad at his little sister for so long after all, especially since the marriage was not her fault.

Takumi sighed and nuzzled his cheek into Leo’s shoulder. They sat side-by-side on Leo’s guest bed, the one that would be used as Leo’s wedding bed. It had been tricky to extend his stay in Hoshido along with his siblings, but it was necessary. Leo was getting antsy without having enough work to help Xander with during their trip and Takumi needed to constantly distract him through various means to keep the man from going insane. He placed a hand on Leo’s thigh, suddenly feeling as though the touch, which they had long grown accustomed to, was now forbidden.

“I don’t like it,” Takumi admitted as Leo pressed a kiss to the crown to his head. “I don’t like it at all. But what can I do? Sakura is innocent, just the thought of what she must be going through makes me sick. She doesn’t want this just as much as you don’t. What can I do?” Then he turned his head to
face the other man with a smirk. “After all, who would want to marry you of all people?”

Leo played along, rolling his eyes and placing a dramatic hand over his chest. “How dare you!” he gawked. “I’ll have you know, there’s plenty of people who would want to marry me.”

“Oh?” Takumi quirked his brow. “Who would that be?”

Instead of answering right away, Leo craned his neck and pressed a quick kiss to Takumi’s lips. “You,” he answered simply. Takumi smiled, his cheeks faintly pink.

They righted themselves after that, their hands in their laps, waiting for the hour of reckoning when Xander would tell them that everything was ready. Everything except themselves.

“You know,” Takumi started, not making eye contact. “After this, everyone will be married except... except me. Everyone but me...”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that,” Leo said. “Don’t let Ryoma pressure you into anything. Just because I’ll be married to Sakura doesn’t necessarily mean we need to stop seeing each other.”

Takumi exhaled through his teeth. “But it does complicate some things, don’t you think?”

Leo reached over to Takumi’s lap and took one of his hands curled around his. He raised Takumi’s hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. “It may... But with both of our great minds, don’t you think we’ll overcome anything?”

When he phrased himself like that, Takumi could do nothing but believe him. His shoulders relaxed, eyes softening. “Right,” he murmured, more to himself than anything. “Right. You’re right.”

Xander had the audacity to knock on their door at that moment. “Everything is prepared,” he said from behind the wall. Leo let go of Takumi’s hand. “We start in half an hour. Please come out and meet me in front of the main doors in ten minutes.” They hear footsteps walking away.

Takumi slid off the bed with a sigh. “I’d better get a seat,” he said. “You still need to fix your... it’s a cravat, right?”
Leo’s hands went to his neck where the silk cloth stuck out at weird angles. He turned towards the nearest mirror with gritted teeth. “Damn, this thing, damn it all...” he cursed, tucking it in properly this time.

Takumi chuckled and opened the door. “See you later,” he dismissed.

“Wait!” Leo called, hands fumbling to fix the rest of his attire. He trotted to Takumi and pulled him into a deep, passionate kiss. It felt final. He did not want it to be final. When they pulled apart, both needed to catch their breaths. “See you.”

Smiling, Takumi patted Leo’s cheek once, pivoted on his heel, and walked away.

Sakura’s hand trembled as she signed her name on the contract next to Leo’s. She tried to copy his fanciful script but ultimately ended up making her name look like a bunch of scribbles. Her entire body was shaking too much to concentrate that when she finally put the last “a” in her name, she dropped the quill on the table, spilling the excess ink on the pure white cloth on top of the altar. The priestess forgave her, but inside, Sakura knew she was making the ceremony much harder for her to fulfill her duties.

They had grown up together. Minori was the head priestess of this private temple, had known Sakura since she had first joined as a maiden. It had been a while due to the war, but Sakura hadn’t seen much of Minori. While she had always been mature and quiet like Sakura, they had enjoyed their company together all the same. She wondered what Minori was going through in life. She wondered if she had children.

When she had her name on paper and Minori could see she was not being forced, the priestess nodded and went back to the scroll which had everything she must say and do written down. This being her first Nohrian-inspired marriage, she must have felt as clueless as Sakura. Meanwhile, Leo managed to stare straight ahead with a look of everlasting indifference, only breaking his facade to look back into the rows of people watching and search for Takumi, wherever he sat.
News had spread fast about their marriage. It seemed that one day, the wedding was a mere thought at the back of their minds, hardly real at all, but then within a week, they were overtaken by the reality of such plans. Ryoma had announced it to his people in public, receiving many shocked, glad, and frustrated responses. On that day, Leo and Sakura stood together as a publicly recognized couple. They did not kiss. They did not even brush elbows with each other. They merely stood at Ryoma’s side and surveyed the gathering that had formed before they went off to tell everyone they had ever known about the surprising news. If they were supposed to be engaged, they did not act like it at all.

That did not stop the entire kingdom from trying to pile into the private shrine for a glance at bride and groom, hoping some of their blessings would rub off on their poor peasant hearts. So it was difficult to find Takumi among all of them.

“May the gods,” Minori said, “creators of the heavens and our Earth, vindicators of all that is right and just, bless this union as they seek the path of righteousness throughout their lives. May they defend unto their name and protect that which their blood has hailed them, until they are ready to become united once again with the all-knowing, all-lasting gods above. May they too be numbered among the great heroes and pious unions before them. We humbly pray.”

She then turned to Sakura, who fumbled with the flower bouquet in her hands. Among the white and pink roses were stems of cherry blossoms. Hinoka had insisted on them, saying, “Odds are, you’re only getting married once. You may as well use your namesake as much as you want. It may be Prince Leo’s wedding but it’s your wedding as well. You’re entitled to just as many things as him.” It was true, the presence of those cherry blossoms bundled between her hands did offer some comfort. And when she looked down at them, she remembered what Leo had promised her the night before, and every night that week.

Nothing has to change.

“Do you, Princess Sakura, take unto thyself as the wife of the noble Prince Leo and pledge unto him before the gods and these witnesses to be his protector, defender and sure resort, to honor and sustain him, in sickness and in health, in fair and in foul, with all thy worldly powers, to cherish and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?” Minori read from the script monotonously.

Sakura nodded, the veil on her head shifting as she did so. “I-I will,” she promised.

Minori turned to Leo, who seemingly snapped out of his trance-like state. “Do you, Prince Leo, take unto thyself as the husband of the fair Princess Sakura and pledge unto her before the gods and these witnesses to be her protector, defender and sure resort, to honor and sustain her, in sickness and in health, in fair and in foul, with all thy worldly powers, to cherish and forsaking all others, keep thee
only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?”

“I will,” he said without a moment of hesitation. Sakura wondered how much time he put into practicing his words in front of a mirror in order to achieve this.

Minori continued. “Oh mighty gods, bless these rings which noble Prince Leo and fair Princess Sakura have set apart to be visible signs of the inward and spiritual bond which unites their hearts. As they give and receive these rings, may they testify unto the world above us that which has been made between them.”

One of the other shrine maidens, young and innocent and virgin, gestured to the rings she held on a tiny pillow, holding them out towards Leo. He calmly took one engraved golden band and held out one hand to receive Sakura’s left. Sakura paused, drawing in a quick breath before gently placing her left hand into his right, the palms of their hands barely touching for the briefest moment.

“Receive and wear this ring as a symbol of my trust, my respect, and my love for you,” Leo said with every ounce of grace he could muster for someone in his position. From the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of silver hair among the masses, and he tilted his head ever so slightly to see. Takumi, dressed in his finest blue kimono a la Oboro, turned head away sharply with a sour expression, resting his chin on his palm. Ryoma nudged him from his side, ordered him to straighten up, but this only made Takumi more bitter, made him turn even farther away from Leo and Sakura. Leo wondered what was going on in his mind as he said those words to someone besides him.

Sakura’s hand trembled as she did the same to Leo. “R-receive and... and wear this ring as a s-symbol of my t-trust...” She took a deep breath to calm her nerves and looked up at Leo’s eyes, a gaze she tried that entire morning to avoid. He still looked every bit uninterested in the ceremony itself, but then their eyes met, Sakura saw something pass briefly over his expression. Something like... concern. They were no strangers, they had gotten to know each other well over the years, though nothing so intimate. Leo gave Sakura a short, pursed smile.

It was not Sakura versus Leo. They were in this together.

She took another breath. In a single rush of words, she mumbled quickly, “My respect, and my love for you!” Sakura placed the band loosely on Leo’s fourth finger, and she saw him fidget and fix it when he pulled his hand away. She felt a new burst of heat in her face.

“This circle will now seal the vows of this marriage and will symbolize the purity and endlessness of their love,” Minori said, reaching behind her towards the altar where three cords rested. The thin ropes were dyed burgundy, ivory, and gold. Sakura and Leo joined their hands in the middle, and
immediately, Sakura was surprised by the sheer warmth of his palm. She wondered if he was sweating under those furs and clasps that Xander forced him into, and if he was going to overheat by the time the ceremony was over. *Maybe his palms are sweaty because he’s freaking out just as much as I am?* Sakura cast out the thought as soon as it came; Leo sure didn’t look like he was struggling as much as Sakura knew she was.

Minori held up the burgundy cord for everyone to see. “I will now place upon their joined hands the burgundy cord, to symbolize romance, partnership, and happiness.” She laid the thin cord across their hands and paused for effect. She held up the ivory cord. “I will also place upon their hands the ivory cord, to symbolize peace, sincerity, and devotion.” Then the gold cord. “And now for the golden cord, which represents unity, prosperity, and longevity. I will tie these cords together, and as this knot is tied, so are your lives to one another. Woven into this cord, imbued into its very fibers, are all the hopes of thy friends and family, and of thyselfs, for a new life together.”

While she was doing so, Sakura’s hand tightened around Leo’s, sensing that the ceremony would come to a closing soon. Her hand clenched the base of her bouquet so tight her knuckles turned white to match her dress. She shifted from foot to foot, ready to speed out of there, out of the sights of over one hundred people witnessing their third royal marriage, the first that linked two war-torn former enemies together forever. It was almost too much responsibility on her part to keep a straight face.

Seeing her anxiously waiting, Leo absentmindedly ran his thumb over the back of Sakura’s hand, rubbing gentle, soothing circles into her pale skin. This seemed to bring her back towards reality a bit, and she exhaled a deep breath she didn’t know she was holding in. Leo mimicked her.

“With the fashioning of this knot you tie all the desires, dreams, love, and happiness wished here in this place to your lives for as long as love shall last. By this cord you are thus now and forevermore bound to your vow. May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last. May this cord draw your hands together in love, never to be used in anger. Two entwined in love, bound by commitment and fear, sadness and joy, by hardship and victory, anger and reconciliation, all of which brings strength to this union. Hold tight to one another through both good times and bad, and watch as your strength grows. I will now remove the cords.”

Leo and Sakura unlinked their hands as Minori removed each cord and placed them on the altar to dispose of later, having no further use for them. Everyone, even Takumi, now had their eyes trained on them, waiting on the edge of their seats for what came next. A bead of sweat rolled down Leo’s neck. Sakura dug her nails into the stems of her bouquet. The entire shrine held their breath.

“By the power vested in me by the gods, I now pronounce you, Prince Leo and Princess Sakura, husband and wife. You may now seal your vows with a kiss.”
Leo knew somewhere far away, Xander and Ryoma were watching him intensely. If he messed this up after getting so far, he would never hear the end of it on both sides of his family. And Leo did not mess up.

Sakura stiffened as Leo rested one hand on her shoulder, the other on her right cheek. So warm, she thought one last time, looking up at her new husband. Sakura remembered a time when she was much shorter than Leo, only coming up to his chest in height. Over the years, her growth had been a gradual process as Leo reached his final height, and even if they did close up a bit of their height difference, she was still just as tall as his chin if she stretched her neck a bit. Leo had to bend his knees slightly, and before he could swoop in and brush her lips with his own, Sakura shut her eyes tight.

The warmth on her lips was foreign, the taste of them unwelcome. She had not felt lips upon her own since nearly two months ago. Those had been welcome, but these were not.

... Huh?

At the back of Leo’s mind, he saw images of Takumi when they first kissed, of warm, soft lips pressed carefully onto his own. But it was not just the context of the kiss that made him feel different. No...

Sakura was soft. Her skin was smooth, unmarred and rounded. She was soft while Takumi was hardened, with strong muscles running down his arms and back, faint scars from battle all across his torso. While Sakura’s jaw was rounded and smooth, Takumi’s was pointed and sharp. While Sakura was close enough for Leo to feel the swell of her breasts beneath her dress pressing into his own chest, Takumi was flat and no less lovely when instead he pressed his whole body to Leo’s when they were alone. While Sakura was stiff, modest, and unused to being held so intimately, Takumi was inviting and lax, always hungry for more. Leo’s hand went to the concave of Sakura’s waist, resting gingerly on the white, rigid bodice. Her body curved dramatically at her hips, and he was stunned how he never realized this fact, making something inside of him ignite, a curiosity he never had in regards to Takumi for years.

Sakura was an enigma Leo did not yet understand.

When they did break apart, the shrine erupted in applause for the new husband and wife. Leo looked at Takumi to gauge his reaction. He was not there.
“You know,” Leo started, rotating his foot in a circle after he crossed his legs. He and Sakura sat inside a horse-drawn carriage that waited outside for them to move back to the castle where the reception was being held. Sakura pressed into her own corner, far away from her husband. Leo didn’t seem to mind the distance. “Ever since working with you during the war council, I have always thought of you as a little sister.”

Sakura perked up at those words, twirling a lock of pink hair around her finger. “O-oh... Is that so?” she asked.

Leo nodded. “Well, never a replacement to Elise, but someone who I could protect like a little sibling all the same,” he admitted, folding his hands in his lap. “You remind me a lot about her all the time... except maybe when she speaks.”

“She’s a bit... outspoken,” Sakura chuckled, smiling at her husband. “It isn’t a bad thing, though. It's something I’ve always admired. Maybe that’s what draws me to be close to her. You also, um, are like a big brother figure... t-to me.”

Leo blew some of his blonde hair out of his face, looking out the window. “Do I remind you of Takumi?” he asked in earnest.

Sakura looked down at her lap. She tapped her feet anxiously on the floor of the carriage. “Kinda. I mean... You’re both into the same things... the same books... and you’re b-both really smart...” she said softly. Then, with a subtle look of defiance, a slight detraction from her usual demure, she added, “But Takumi is much more outspoken than you.”

Snorting under his hand, Leo raised his eyebrows at Sakura. “Is that so?” he huffed, uncrossing his legs and resting his hands on his knees. “Well, it seems that we both have siblings who are more expressive than what is proper. I guess I can keep what you said about Takumi a secret if you keep what I said about Elise to yourself.”

Sakura giggled, nodding. “I think that can be arranged,” she chirped.

“You promise?” Leo asked with a mischievous look.
“P-promise!”

The rest of the carriage ride was spent in silence as they watched the kingdom pass from opposite windows.

The banquet hall was packed with people neither family knew very well, from noble men and women wishing to establish a union, to peasants begging to be concubines, to drunkards who took advantage of the castle’s spirit supply too early in the evening. Leo and Sakura spent a large portion of the reception speaking to others, being congratulated, and prying drunk men and women off of their bodies before the guards whisked the unwelcome guest away. The two of them just wanted to go home.

Takumi seemed to come and go as he pleased that afternoon. One moment, Leo managed to bump into him on his way to find Xander and say a few words, and the next, he was gone. None of his siblings seemed to know where he went, and by the time the reception was in full swing, Leo was starting to become desperate. They shared fragmented sentences before Takumi would disappear for another half hour. Leo was slowly being driven mad, not able to talk to the one he loved more than his own wife.

“I would like to propose a toast,” Ryoma said, rising from his seat next to Kagero, a glass of sake in hand. Kagero bounced her son on her knee to keep him calm, shushing Shiro’s wails every so often. He gestured to Leo and Sakura, who sat anxiously next to each other. The entire banquet hall died down in respect for their king. “I understand that circumstances were not ideal for you two. Rushing to plan the wedding was an experience I personally would not like to relive.” Some laughter. “However, as long as you two are happy together and stay by each other’s side, everything would have been worth it. Sakura, may you feel safe and secure in Leo’s arms, as I am sure you will.”

There was a hidden meaning, a hidden threat that Leo picked up on. *Protect her with your life, Leo. She and her baby are in your hands, even though I know this is a loveless marriage, and if I hear that you mistreat either of them, there will be hell to pay. You not loving my littlest sister is not an excuse to abuse her or her feelings.*
Ryoma cleared his throat and continued. At his side, Shiro whined. “Seeing you two walk down the aisle today reminded me of my own wedding three years ago. It was different, yes—I think this was the first Nohrian-inspired wedding held so closely to Hoshido’s capital—but the feelings shared are the same, among you and those around you who love you dearly, and the people of the kingdom who came to congratulate you on this grand occasion.”

Another threat. Everyone thinks you married for love. Do not let them know the truth, or my sister will be put in danger again, and both of us do not want that.

“You two have given up many things in life. At the time of war, you two gave up your very lives to save your people. You have sacrificed most of your childhoods training like soldiers. However, like heroes, you have risen again stronger. I am sure that your days of sacrificing will not end, as there is no battlefield quite like marriage.” Kagero nudged Ryoma from her seat. More laughter.

I know life sucks, but you’ll just have to make due with the circumstances for now.

“We, the royal family of Hoshido, welcome the family of Nohr with open arms, as we have done for these past years. Prince Leo, we are glad to have you. I hope that you can see the rest of us as family as well. Congratulations, and may your union yield happiness and prosperity for you both, for many years to come.”

Everyone drank at that. Leo winced at the taste of saké burning down his throat. They were quickly running out of wine, and he could never grow accustomed to that taste. Sakura, on the other hand, swallowed down the spirit like it was a smooth dessert. Part of Leo wondered what would happen to the fetus if Sakura drank while pregnant. He figured that such things were beyond his control and said nothing.

The next one who spoke was—surprise, surprise—Camilla. Honestly, Leo had expected her to go first, to humiliate him and talk about everything he did not want an entire kingdom to know. But he was also grateful; the crowd had already seemed warmed up from Ryoma’s speech. Perhaps they won’t remember anything she said.

“In the midst of this joyous occasion, I would like to remind everyone of our roots, and growth as a family in Nohr. Growing up in Castle Krakenburg was difficult,” she admitted, clutching her glass to her chest. “And I watched my younger siblings grow up not knowing if they would survive another night. Leo was a special case from the moment he was born—and I would know, I watched it happen—because I knew for certain that he would survive the horrors of the concubine wars. I have no clue where he got his brains from, but I’m glad he did. If he did not, he might not be here today. I admit, and this is something I am not proud of, but I did play favorites among my younger siblings. Leo always got the short end of the stick, and I will never be able to live that down.”
By the way she was talking, Leo believed that was at least her fifth drink. He swirled his glass in his hand.

“But! Even though Leo has grown into the strong, dashing young man you see before you, I have made it a priority after the war to fix things, to make things right and compensate for all those years I have been neglectful.”

There were some shouts of “You can compensate with me!” and “I’ll give you something to fix!” from the guests, but they were quickly hushed. Camilla ignored the catcalls and cleared her throat.

“My dear little brother, you have grown so much. All of us are so proud of you, and are happy that you are taking the next step in life. You have opened your heart to someone after years of having it closed, a feat not even your family could get you to do.” Leo was convinced she was lying through her teeth as he watched her patiently. She knew the truth.”To have such a lovely lady stand beside you is praise from the gods, something I hope you never take for granted. You have sacrificed much for the good of Nohr, and now this work is being repaid. Congratulations for your good fortune, and may fortune continue to smile upon you in the future!”

Everyone drank to that. Leo felt like he was going to retch from the saké taste if he had to do that again. The waitress was supposed to fill his glass with wine, where was she now?

Xander stood up next once Camilla was seated. “It is a fine day in the history of Nohr and Hoshido-" someone shouted “No it’s not!” from the crowd—“and may it mark a new period for historians, one where Hoshido and Nohr were forever linked. I understand that many citizens in each kingdom has not gotten over the fear of a raging war. Four years is so long and yet so little. Yet among all of this healing that never seems to end, experiencing something happy like this is a nice break. My own marriage was a merry occasion, for example, and so this extends to you two.”

He paused to gather his bearings. Speaking among a sea of Hoshidans required much more effort than making a speech in his native country. “Sakura, I have known you for these years that have come and gone. I remember the first time I spoke with you passing through the halls, you trying to speak with me like a little mouse speaking to a lion. I remember seeing potential in you, the want to change, and to become a better person. And as far as I have seen from the sidelines, you have accomplished this. Now, you have become a lovely young lady more than worthy of my little brother. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise. I believe I speak for my entire kingdom when I say, your family in Nohr welcomes you warmly.

“As Camilla said before,” Xander continued. “Leo has been through a lot. He spends most of his time at home working with me on reforms, something he is under no obligation to do. Now, he will
have other things to tend to with your company.” There were some suggestive wolf whistles and hollers implying something forbidden from the crowd, but they were ignored. “Perhaps you’ll be able to drag him out of the library once in a while. The sun started reappearing in Nohr, a sure sign of good things to happen. May you share that light for the rest of your days, and may your future be just as bright.”

Leo casually mimicked the action of drinking from his glass, the nonchalantly poured the remaining liquid into a nearby potted plant. Sakura saw him do this from the corner of her eye but did not say anything.

Ryoma stood again. “Is there anything else someone would like to say to the newlyweds?”

For a while, the entire banquet hall was quiet. Everyone looked at one another, searching for another reason to toast. Elise and Hinoka had not prepared speeches beforehand, and so they stayed silent. Seconds passed, and Ryoma turned back to Leo and Sakura and opened his mouth to say something.

“Wait!”

All of the royals turned to face the source of the familiar voice. Takumi forcefully pushed his way to the front, snatched a glass of saké from one of the waitresses, and made his way to the dais. Leo’s eyes widened as he looked down at him. Takumi looked a bit eccentric, like he had been struggling with something for a long time. But he forced himself to put on a demeanor of poise and confidence. He held his head high in his rich blue kimono, now standing among his siblings at the head table.

Leo wanted to ask him where he has been hiding all this time, but it was too quiet for that. Now, all eyes were on the youngest prince of Hoshido.

“I would like to say something,” Takumi said, taking a deep breath. “Seeing relationships like yours... Well, it’s hard not to be bitter about them when you aren’t engaged to anybody. I can only hope to have a wonderful marriage like yours.”

I hate everything about this. I feel like I’m losing composure when I think about anyone marrying you, even if it is my little sister. Please, don’t leave me, Leo...

“We have known each other for so long. I mean, we didn’t like each other at first. All of our siblings can attest to this, how we fought in the mess hall like children. But that was the past, and times change. We have grown ourselves, and I relish the times we had together. If we can get along, those
who oppose Hoshidan-Nohrian relations can learn to see the light of it. There is nothing more pure than enemies learning to love one another."

_We have been kept apart because relations between our kingdoms have been dicey years after the war, and yet here you are. We are not enemies anymore, there is no reason to act this way. I now see the truth, that even if the world were to oppose us, I still want to be by your side._

Takumi paused, holding the glass with two hands. He licked his dry lips. His shoulders were shaking with pressure. “… Sakura, you are my only little sister. Ryoma looked after Hinoka as I look over you. That is what older siblings do. For much of my life, I have been devoted to keeping you safe and happy. This did not stop when the war ended, and I will see to it that you continue to live a joyful life. You... you have married a fine man, one I am sure will treat you as if you are his world, and will hold you like life’s greatest treasures. He will make you feel special, and know exactly what to say to cheer you up. He... will never leave your side.”

_Sakura, I’m begging you. You can do whatever you want now that you are free from the castle, but please, do not fall in love with him. I can’t handle losing both of you._

“Protect him, Sakura. Look after him. Don’t let him hole himself up in the library for hours on end. Make him be social for once even if it means dragging him by his ear.” Some laughter. “And... take care of each other. Let us toast…” Takumi gulped, raising his glass. “To life... to romance... and to a love that never dies. So long as we live.”

_No matter what happens, Leo, I love you. Never forget that._

He trailed off at the end, but everyone raised their glasses to their lips in celebration. Leo stared at Takumi, stunned. He had completely forgotten to take a sip from his newly filled glass of saké (dammit!) and simply sat open-mouthed at Takumi from his seat. Ryoma pulled his brother close and whispered some words of praise into his ear. Xander watched them with a sympathetic expression. Sakura was none the wiser.

Leo leaned back in his chair, staring down at the white tablecloth below him, wanting nothing more than to run to Takumi’s side. But he knew he could not, at least not with witnesses. He was a married man, after all.
“If you do not want to consummate your marriage, which I am certain that you do not, take this. I ordered one of the servants to catch me a rat, and I have drained its blood into this vial. Make sure you smear this onto the middle of the sheets tonight. This will make it look like your marriage was consummated, and will settle any disputes if someone suspects you did not.”

That was what Xander told Leo when they were alone again. He took the vial gratefully before taking off towards where he was expected to spend his night.

It was a Nohrian tradition for those attending the reception to follow the couple to bed and have them listen to the consummation process. This detail was thankfully left out when Xander explained their customs to Ryoma and the rest of the Hoshidans. Sakura was already waiting in the room, stripping herself out of her tight gown and into the loose-fitting nightclothes that had been left on top of the bed.

“Um, Leo,” she said when he arrived. She quickly finished covering herself in the thin white dress that went down to her knees. Sakura’s cheeks flushed red as she felt her husband’s eyes on her. “U-uh... Are we...?” she gulped, unable to meet his eyes. She stared off to her side, at the special mattress the servants had explicitly prepared for them.

Sakura had experience, of course she knew what was going to happen. “... Are we really going to... y-you know...”

Leo looked her up and down from the doorway, to the bed, and put two and two together. “No,” he said simply, shedding his furs and outer suit. He also hated the feeling of being restricted. “You don’t want to, I don’t want to. We don’t have to.”

Perking up at the suggestion, Sakura eyed him suspiciously. “W-we don’t? I-I mean, I'm glad.”

Once Leo could breathe properly again, he yanked off the duvet, tossing the pillows into a disarray. Then he took the vial from his pocket.

“W-what are you doing?” Sakura asked, edging closer to her husband. “What’s that?”

“Blood,” Leo shrugged. “Tell me, Sakura, the first time you had sex, did you bleed?”
Sakura stiffened, her breath knocked out of her. “I-I... Um... Yes? I-it was only a little, though. It didn’t really hurt.”

Leo huffed and poured a small amount of blood onto the sheet. Then he smeared it a little with his hand. “Done. Consider yourself consummated.”

Once she realized what he was doing, Sakura sighed in relief. “Wow, that was simple,” she giggled.

“Wait,” Leo said approaching Sakura. He held his hands out and started ruffling her pink hair into a tousled mess. When he pulled away, there were pink strands pointing everywhere. “Okay, now you look the part.”

Sakura laughed, smiling up at Leo. “W-wait, shouldn’t I do you?” she asked.

“Be my guest.”

Standing up on her toes, she reached up and ran her hands frantically through Leo’s blonde hair. It was fun, she decided. She would have never expected his hair to feel that soft. When his hair got to the point of sticking up at odd ends, she pulled back and smiled. The once proud, cold prince had a massive case of bedhead.

Sakura took a couple steps towards the door. “I want to go and talk to my family,” she said. “Since we’re leaving for Nohr tomorrow, it’ll, um, it’ll be the last time I get to speak with them for a while.”

Leo nodded and sat at the edge of their bed, carefully avoiding the bloodstain. He stretched his arms up and yawned. “I’ll be here,” he said, bidding her goodbye.

Closing the door behind her, Sakura took two steps down the hall only to bump into someone. “Takumi,” she smiled at her brother, who quickly changed his expression from sorrowful to glad before she could notice.

“You’re in good hands.”
She rested her head briefly on his shoulder. “Thank you, Takumi. I know with everyone’s support, this partnership won’t be as difficult as I initially thought,” she said with full confidence before pulling away. “Oh, where were you during the reception and ceremony though? Sometimes I looked over and you weren’t there. Or I would try to find you but nobody had seen you.”

Takumi scratched the back of his neck, looking guilty. “You know me,” he chuckled. “Big parties aren’t my thing. I spent some time just outside getting some air. I don’t know what you’re talking about with the ceremony, though. I was there.”

Sakura scrunched her brows together. “I could have sworn you disappeared...”

“I did get up to quickly go to the bathroom at one point,” Takumi lied. “You must have looked for me then.”

Huffing to herself, Sakura was going to inquire more, until she heard a voice from behind her.

“Sakuraaa!” Elise shouted, running up to her friend. She too was dressed only in her nightwear. “My GODS I am so, so, so happy for youuuu!” She took a deep breath as Takumi slipped away, unbeknownst to Sakura disappearing into her bedroom. Elise smiled widely before throwing her arms around Sakura’s shoulders, pulling her into a tight hug. “Do you know what this MEANS?!”

Sakura patted her friend’s back. “What does it mean?” she mumbled.

“It means we’re IN-LAWS!” Elise screeched into Sakura’s ear, crushing her chest with her bear hug. “From now on, we don’t have to separate! We’ll do everything together! We can dance together and play our music whenever we want! It'll be like a sleepover that never ends! From now on, you’ll be traveling with us! Gods, I can’t wait!”

Trying to pry her friend’s arms from her body, Sakura smiled. “Ryoma did say that continuing to live in Hoshido would be too unhealthy for me,” she said, gesturing towards her stomach. “Now that they know... it would be better to have a fresh start with a staff that doesn’t. I side with him, I really think I need to get out of the castle more.” Though I’m not sure how well I can manage living in a foreign castle for several months, if not the rest of my life, Sakura thought, swallowing a lump in her throat.

Elise caught on to what she said and instantly her demeanor settled. She folded her hands in front of
her lap. “I suppose so,” she said. “But don’t let it stop you from having fun. We’ll make plenty of happy memories over in Nohr. I can show you all of the underground—it’s really, really cool, and I don’t think I ever showed you before—and we can now go hunting now that the forests are better. You’ll be safe, even if I need to watch over you myself.”

Sakura snorted in disbelief. “Shouldn’t my husband be saying that to me?” she teased.

Elise rolled her eyes. “You know Leo will be his usual self, married or not. But if he ever raises a hand to you or makes you uncomfortable, you come straight to me and I’ll kick his butt for you! I can take him. He’s not the only one that knows magic.” She winked.

Sakura laughed. “I’ll remember that,” she giggled.

After managing to speak to all of her siblings, to receive their final words of gratitude, Sakura’s nerves were finally calm enough to return to bed. She couldn’t believe she actually walked around the entire castle in her nightclothes with guests around, but her siblings were used to it. Sakura knocked on the door to her shared bedroom, yawned, and opened the door without hearing an answer.

What she saw on her bed made her gasp in surprise. Leo took some time to notice her presence, but when he did, he raised his head in shock. He made no attempt to right his position, especially not with Takumi straddled and pinned to the bed below him. It was too late for that. A thin line of saliva dripped from Takumi’s chin as he turned to face his sister, wide-eyed and frantic.

“S-Sakura!” Takumi exclaimed, wiping his chin with the back of his hand.

“It’s the night of my wedding day,” Sakura said with a trembling voice full of confusion. “And I’m already being cheated on. Takumi, Leo, how could you do this?”

“Let me explain,” Leo said quickly, shifting to sit on the edge of the bed, wiping his own chin. Takumi righted himself next to him, an equal look of shame on his face.

“No,” he said. “Allow me.”
I have an interview with my college's counselor for an executive position on the newspaper tomorrow, why am I writing this right now.

Some cool things about medieval weddings:
- Crying of the banns is still done today in some parts of Europe. A couple would publicly announce their marriage at church three weeks in a row. If you're like Shakespeare, you can apply to only do it for one week. This tradition was not shown in this chapter.
- Handfasting is a pagan tradition. In the beginning it would symbolize that the two would be married for a year and a day so they could have sex like bunnies all they want, but as the church adopted this tradition, it became a part of usual, lifetime marriages. This tradition is shown in this chapter.
- While it is believed that most women married at young ages, this was usually not the case. Most women were married at 18 or in their early twenties, and men a little after that. Women were only married young when the family was desperate to marry into wealth.
- Engagement rings were almost nonexistent, but nobles had diamond wedding rings. Peasants would propose with a broken coin and give one half to their fiance/e.
- During the 16th century was when marriage contracts and documents started to be drawn up. Before, people only had each other's word that they were married to each other.
- Blue was the color of purity, not white. White was considered a status color because only the rich could afford to keep white clothes clean. Most wedding dresses were blue (hint Takumi hint). Also that's where the "something blue" saying came into play in the phrase, "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." If blue could not be worn, the bride would wear a blue ribbon or some other accessory.
- If a marriage was being challenged, a couple would literally bring the sheets with consummation marks to court to prove their marriage was finalized. Hence the importance of the rat blood (I made that up).

Minori is the NPC shrine maiden from the einherjar shop in case you did not know.

Ahh, I love me some angst. Let me know what you think of this goddamn long chapter.

Feedback me, reader-senpai.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Leo makes a couple dick jokes and that's it. That's literally it.
Also Niles.

Chapter Notes

Short, boring chapter I admit but hey now we can start getting to the juicy bits.

If you read closely enough you can hear me going "moooore sibling bonding moooore!"

Also, important note: I changed the gender of Camilla's spouse from male to female in
the first chapter. There are a couple reasons why I made this change.
1) If Leo and Takumi were the only same-sex couple out of all the royals that would be
weird, just singling them out like that.
2) I just wanted to make it so gay marriage seemed more like a thing that could plausibly
happen among royals.
3) Camilla acts the gayest in canon so she gets it.
4) In this fic, everyone is bi and you can't stop me.

Camilla has a kid with her as-of-yet unnamed wife [edit September 27 2017: Camilla's
wife changed to Flora] because if Annankos can asexually give birth to a daughter then
royals can use some freaky dragon vein voodoo magic to have a kid with a same-sex
partner. Because I say so.

And this is going off of personal endings for everyone after the events of Fates, so sadly
there is no Selena, Laslow, Odin, or Effie. Effie might make a comeback, since she still
exists in the Fates universe.

As always, un-beta'd. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ocean breeze carried a soft mist of salt through the air like a gentle caress, the steady green
waves rocking the ship ever so slightly. Leo stood near the edge of the port, taking in the dim light
above him. Heavy gray clouds loomed above, pregnant with water but not ready to cry just yet. It
will be a stormy adventure back to Nohr, and he was not looking forward to it.

Takumi returned to his side after briefly speaking with his siblings. “It looks like it’ll be a tough
journey,” he remarked, also staring up at the dull sky. “Promise me you’ll stay safe.”
“I don’t have control over the weather, you know,” Leo said matter-of-factly, waving his hand around to accentuate his point. “My magic isn’t that strong.”

This answer did not satisfy Takumi. With a vexed expression, he reached forward and pinched Leo’s check, who immediately tried to slap his hand away. “Promise me or I’ll worry,” Takumi commanded. “And you don’t want me to worry!”

A passing flock of flying gulls cried and screamed overhead, far above the ship’s mast. Behind them, there was indistinct chatter echoing across the port from hundreds of villagers and sailors unloading cargo and selling wares. They were being watched by Hoshido’s constituents. One wrong move and rumors would rise for months on end. So instead of pressing further, Takumi retracted his touch.

Leo rubbed his stinging cheek. “Fine, fine,” he sighed with the faintest of smiles. “I’ll write to you the moment we land back in Windmire. Understood?”

Takumi grinned. “Right. And I’ll write to you, everyday, as much as you want.”

“Naturally,” Leo said softly, longing to reach out to Takumi again without being suspicious.

They hadn't planned on traveling a week to the nearest port just to bid their little sister farewell. Ryoma was supposed to stay at the castle and Hinoka was to prepare for her own departure, at the very least. But everyone wanted to ensure that the married couple and the Nohrian family made it to the ship safely, and seeing as it was Sakura's first time traveling to a new kingdom by herself, everyone wanted to make sure they could milk every last moment with her before her semi-permanent relocation. For Ryoma, this meant going over Nohrian etiquette and his expectations of her at nights when they stopped at inns. "Make sure the Nohrians take great care of you, and make sure to let your voice be known," he had said the other night, not expecting Takumi to overhear from his own futon. "We have them under contract, after all."

From Elise’s side, Sakura left and approached Leo with a wistful glance at Takumi, hands folded in front of her lap. “Um, everything is ready,” she mumbled, pink fringe hiding her eyes.

On the night of her wedding, Sakura had been wholly understanding of the situation, though her face was horrified when she put together the fact that she was coerced into marrying her big brother’s lover. And that they had loved each other for years and she was never told a thing because their reputations would be in jeopardy if word got out. Sakura swore secrecy to them, promising that she would protect their relationship no matter what. It was the least she could do as a little sister and as a wife.
I will never be a proper wife. I will always be pushed aside in Leo’s case.

I should never have been so stupid to willingly have relations despite my position.

I am disgusting. That’s what I am.

Sakura loved Takumi. Out of each of their siblings, Takumi was the one she was always closest to, in age and in trust. If Takumi was willing to allow her to marry the love of his life to protect her sour reputation, then by gods, she was not going to take advantage of them. Sakura was not going to coerce Leo into anything, she would not fall in love with him despite their union. She was entrusted with her big brother’s heart and she would not break it.

Besides, there was another man.

“Sounds like you’re leaving soon,” Takumi sighed, looking the two over. He crossed his arms close to his body and pursed his lips. “Sakura, promise me you’ll be safe.”

Just above the gentle wind, Leo murmured, “Do it or he’ll hurt you.” Takumi nudged him sharply with his elbow.

“I promise,” Sakura nodded, looking up at her brother with a smile. “I just... I-I’ll miss you.”

At that, Takumi melted. His shoulders visibly relaxed. “I’ll miss you too. Home won’t be the same without you,” he admitted sadly. “And the gods know how much time Hinoka will spend with her husband, leaving me with Ryoma and Kagero. You’d better write to me so I don’t go insane.”

Sakura nodded again, grinning wider. “Absolutely!”

“And!” Takumi interrupted with one finger pointed to his sister. “You tell me the moment you feel uncomfortable, or you get bored, or you’re homesick and just want to see a familiar face. Ryoma and I will come running and we’ll visit you in Nohr. Just say the word.”
Giggling under her hand, Sakura said, “Alright, I get it. You don’t have to go out of your way *that* much.”

From the side, Leo scoffed and placed his hands on his hips, stance wide. “You never go out of your way to see *me* in Nohr when I get bored or want to see you,” he stated, rolling his eyes.

Takumi patted the other man’s bicep with some force. “Because you’re a big boy,” he cooed. “And big boys going back to their homeland don’t need people dropping everything for them in another kingdom just because you’re bored.”

Leo inched closer to Takumi with a knowing smirk. “Oh, I’m a big boy, I see,” he said, leering down at Takumi. Then, speaking soft enough for Sakura not to hear, he asked, “Is *that* why our favorite place to play together is inside your bedchambers?”

Takumi’s face flared up as blood rushed to his cheeks, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. Sakura had never seen him make that expression before. Takumi sputtered for a moment, trying to find his words again, while Leo watched with subdued bemusement. Sakura just didn’t understand anything between those two.

“I-it’s time for you to go!” Takumi stuttered when he could finally form words. “You don’t want the ship to leave without you!”

Sakura watched as Elise and Camilla waved her and Leo towards them with excited grins. Xander shook Ryoma’s hand in farewell and turned towards the ship to board. Leo and Sakura turned to Takumi one last time.

“Take care, Big Brother,” Sakura said, folding her hands over her chest. “We’ll see you next time we visit. Hopefully we’ll be together for the next festival.”

Takumi nodded. “I look forward to it.”

Leo smiled wistfully at Takumi and looked every which way, making sure nobody was watching before quickly taking Takumi’s hand in his own. With a gentle squeeze, he simply said, “Take care.”

Takumi squeezed his hand back, pressing his lips together. Words evaded him. He had so much to say, but wouldn’t dare say it in front of his sister, or in public. So he nodded silently, to keep those
words from coming out.

“Come on!” they heard Elise scream from on board the ship. “We’re burning daylight here! I wanna show Sakura *everything* in Nohr!”

Leo let go of Takumi’s hand. “Goodbye,” he murmured softly.

“... Goodbye,” Takumi repeated.

“B-bye, Takumi,” Sakura stuttered, her head facing the wooden dock below.

They both started making their way to the boarding dock, but before Sakura could get two steps in, she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

“And one hug for the road!” Takumi chuckled, pulling his little sister into a tight embrace. Sakura laughed, wrapping her arms around his waist before she felt her feet leave the floor. She felt herself being twirled around, the tightness of Takumi’s arms around her torso holding her body firmly against his no matter how much her feet kicked the air. Leo clicked his tongue, the corner of his lips twitching upward. When she finally did touch ground, Sakura was still laughing.

“You’re a lot heavier than I remember,” Takumi joked, rubbing his arms. Sakura shot back with a hesitant “H-hey!” before he continued. “Well, good luck in Nohr. And be sure to take good care of Leo for me while I’m not there.”

“Thanks,” Sakura smirked.

Leo groaned. “I can take care of myself, thanks,” he sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Come ooooon!” Elise called once more, frantically waving her arm at them from the edge of the ship. “Let’s gooooo!”

From the distance, Leo faintly heard Xander tell Elise to “Stop being rude and be patient.”
Leo and Sakura finally made their way towards the boarding dock. “Bye! Don’t forget to write me!” Takumi called as the two left his side. “Or I’ll hunt you guys down myself!”

Ryoma and Hinoka gathered around him, the three watching as their sweet little sister boarded alongside the Nohrian family. The salty wind picked up around them, whipping Takumi’s and Ryoma’s long hair. The sun peeked out from one of the full clouds, white light beating down on them. As they looked up, they shielded their eyes.

The Nohrian family plus Sakura all stood together side-by-side on the deck, waving down at them as the ship started taking off. Final words of “Take care!” and “Thanks for having us!” were heard, mainly from Elise. Leo mainly concentrated on Takumi. He hesitated before giving him a small wave. Were he not staring intently at Leo, Takumi might not have noticed it. He paused before finally reaching up and waving at Leo, then at Sakura. Sakura immediately reciprocated.

It didn’t take long for them to sail out of sight. When riding their carriage back to the castle, Sakura’s usual seat was empty.

They were sailing for fourteen days. Sakura spent most of her time with Elise, trying to keep themselves busy. During some meals, Camilla would try to persuade her into eating with Leo, who always had a book in hand even at the dining table. Neither Sakura nor Leo particularly minded--this behavior was expected of them after all--but Sakura would much rather spend her meals speaking with her best friend instead of in silence as Leo read, only pausing to raise another spoonful of porridge to his mouth.

On one particular night, Sakura made herself comfortable on the soft extra sheets Elise had been provided, laying on the floor as Elise lay on her mattress. The chambers were small to make more room for cargo and other passengers, but they were big enough for both of them to stay during the night. Most nights, Sakura’s own chamber was empty.

“What do you ever wonder what your future would be like if you weren’t married to my brother?” Elise asked, picking at her fingernails. She had long since given up her twin tails as they were too childish, and now mainly braided her long blonde hair with one of her old bows holding the plait together. Now, her hair was loose and spiraled all around her where she sat cross-legged in her nightgown. Sakura envied her hair.
“Yes,” Sakura admitted, pressing her knees to her chest as she looked up to her friend. “On one hand, I imagine a long life of solitude in a townhouse near a cliff. I raise this child on my own. My siblings visit me in secret twice a year.” She took a deep breath, staring in front of her, to nowhere in particular as she drowned in her thoughts. “On the other, I am rushed to marry a prince or princess from another kingdom. They know of my pregnancy, so they use it as blackmail to keep me silent as they... do horrible things...”

Elise paused, her body rigid as she stared down at Sakura with wide eyes. “Sakura...” she murmured softly. “I’m sure there must have been another way.”

Sakura shrugged. “Ryoma was right in sending me away. I could have stayed, but... I’m sure the people in my kingdom would never want a monarchy with an illegitimate child running around. If you don’t know the person you’re marrying, there’s a high chance they might be... very, very mean. I don’t want that to happen, so... For my own sake, I’m glad I married Leo.” For my brother’s sake, not so much, Sakura thought.

Elise felt a chill go down her spine, her face paler than usual. “A high chance of being very mean, you say?” she repeated with a gulp. Her eyes were fixated on her nails, or rather, the dirt caked under them, even though she wasn’t quite seeing them.

Laying back on her bundle of sheets, Sakura felt strangely at ease to get all of this off her chest. “Hinoka didn’t know her husband very well before marrying him, since Ryoma persuaded her into marrying him for resources,” she admitted, folding her hands under her head. “Even though Hoshido is a very plentiful and self-sufficient kingdom, we’ve been exporting a lot after the war and Ryoma’s afraid that it will all be too taxing on our country if we push ourselves too fast. We’ve been making more money than we know what to do with, but at the cost of working our farmers harder than ever and the expense of our crop... Her husband puts on a lot of airs, but she says that he’s very hardheaded and stubborn, and that her experience with taking care of Takumi made him slightly more manageable. But that’s why she doesn’t like staying with him for so long. So she makes tons of excuses to visit Hoshido alone for every festival and holiday, so she doesn’t have to be around him a lot.”

“I... I see...” Elise muttered with a click of her tongue.

“I’m jealous of Ryoma, though,” Sakura sighed, staring at the ship’s wooden ceiling. “He got to marry for love. Well, love and protection. Nothing like having a ninja by your side as a king, after all.”

Elise took a deep breath, slowly laying her head down onto her pillow. “Right... protection...” she said.
Sakura turned to face Elise. “How did you meet your fiance?” she asked.

Twirling a lock of blonde hair with a finger, Elise said nothing. She just stared at the ceiling.

“... Elise?” Sakura asked. “W-what is your fiance like?”

“I don’t want to talk about him,” Elise answered, turning to face the wall opposite of Sakura.

Sakura swallowed a lump that formed in her throat. “I-is there something wrong?”

“I’m tired,” Elise muttered, settling into bed.

“O-oh...”

When morning came and Elise woke up, Sakura had already returned to her own chamber, gotten dressed, and went about her day as per usual.

Upon arrival to Nohr’s closest port, everyone dismounted the ship and was quickly met with the remaining retainers of Castle Krakenburg greeting everyone with wide smiles.

Arthur ran to Elise’s side, covering her hands in his own. “I pray those lengthy tides served you well, Milady!” he cheered, flashing Elise a dazzling smile. Elise laughed like a child and nodded.

“Yes, everything went amazing,” she chuckled, jutting her chin to Sakura. “Did you receive my letter explaining the details about Sakura’s departure from Hoshido?”
Arthur took his hands from hers and straightened his back. “Ah, yes. The lovely young damsel finally finds love with our very own prince. A true happy ending!” he exclaimed.

_Ah, Sakura thought. He must think..._

She felt someone move next to her. Leo craned his neck to whisper into Sakura’s ear. “Xander, Camilla, and Elise have alerted their retainers that we are married. They told half of the truth, all saying that we kept writing to each other in private and that we have been secretly engaged for a long time. The wedding was supposed to be small so as not to cause outrage to conservative citizens in either kingdom, and since all of our siblings were there to bear witness, we last-minute decided to have it quickly.” He took a breath, scanning the area for one face in particular. “There is only one person besides our family that knows the full truth... one who I knew I couldn’t lie to.”

Sakura was about to ask who it was, but found that she didn’t need to. During her short, few trips to Nohr with her family, she had gotten to know this person more intimately than she would have liked. A person who always knew too much.

_Said person stopped rummaging in the saddlebags of his horse and finally sauntered over to Leo with a knowing smirk. He brushed his soft white hair out of his face, exposing his black satin eyepatch. “Milord and Milady, boy am I going to have to get used to that,” Niles purred._

_Leo held his hand out to stop whatever words Niles had in store for them, especially for Sakura. “Stop,” he said abruptly, a stern look on his face. “I just spent over about four months traveling around the east visiting other kingdoms. I only want to get settled back into the castle. Whatever it is you have to say, unless someone is dying, it can wait. Do you hear me, Niles? It can _wait._”_

_Anym rational person would have been distraught from that claim. Sakura knew she would. But instead, the smirk on Niles’ face only grew wider. “Whatever you say, Milord. We will speak more once you put your feet up.” He took a step back towards his horse, seeing everyone already mounting their steeds for a long, public travel towards Windmire, then to Castle Krakenburg. Then Niles paused and curtly bowed his head in regards to Sakura. “Milady,” he said before taking off._

_As Leo approached his trusted jet black horse, the rest of his siblings’ retainers congratulated him and Sakura on their union. “I wish I could have been there,” Peri admitted, swinging her legs slightly on either side of her brown mount. “It would have been nice instead of the dull life here in Nohr, going on small missions, training the army...”_
“It wasn’t that big of an occasion,” Leo admitted without thinking. With expert grace, he hoisted himself up onto his horse’s saddle, feeling at home already. “You didn’t miss much.”

Camilla and Xander shot him a look out of the corner of his eye. “He’s just being modest,” Xander said to his retainer, clearing his throat. “You should have seen him at the ceremony. He had tears in his eyes when Sakura walked down the aisle.”

“WHAA??” Peri gawked at Leo, who shared a sour look with Sakura. Her blue and pink pigtails whipped around her face as she turned to face him. “And here I thought you didn’t have emotions!”

Xander stared pensively at the two. Leo and Sakura simultaneously brightened up when they realized they were expected to play along if the half-truths shared with their retainers were supposed to be believed. “O-oh, yes,” Leo grumbled halfheartedly under his breath. “Beautiful. She was beautiful.”

“A-and he was handsome,” Sakura stammered, staring at her feet on the ground. “I’m just... so happy.”

“Fear not, Milady!” Arthur boasted on top of his own horse. “While Nohr is very different from your previous home, all of us will make sure you are never alone! That is to say, you will always be safe and sound next to your beloved husband. You have our word.”

Camilla nudged her own retainer with her shoulder, smirking down at the blue-haired ex-assassin. Beruka looked up at her superior quizzically before turning and mounting her bright silver wyvern. Camilla tsked. “Don’t be like that, dear,” she said to Beruka. “You haven’t said a word since we arrived.”

Beruka regarded Sakura with an unreadable expression. Sakura knew very little about the woman other than she used to be an assassin, she is unconditionally loyal to Camilla, and that she didn’t speak much. She thought during her previous stays in Nohr that they could find comfort in each other’s presence since they both appreciated a good silence, but she had yet to find a way to enjoy Beruka’s presence. Perhaps she felt the same?

After some time, Beruka turned her gaze away. “I’ll protect you,” she swore to Sakura. “If Milady commands it.”

Camilla sighed, her posture drooping. “You don’t need my command to take care of family, you
know this, dear,” she pointed out. Beruka nodded from atop her mount, which was starting to grow restless. The silver wyvern shifted from foot to foot, fluttering its wings ever so slightly in preparation. Xander’s horse noticed the shift in energy and began flicking its tail and stomping its hooves.

“Let’s go. We need to reach a village before sunset,” Xander instructed. He started taking off, assuming everyone had already mounted their rides. Everyone would rather be taken by carriage, however, if they were supposed to show to their people that they were safely back in their nation, everyone would need to bear witness to them face-to-face instead of hiding behind carriage walls and windows.

Before he could break into a canter, a loud “Um!” jolted him back. Sakura stood in the middle of them, on foot, her white horse untouched. She wrung her hands, looking up at Xander curiously.

“I... there something wrong, Princess Sakura?” Xander asked, turning his horse to face her despite the animal’s protesting snorts.

Sakura looked at the horse that was designated to her. “I... er...” she gulped, and suddenly she was self-conscious. Leo sighed, exasperated. With every minute passed, the less time he would have to himself. Sakura gulped. “I d-don’t know how to ride a h-horse...”

As Leo impatiently ran his hand over his face, Xander gave her a warm smile. “Is that so?” he asked. “I’m sorry for not considering it. You’ll just have to ride with someone.”

At Arthur’s side on her own white mount, Elise raised her hand. “She can ride with me!” she said with a big smile. She patted the space of saddle behind her. Despite sitting sidesaddle to keep her dress from riding up her legs, there was still a decent amount of space. “Hop on, Sakura!”

Before Sakura could commit to taking her up on that offer, Niles—of course it was Niles—piped up from behind Leo on top of his own brown stallion. “Shouldn’t she ride with her husband?” he asked innocently, and Leo immediately felt a migraine coming on. “I mean, it only makes sense. You know how perverted those villagers are. What if they assume Elise eloped with a princess from Hoshido? May as well make their marriage known.”

When he said the words “Elise eloped with a princess from Hoshido” Elise felt her face heat up. Sakura stared bashfully at the ground, wringing her hands together.
“I think that’s a wonderful idea!” Camilla cheered from atop her own deep violet wyvern. She kept it busy by scratching under its chin, just the place to make the beast drool. “Sakura, go on! Go take a ride with your husband.”

Leo glared daggers at his retainer. In a hushed voice, the prince growled, “I thought I said it could wait.” His fists tightened on the reins of his horse, which was starting to grunt and toss its head with impatience.

Niles smirked. “We can’t leave your wife waiting. That would be improper of me, a lowly servant of yours,” he cooed before his horse cantered away towards the front of the traveling party. Leo pinched the bridge of his nose, trying not to get so worked up, and maybe he would see the end of the trip without an ounce of blood being spilt. Arthur took the reins of the spare horse and attached it to the reins of his own, leading both at once.

“Come on, Sakura,” Leo sighed, shifting his weight so there was room on the saddle for two and kicking the stirrups off his shoes. Sakura slowly approached him, feeling unwelcome on his steed. Doing her best to mimic what she saw when others mounted their horses, she put one foot into the stirrup and balanced her hands on the saddle. Leo watched her from above, and upon seeing her struggle, finally offered her a hand. “Here.”

“T-thank you,” she said, taking his hand and heaving herself up, sitting astride the horse. Her dress hiked up to her thighs, and she tried pulling the frock down to its normal height to no avail.

Every man in their group (except Leo, who couldn’t see behind him, and except Niles, who watched with interest) widened their eyes and averted their gaze while every woman sucked in a tense breath. “Sidesaddle!” Elise told Sakura in a frenzy, gesturing to her own legs that hung to one side of the horse. “Sidesaddle!”

Sakura looked down at her messed up dress. “... Oh!” she blushed, and before Leo could crane his neck to see what was going on, Sakura lifted her left leg over the back of the horse again and sat just like Elise with her legs to one side. Her red and white frock flowed down to its normal height.

Xander sighed. “While we’re in Nohr, remind Leo to give you some riding lessons,” he said as he turned his horse to face the path they would be headed down. One by one, they all took off. Camilla and Beruka took off on their wyverns, flying towards Windmire to book the inn they would be staying at. The trip would have been more convenient if everyone had wyverns, but they were so rare, even among the army, and none of them except for Camilla and Beruka had the years of training required to fly one of those beasts.
Leo huffed, guiding his horse into a canter. “Do I really need to?” he sighed. There goes his free time that could be used for studying.

Nodding at his little brother, Xander said, “Yes. It would be improper if a princess, who will be living here permanently, could not go about visiting the kingdom when she wants. She is not a hostage, she is your wife. Treat her like one. Teach her how to ride a horse.”

As Leo groaned to the heavens for cursing him with this fate, Niles brought his horse right beside Leo, looking past his lord towards Xander. “Oh, is that all the princess will be riding?” he asked, licking his dry lips. “I can think of a few more that our lovely prince would love to teach her.”

Instead of dignifying his words with a response, Leo glared at his retainer until Niles turned away and focused on the dirt road ahead. Sakura watched as Leo carefully reached over to the saddlebags on Niles’ horse, clenching his legs tight on the body of his own horse to keep balance. Then, without Niles knowing, Leo grappled for the leather riding crop.

“Ride this!” he hissed before delivering a loud crack to the brown horse’s rear. The horse bucked and whinnied, and Niles instinctively held tight, the grin wiped off his face and replaced with fear. The horse broke out into a run. Niles frantically pulled at his reins, but his experience in actually handling horses was very minimal. He managed to make his horse calm down at least twenty meters ahead of the rest of the group.

When Leo managed to see Niles’ remorseful, bitter countenance, he started laughing behind his hand. Sakura joined him, feeling pride in Leo’s revenge.

Xander sighed heavily. “It’s going to be a long trip...” he said to himself.

The sky slowly turned dark as they dredged on towards the nearest village. Sakura counted 12,562 trees their group passed, lost count, and started over twice. Her body was starting to sway, her thighs hurting from the constant motion of the horse. She wondered how Leo was holding up, imagining it felt worse sitting astride than sidesaddle. She tried to keep her posture straight as they made their way through each city, but the weight of being forced into the same position for hours was bearing down on her. Sakura grew restless.
“Four more miles and we should be just outside Fort Dragonfall,” Xander sighed, looking up at the sky. “Camilla and Beruka should be there by now.” He too was starting to lose his poise, sinking into a hunch like the setting sun. Leo grunted and arched his back, hearing his spine pop under his heavy dark clothes. Everyone else was slowly losing their energy, even Peri who formerly seemed like she could take on anything.

Sakura yawned into her hand. They had made several short stops in three hour intervals to feed themselves and their mounts, but as they were nearing the village, they decided to continue on so they could reach it before night. Despite all being war veterans and more than ready to take on a gang of lowly bandits, they would rather not face conflict right after arriving home. Sakura wondered if they could take a short stop to power nap.

All throughout their journey, Sakura had made sure to make as little bodily contact with Leo as possible. She did not wrap her arms around his waist, she did not lean her body on his. She would not force Leo into a position he would rather her older brother be in to take her place.

However, this did not mean that Sakura was any good at it. On occasion, Sakura would snap back to her senses and find her side gently pressed against Leo’s back for support. And she would right herself again, keeping to her no-touch policy. But by gods, it was difficult when she kept yawning.

Elise wasn’t holding up that well either. She shifted her position to lay flat on her back on the span of the horse’s back, body rolling with each step it took. Everyone seemed to be drifting to some sort of dream world, adjusting to the monotony that was traveling via horseback. And Sakura was having a harder time than most, since she could not lay down on the horse with someone else already on it.

Sakura yawned again, caught herself leaning against Leo’s back again, righted her posture again. *We’re almost there,* she thought, hopeful. *I just want to lay down, this horse is exhausting.*

Barely listening with her mind too foggy to know for sure if he said something, Sakura could have sworn she heard Leo’s voice. She let out a tiny snort as she blinked herself awake.

“Did you say something, Leo?” she asked in a whisper.

Leo paused, turning his neck to look back at her over his shoulder. “You don’t need to be so shy,” he murmured so nobody else could hear. “You’ve been trying to sleep for two hours now. I’m not going to break if you lean on me.”
Sakura hesitated, averting his surprisingly sharp gaze. “A-are you sure? I-I, um…” I don’t want you remembering my brother, I don’t want that to make you sad. Sakura wanted to say, but her tiredness was keeping her from articulating those thoughts. She rubbed her eyes, yawning again.

“… Positive,” Leo said, turning to face in front of him again. “Or don’t. It’s up to you.”

With her judgement pitted against her in favor of the promise of sleep, Sakura slowly lowered herself to press her head to the crook of Leo’s broad shoulder, her pink hair brushing his exposed neck. The rest of her body naturally melted against his, her hands folded politely in her lap. Under her touch, he felt him right his posture a bit more, to sit a little taller in the saddle. She sighed in bliss. Finally she could close her eyes and not worry about falling off the horse again.

I’m sorry, Takumi.

When they finally did arrive at a cozy inn, Leo reached back and gently shook Sakura’s thigh to wake her, but not before Camilla caught sight of their party and teased him for how cute his wife was being. Leo simply rolled his eyes and rubbed his own thighs to return some of the feeling in his legs.

My dear Takumi,

You may stop worrying so hard--your sister and I have landed safely in Windmire. Though some parts of our team withered and died of boredom during the long trek here, I made sure that the part you like the most is well taken care of.

Let it be known that Sakura’s first lesson in Nohr is to learn how to ride a horse. Not Nohrian politics, culture, dance, history, religion, or geography. Horseback riding. And I’m the teacher. You may laugh. There are so many topics and subjects I am better suited to teach, though I suppose travel is key to freedom.

The people thus far have been outwardly welcoming to Sakura, not knowing the truth behind her shifting castles. Though there is a flaw in the plan--I have no idea if we might have a rebel among
our staff or trusted officials, a Nohrian extremist who still does not like Hoshido. I do not wish to make you more anxious, so Xander is keeping an especially close eye on us. I do not think anything bad will happen to us in the meantime, and if something does happen, you know I’ll write to you.

Xander is publicly announcing my marriage to Sakura next week as soon as we arrive inside the castle. A second wedding is being discussed. If I need to watch her walk down the aisle again, someone is going to be murdered. What can a prince do to have some peace and quiet after months of traveling?

Huh. I just came home and yet I already long your company.

Are you eating well? I know that when you feel anxious, your eating habits change and you end up starving yourself without someone prompting you to eat something. You say you can take care of yourself just fine, but please, let someone worry about you from time to time. You can’t be the only one worrying about everything. Let me take some of your burden.

Love,

Leo

Dear Takumi,

You asked for me to write to you, so here I am. So far, my stay in Nohr has been eventful, to say the least. Camilla gives me a surprising amount of attention. She even let me pet her scary wyvern! It was much less slimy and snake-like than I thought it would be. Elise has not left my side since embarking on the ship. She talks about many things, you know how she is. She keeps my mind preoccupied.

Do not let anyone else know, but I suspect she does not like her fiance much. That is just my speculation.
Leo is fine. Every single lunch we shared, he always has a book in his hands. I didn’t take you seriously when you said I needed to drag him out of the library by his ears. I think I might need to take you seriously in that regard once we settle into the castle. Otherwise, we get along fine, or at least we seem to be. I really do not want to be a bother to you both, like a wedge in your relationship. I imagine this fake-marriage might turn out fine. Let’s see how well his attitude holds up when he teaches me how to ride a horse. Horses are lovely, but also kind of scary, don’t you think? They are very unlike pegasi in their mannerisms. Speaking of which, say hi to Hinoka for me. Or did she already leave for home?

I’ve been thinking about what to name the baby. Do you have any suggestions? Only 5 or 6 months to go...

Love,

Sakura

Chapter End Notes

Those Sakulise feels hit hard. I wonder if this is going to turn into a Takumi/Leo/Sakura/Elise fic because idk if I can handle that responsibility but holy hell does that add another layer of something interesting. Or I might keep them as friends? Let me know what you guys think.

Also, really, really important question: Should I make Sakura's baby the father's canon child or should I make it Forrest with the other father's hair? I feel like making it Forrest with the other father's hair color will leave a bit of mystery, whereas making it the mystery father's child would make it clear who the father really is. Like, let's just say for example the father of Sakura's illegitimate child is Jakob (which it's not) should she have Forrest with white hair or Dwyer with pink hair? This probably won't affect the story much, but it just depends on if you guys want me to out the father upon birth and naming of the child, or by some other means which might be more interesting. Let me know what you think.

Feedback me, reader-senpai.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sakura: *sneezes in Leo's direction*
Leo: Ugh stop looking at me.

Chapter Notes

Boy oh boy let me tell you guys something. First off, let me apologize for taking so long in updating this fic. It started with hell week with projects and essays and exams all cramped into a single week. That was a couple weeks ago. Ever since, I have been studying for midterms, which I just took, and now I'm more or less off the hook until next week. To make up for it, this is the longest chapter I have published in a multi-chap fic, nearing 10k words. I hope this helps!

This chapter mainly focuses on building Sakura's awareness of events happening around her now that she is living in Nohr. She is also exposed to other married couples and their children (kinda) which will become more of a plot device later. Since Camilla is in a lesbian relationship and therefore does not actually have a canon child, I kinda just did what I could in regards to that. You'll see. Not much shipping action except Leo and Sakura kind of growing closer, but still not to a major point. I intend to have them acting as friends in the next chapter, not so much this one.

Also Niles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weather in Nohr was nice, Sakura decided. A bit frigid while nearing the winter months, but nice. It was different from Hoshido; the skies were usually dark with heavy, ominous clouds blocking the sun. Sometimes the sun would peek out from behind the clouds and the Nohrians would stop whatever they were doing and bask in this rare occasion. The first time this happened while passing through the city, Sakura felt her heart drop at the sudden silence. The dull chatter echoing throughout the agora paused, and she saw everyone look up at the sky where streaks of light filtered through the darkness. Children pointed at the sun, their eyes burning with effort. The royal family hardly noticed.

It was nice, Sakura decided, that there was something bringing everyone together. Even if the sun did eventually fade away after a short period and everyone resumed their conversations, she understood now what Xander had said to her the night of her wedding. For a kingdom as dark as Nohr, seeing the sun start to come out was bound to be a good sign.

Hey, at least she was trying to stay positive.
At the moment, she sat alone in front of Castle Krakenburg’s large windows facing outside the fort, curled up in a plush seat. Leo had been adamant in getting right back to his work alongside Xander, and Elise retired early, stating that she was beat from traveling for so long and wanted to sleep right away. Camilla was greeted by Flora and daughter at the door, pecking her lips with a short, happy kiss and ruffling her two-year-old daughter’s hair.

“Scarlet!” Camilla swooned, taking her child from the arms of her wife to hold against her own bosom. The child suckled her pacifier with vigor, staring up at her mother with soulful brown eyes. “Oh, how I’ve missed you! Do you remember Mama?” She chuckled, nuzzling the child’s wispy blueish hair. Then she looked up at her smiling wife. “My dear, how have you been? Sorry for taking so long on our trip. I hope Scarlet didn’t cause you too much trouble. The rest of my evening is yours.”

"Yes," Flora smiled, inclining her head a fraction of the way. Old habits die hard. "I can't wait."

Sakura drank from her hot cup of tea, watching as cargo carriages moved in and out of view from her window. Didn’t she name her daughter after that one fallen soldier? she thought, knowing she had never gotten to know the warrior girl personally. Her wife is from the Ice Tribe... right? There was no need for my family to be at her wedding. I don’t think I ever heard her name before.

Silently, she tapped the side of her cup with her nails, contemplating her surroundings. Sakura was told the rest of the evening was up to her to spend until dinner. During her few trips to Nohr in the past, she had gotten to know the castle quite a bit, but knew she could still easily get lost without a guide. Yet she did not want to stay complacent. Her curiosity about Krakenburg’s secret crevices and passages had her dreaming up elaborate ways they could be used and where they lead.

Probably torture chambers and dungeons, Sakura’s mind drifted to, and her eyes widened with that thought. She nearly choked on her tea, setting it down in her lap instead once her breathing calmed down. Xander wouldn’t keep any torture devices after King Garon died and he took the throne. There’s no way...

She heard a tiny tapping sound behind her plush chair. Sakura turned and saw Scarlet running on wobbly legs across the stone hallway, an embroidered baby blanket swung over her shoulder. She was wearing only her cloth diaper, suggesting she was going to be bathed beforehand. From the end of the hall, Camilla’s worried voice echoed, calling Scarlet’s name. The toddler spotted Sakura and quickly teetered over to her chair, holding up her arms expectantly. Sakura stared down at the child with a blank expression, wondering what she wanted.

“Scarlet!” Camilla called again. “Why are you running away from Mama, dear?”
Scarlet suckled on her pacifier, the sound bringing back Sakura’s attention. *Does she want me to pick her up?* she thought, watching as the toddler started waving her arms in the air above her head and stomping her small feet impatiently against the rug. Sakura carefully placed her cup of tea at the foot of her chair and grabbed Scarlet’s soft sides, heaving the child towards her torso. She sat back in her seat, the child curling up against her chest. Scarlet held her blanket against Sakura’s shoulder, suckling her pacifier with tired eyes.

Sakura looked down at the toddler hesitantly. *Is this what motherhood is like?* she wondered, one hand reaching down to her abdomen. There was a growing hardness to her stomach, like her insides just beginning to be pulled taught right under her skin, but nothing was too visible under a dress yet. *I wonder if Scarlet can feel the child’s presence...*

When Camilla did come into view, she exhaled a sigh of relief, a hand on her bosom. “Thank you so much for catching her,” she cooed, approaching Sakura’s chair and holding out her hands to Scarlet. “This bad girl tried to escape her bath and made a huge mess on her way. She even got her blanket wet!” She sighed, and Sakura held Scarlet out for her to take. Camilla immediately held her daughter to her chest, bouncing the toddler in her gentle hold.

Scarlet stared up at her mother with a blank expression, and Sakura assumed she was offended at Camilla for picking her up. How dare her own mother chase her down and bring her back to the bath? To be bathed?! Insane, this world.

“Oh, don’t give me that look, dear. What can I do to make you happy?” Camilla hummed with a small smile, looking down at her daughter with every ounce of love and affection residing in her big heart. Then she gasped. “Oh, I know!” She then put her mouth to Scarlet’s short neck and blew out a puff of air, making a loud, crude sound. Scarlet’s mouth opened wide, dropping her pacifier and blanket onto the floor below her, and she laughed. Her giggle, like the tiny chime of silver bells, resonated throughout the hallway. Camilla took her mouth off Scarlet’s squirming body only to raspberry her fat stomach. Scarlet started screaming her laughter, mouth wide with a gap-toothed grin.

When she came down from her high, Scarlet curled against Camilla’s chest like she had done with Sakura, sucking on her thumb. She seemed almost ready to nap. Camilla leaned down, balancing her baby against her body, and picked up the pacifier and baby blanket with expert grace. “Thank you again for making sure she didn’t get away. I hope she didn’t bother you,” she smiled.

Sakura shook her head. “No, not at all!” she attested, standing before Camilla meekly. “She’s the one who wanted me to pick her up. She just came to me and held her arms up.”
Camilla chuckled, gazing affectionately at her daughter. “Yes, she does that quite a bit. It’s scary to think she might do that to strangers, though. At least I know I can trust you, but to think she went up to you without knowing who you are... Ah...” she trailed off, looking up at a nearby tapestry with the Nohrian flag on it. Then she seemed to shake something off. “Well, nothing to worry about now. It seems like my little Scarlet has taken a liking to you. You should come to my quarters and play with her sometime, I’m sure she would love another playmate.”

Smiling, Sakura nodded. “Absolutely. Any time,” she grinned, staring at the baby who stared back with her big brown eyes, as if understanding how much of a facade Sakura was putting on so as not to offend her new sister-in-law. She was looking right through her, and Sakura could feel it.

Camilla hesitated for a moment, opening her mouth to say something, then shutting it. By the time she opened her mouth again, Flora called her name, asking if she found Scarlet. “Now if you’ll excuse me, this little one needs a bath,” she said, giving Sakura one last smile before walking away. Scarlet looked over her mother’s shoulder and slowly waved Sakura goodbye. Sakura waved back with a small forced smile.

When Sakura sat back down in her seat, she picked her half-filled cup of tea and took a sip, only to grimace at the taste. Too cold, she thought, putting it down again and returning her gaze to the window and the lives going on outside, far away from her.

Sakura rubbed her eyes, yawning loudly in front of her husband. It was a rough night sleeping in a new castle that she wasn’t entirely used to yet, plagued with nightmares filled with guilt and loud unborn babies. She had tried to take care of them, but with every second that passed, her fear doubled, and they were all dead from some sort of plague. And as much as she called for Leo in her dream, he never came. After she had awoken far before sunrise, Sakura had half a mind to knock on her husband’s door seeking comfort, but when she did in the middle of the night, she was met with Leo’s unbridled attitude telling her to go back to bed and then some. Her only hope was Elise, who helped set up a spare mattress in her bedroom for the rest of the night.

Leo yawned as well, having been up late revising and signing certain agreements and documents that Xander would later go over and put a royal seal on. He didn’t quite know when he passed out on his desk, but when Sakura knocked on his door, he was probably saved from a whole new world of neck pain and back ache. He ought to be grateful, he knew, but there was some things he would never admit out loud.
Together they stood beside the royal stables, having picked out an old, sweet-looking white horse for Sakura to practice on. Sakura dressed carefully in the clothes she was supplied with, wearing leggings and a short pink dress so she could learn to ride astride like Leo and everyone else. She stared up at the horse’s face with unease, feeling small and vulnerable next to the beast.

Leo checked the reins and saddle to make sure they were properly secured by the stable boy. Upon deeming them correctly done, he handed the reins to Sakura. “Don’t be scared,” he sighed, then added, “They can smell fear.”

At this, Sakura gulped, staring at the horse skeptically. She held the reins to her chest. “A-are you sure about that?” she asked, eyes widening in fright. “The horse we rode here d-didn’t do that, right?”

“Because I was controlling him,” Leo shrugged off, folding his hands behind his back. “Let’s get started. Use the mounting block to get on her. I’m sure you already have a feel for how to do that.” He gestured for Sakura to stand on the mounting block placed to the side of the mare.

Sakura stared at it before hesitantly putting her right foot on top of the mounting block. “Wrong foot,” Leo corrected. Sakura quickly changed her footing, balancing her hands on the side of the horse. He moved to the front of the steed, blocking her from moving, and calmly ran his hand over her muzzle. “Now swing your leg over the back to sit yourself in the saddle. Stabilize yourself with the stirrups.”

Slowly doing as she was told, she sat on the horse’s back with little resistance. Finally, she was taller than Leo. The mare was too distracted by his petting to fully realize that she was being mounted by an unknown rider. Sakura righted herself to the best of her abilities, holding the reins close to her body as if she was about to lose control of the horse at any moment.

“Fix your posture,” Leo commanded, looking over the horse’s head to her. “Back straight, shoulders even. You want to hug the horse’s body with your legs, and the best way to do this is to keep your feet turned inward, toes up.” Sakura shifted, trying to judge how straight her posture was without a mirror. Her knees clenched against the horse’s sides. “Make a fist and pass the reins through to hold them. The pinky goes on the outside, the thumb on top to secure them in your hold.” Leo approached her side and took the reins to show Sakura the proper way.

Once she was secure and ready, Leo looked up to her and nodded. “And now we ride,” he proclaimed, clicking his tongue to set the horse off in a slow walk.
Sakura felt her body move with every step the horse took. She tried not to be too stiff in her posture, but the motions of the beast jerking under her was strange for her to feel under her. Leo followed close to the horse’s side, keen brown eyes flicking over her, constantly checking her form for errors.

“Don’t slouch,” he ordered, and Sakura immediately obliged. “Hold your reins tighter. If you don’t hold yourself like you’re in control, the horse will take control of you.”

Sakura gawked down at him. “Y-you’re not serious!” she gasped. Leo rolled his eyes.

“You’ll see what horses are capable of. They’re different from pegasi, they have minds and personalities of their own. You’re lucky this horse is a very trusted veteran and not a rambunctious young colt, or she would be a lot more difficult to control. Pay attention!”

Gulping down her doubt, Sakura tightened her fists on the reins. They felt weird in the grip that Leo described. Her weight bounced slightly, her knees knocking occasionally against the sides of the horse’s muscled body. The mare’s blonde hair blew with the brisk November breeze. Sakura thought it was the same shade as Leo’s.

Leo lead the horse in slow circles around the field for about a half hour, treading closely just in case she took off or sped up without his command. “Pull on the reins with your left hand to go left,” he said, and Sakura did as she was told, turning the horse away from his direction. He murmured a word of praise.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” Sakura smiled, experimentally tugging the opposite side of her reins. The horse hesitantly followed her command, grunting melodramatically. The mount slowly lowered her head, making herself more difficult to guide. Leo noticed the building hissy fit and intervened, running up to Sakura’s side and pulling back the reins hard. Before the steed could possibly buck or rear, he patted the mare’s strong neck, trying to calm the horse down. “D-did I do something wrong? Oh no...” she trailed off, one hand raised to her mouth.

The horse snorted, stomping its front hooves slightly. But her muscles visibly relaxed upon seeing a familiar face. Leo sighed, his hand stopping on her nose. “No. Well, at least not something that would cause her to lose control. I think this is it for today,” he said, making sure that the mount stopped completely before running to get the mounting block.

Sakura chewed her lip, looking down at the horse’s head. Slowly and carefully, she leaned down and patted her neck, just as she had seen Leo do. *I guess she was just following Leo’s orders and not mine,* Sakura thought to herself sadly.
When Leo came back, he placed the block by the mare’s side and gestured for Sakura to climb down. “Come on, let’s give her some rest. To be ridden by any foreign rider is jarring for any mount,” he shrugged off, stepping away to give Sakura some space.

Letting go of the reins, Sakura huffed and grabbed the pommel for support before slowly and carefully raising her right leg up and over the horse’s back. Before Leo could point out her mistake, Sakura’s left foot, which was still in the stirrup, swung away from the mounting block with her weight, throwing her off balance. When her leg was all the way over, Sakura grappled the saddle for balance, only to find it slowly turn and rotate in a way that left her hanging on for dear life. And what’s worse, the horse noticed this odd shift in weight and nervously began to canter away from Leo. Sakura screamed.

Leo jogged after her, ordering her to not let go or else she would be trampled. The mare was too far away for Leo to follow, so from about ten feet behind, Leo began shouting commands.

“Sakura, on the count of three, tuck in your legs and push off of the horse!” Leo commanded, cupping his hands over his mouth so she could hear. “One, two--”

“Wait!” Sakura squeaked, feeling her grip loosen with every second that passed. “If I let go, it’s gonna step on me!”

“Just trust me!” Leo grunted, willing the mare to slow down. Instead, she seemed to speed up, making this more dangerous for her. He wouldn’t let Sakura get hurt. Not with him around. He took a breath. “One, two, three!”

Sakura squeezed her eyes shut and felt her grip fall off the saddle completely. Her back hit the hard ground, softened only by patches of thin yellow grass. A rock scraped across her pale cheek, drawing trace amounts of blood. The horse passed her without trampling, bucking and rearing some feet away until the saddle came undone. Leo ran to Sakura’s side.

“Are you alright?” he spared no time asking, offering Sakura a hand. She seethed through her teeth at her sore body, rising to a sitting position. “I’m terribly sorry for this accident, I should have helped you down myself. If I had known your foot would get caught, well…” As she dusted herself off, Leo looked Sakura over, who stood beside him fixing her hair. “I apologize.”

Sakura took a deep breath, feeling the cold air fill her lungs. She thought that she would never be able to do something as simple as that ever again. “It’s... it’s fine,” she said quickly, averting her
eyes. She felt a rock jab her elbow while she was tumbling, and now she rubbed the area that was no doubt bruised. “At least you helped save me.”

Taking another breath, he thought for a moment before looking down at Sakura’s stomach with a pause. “… Is your… er… is the baby…?” Leo tried to ask, but the words weren’t coming out. It was as if he didn’t even want to fully recognize the existence of a third party among them.

Glancing downward quickly, Sakura rested one hand on her abdomen. “O-oh, um, I think it’s okay,” she stuttered, staring bashfully down at a patch of dandelions. “I didn’t land on my stomach, so…”

Leo sighed in relief as the horse stopped her canter and trotted over to an oddly green patch of grass, stopping for a bite. “Let’s not repeat this,” he said, pulling her to her feet.

Nodding, Sakura agreed. She was still in a state of shock from everything that happened and everything more than a meter away seemed blurry and unreal, but in the end she would do anything to not remember this lesson. “I… would rather go riding with a different horse as well,” she admitted, rotating her elbow to feel the extent of her damage. She winced. “Or maybe I’ll just stick to riding with someone else on the horse with me.”

Leo elicited an uneasy huff, approaching the rebellious mare and pulling her reins to follow him towards the stable. Sakura could see he was being more forceful than usual. “And another thing,” he seethed to Sakura, who followed at his side. “Let’s… not tell Xander about how this lesson turned out. The last thing I need is him freaking out about you and berating me for not doing the proper thing.”

“Agreed,” Sakura sighed, keeping one eye on the horse warily until she was handed off to the stable boy, who had been watching the entire time and was red faced and teary eyed from laughing too hard. If Sakura wasn’t there, she wouldn’t be so sure Leo would have let him off without severe punishment, or at least a biting remark. But he was quiet through it all, if not a bit embarrassed, even as they started heading back towards the heart of the castle. Sakura’s eyes were trained intensely on the back of Leo’s head.

Later, when Sakura told Elise about all that had happened, Elise laughed so hard there were tears in her eyes. By the time she could breathe, she wasted no time in offering to punch Leo for Sakura, to which Sakura politely declined.
It was two days and Sakura quickly realized how absurd her new siblings-in-law were in their natural habitat.

Even though she had vague knowledge of Camilla knowing how to sew and embroider many things, since she often send finished projects as presents when she couldn’t visit Sakura and her family in Hoshido, Sakura never knew how creative Camilla could get with a needle and thread.

With a sweetly smiling face, her older sister-in-law handed her a sheet of sheer pink fabric with red thread creating patterns across what Sakura assumed was a loincloth similar to the one Camilla wore to battle all those years ago. Carefully, she unfolded it to hold out in front of her, eyes scanning the designs with changing expressions.

Sakura’s eyes fixated on the intricate rose petals and designs that bloomed across the corners, rimmed with subtle gold trimming. The petals spun from the epicenter of each bud, scattering across the length of the fabric in a way that reminded Sakura of Hoshido’s cherry blossom festivals. Perhaps that was where Camilla got her inspiration? Her eyes traveled to the center where perfect script etched a quote in fine gold.

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage. -Lao Tzu”

Pursing her lips, Sakura looked back at Camilla, who smiled expectantly back at her. “Camilla...” she paused, thinking carefully about her next words in order not to offend her. “I appreciate the gift, but you know... Leo and I... well, we d-didn’t marry for l-love...” For some reason, the words didn’t want to come out. It was such a sick truth.

Camilla’s smile wavered a little, but was fixed as soon as it left. “Oh, I know,” she purred, tossing some of her lavender hair behind her shoulder. “But that doesn’t mean there can’t be love.” She said it so matter-of-factly that Sakura was left reeling in her wake.

“B-but!” Sakura stammered, clenching the beautiful fabric in her hands. She didn’t intend to wrinkle it, but she couldn’t help her nervous habits. “W-we aren’t in love! I-I think that’s just wishful thinking.” Besides, he’s in love with my brother, Sakura thought offhandedly, then shook it quickly from her mind.
Clicking her tongue, Camilla cooed as she stepped closer to Sakura. “Ooh, you don’t give yourself enough credit,” she said, head tilted to the side. “You’re a lovely young woman, pregnant or not. Leo never cared for such details like virginity, and besides, you’re sweet and patient, everything that he needs in his life right now. Not to mention you would do best with someone who is gallant, intelligent, and has connections to humanitarian projects in Nohr. It’s a perfect partnership with both of you benefiting, I don’t know why I didn’t see it before.”

Biting her bottom lip, Sakura held the fabric close to her chest. Her face was burning with embarrassment. “Your support is appreciated, but...”

Camilla placed a comforting hand gingerly on Sakura’s shoulder. “Look,” she said, and Sakura hesitantly met her purple eyes. “When I got married, I had the same thoughts you had. I kept thinking, ‘This is it, I’ll never be truly happy with someone, how will I ever experience love now?’ But instead of complaining, I gave it a year. I had tea with Flora daily. I went on morning strolls and hunted by her side. Sometimes I thought I was annoying, that she didn’t want to spend time with me. But eventually, the more positive experiences we shared, the closer we were.

“Even now... even now, I wouldn’t say we are completely enamored with each other. Even after having a lovely daughter, whom I wouldn’t trade for the world, we still have our ups and downs, trying to figure everything out. But there still isn’t a single person, besides my family, who I would not defend with my own life more than her. These struggles are expected, Sakura. You’ll sort them out. And if you need help pushing Leo in the right direction, you come to me. Marriages are always much better when you are in love, after all. And it can happen, even after the fact.”

Bringing Sakura’s face to her endowed chest, Camilla pulled her into a tight hug. “I’m here for you. And I’ll do anything to make sure your marriage is as smooth and happy as possible.”

At this, Sakura felt a pang of guilt shoot through her core. Of course I won’t be happy, she thought, pulling away from Camilla’s hug and forcing a painted smile on her face. Of course Leo won’t be happy. We were destined to be miserable and it’s all my fault.

“Thank you,” Sakura said, folding the fabric in her arms again. “I... I appreciate it.”

Camilla smiled widely. “Any time. And I mean it. Any time at all.”
It took a while for them to run into each other, but when they did, Sakura was shocked to see Charlotte running frantic around the castle looking for her husband. She still looked as lovely as Sakura remembered her, even from those years ago; not much has changed. Her blonde curls were even longer, stretching down to the back of her knees, and her laugh lines were ever so slightly deeper with age. She even was miraculously able to lose her belly weight after her pregnancy came and went, never once losing her muscles from years of axe fighting. But her demeanor did not change.

“Oh, yes, I heard about your marriage,” Charlotte mumbled offhandedly, eyes darting every which way as she speed walked through the stone hallway into another. Her long white dress trailed behind her like a specter. “Congratulations. I’m sorry I couldn’t have been there.”

“I-it’s alright,” Sakura stammered, following Charlotte’s every step. She would have suggested they split up, but perhaps Charlotte would be able to show her a new part of the castle she was not previously exposed to? She hoped so. “What were you doing that kept you from greeting us yesterday?”

Raising her hand to her mouth, Charlotte started biting her fingernails anxiously, never once looking back at her shorter comrade. “I was with my mother,” she quipped, turning down another wing. “Her health is quickly declining. I was hoping that the castle would have doctors good enough to help her, but even Elise is having trouble keeping her health up. She’s getting on in her years, which I guess is to be expected, but...” She trailed off with a pout, not speaking up after that. Sakura did not press her. When the two finally opened the door to Xander’s office, Charlotte threw her arms in the air, grinning widely. “Hubby!” she cheered, exasperated as she approached her husband with mirth. Xander looked up at her briefly before putting down his quill next to the parchment he was writing on. Charlotte wrapped her strong arms around him, pressing peppered kisses to his temple. Xander’s usually stoic face lit up with a small smile.

“Charlotte, I assume your presence means Mother is in a stable condition?” Xander inquired, looking up at his wife’s clear blue eyes. He made no movement to rise from his chair, but his concern for her was enough. Together, they were sucked into their own little world without Sakura, just husband and wife.

Worrying her bottom lip, Charlotte averted her gaze towards her husband’s desk, filled with documents and letters from all around the continent. She didn’t understand half of it. “She... she’s doing fine, I suppose. For now, at least.”
The soft smile on Xander’s lips faded, back to his usual look of stoicism with a hint of sternness that came with being a king. “I am sure she will overcome her illness despite her old age,” he assured her. “We have the best doctors in all of Nohr at her call. There’s nothing they cannot treat. We just need to be patient and give it time, my love.” He took one of her hands into his, running a thumb over her hidden callouses. Then he enveloped it with both of his hands, giving her a couple comforting pats.

Charlotte gave Xander a grateful smile, her eyes lighting up with hope. Balancing her hip on the arm of Xander’s chair, she leaned over and pulled her husband into a gentle, wordless hug. Xander wrapped his strong arms around the curve of Charlotte’s waist, resting his hands on the lower back of her dress. They didn’t need to say a word. After being married for several years, they already felt everything their partner wanted to say, but couldn’t.

Sakura really didn’t want to interrupt, but she wasn’t entirely sure where in the castle she was or how to get back to Leo’s study or if she should even be there in the first place, but standing at the door of a king’s office while said king—her brother-in-law—was consoling the queen over very intimate matters felt odd. So she folded her hands over her lap and cleared her throat. Xander was the first to pull away and addressed Sakura in the room.

“I... I don’t know the details, but...” she started, wringing her hands together. Charlotte locked her eyes on the younger woman, the remnants of her hope growing bigger. “I-I’m sure your mother will come out alright. I don’t know much about Nohrian ailments, so I probably wouldn’t be of much use, b-but... I’m here if you need the extra support.”

Charlotte’s tense expression melted, and she smiled down at Sakura. If it were four years ago, Sakura would have expected that smile to have something hidden beneath. But after everything that had happened, she felt like she could trust the Nohrian Queen without regard for her promiscuous past.

“Thank you very much, Princess Sakura,” she said with a soft giggle. “I’m sure that with everyone’s help and support, my mother will live to see another year.”

Sakura nodded, bowing her head slightly to stare bashfully at the floor.

Xander tapped his fingers on the edge of his desk. “Charlotte,” he said, looking up at his wife. “How is Seigbert doing among all of this?”

Instead of answering immediately, Charlotte tsked and waved her husband off. “He’s doing just fine. I left him in the care of his favorite nurses and I made sure to visit him four times yesterday. I kind of
feel bad for the nurses, though. That stinker is *this* close to being able to climb out of his crib and hurt himself!”

Xander sighed, taking his quill in his hand again. “I suppose he wouldn’t understand what his grandmother is going through even if we explained it to him,” he supposed, signing his signature on one of the documents. “I should visit more often.” Before Charlotte could say something along the lines of “Of course you should, sweetie!” Xander continued with, “You should as well, Sakura. It would help you take care of your future children if you had experience, which I don’t assume you had much of since you’re the youngest of your siblings and Prince Shiro was just born.”

Sakura was about to say, “I appreciate it, but I don’t want to” Charlotte interrupted her thoughts. “Don’t you think it’s a bit early for her to think of raising kids?” she said, raising her palm to cup her own cheek. “I mean, it took us a couple years to be perfectly comfortable, I’d imagine it’s the same for her. *Especially* Leo, since he doesn’t seem, you know, the type to be excited about having kids?”

Xander dipped his quill into the inkwell, hiding his vaguely amused expression from his wife. “You never know with these things,” he said, leaving Charlotte to decipher his cryptic message. “It’s always best to be prepared.”

Charlotte huffed and didn’t say anything more on the subject. Instead, she left to find the kitchen, as lunch was fast approaching. Sakura trailed behind her in silence, stomach rumbling ever so slightly. Every attempt she made to learn more about Charlotte’s mother was brushed off. Every attempt Charlotte made to learn about her and Leo’s stance on raising kids was ignored.

By the looks the maids gave her, Sakura was starting to think *maaybe giving into my cravings isn’t such a good idea*. It was her tenth day living in Nohr, her new permanent home, and she had already eaten through three whole melons and made a dent in the kitchen’s abundant potato supply. Perhaps she was being over-the-top in her “eating for two” mentality, but at least she had a reason for craving foods in a quantity no normal person would want.

Leo didn’t have a reason.

“What do you want?” he sighed, nose deep into a book and even deeper into a ripe, raw tomato in
his free hand. Sakura stared in horror at the crimson sphere as juice cascaded down the skin and into Leo’s palm. If this was his type of midnight snack, Sakura was having second thoughts about her cravings. He took another bite, waiting for her to respond. “Come now, speak up.”

How can someone do that? Sakura thought, watching her husband’s teeth tear through the red flesh of the tomato as if it were something more socially acceptable, like an apple, or a whole orange, or literally any other fruit in existence. This castle is filled with weird people, isn’t it? Now I’m getting to see them act as they normally would for the first time, and it’s all so strange! Oh gods, Leo isn’t helping. I’m married to a weirdo!

Sakura gulped and opened her mouth to speak, but was silenced by the opening of the study door. It swung open to Sakura’s side, revealing none other than Leo’s trusted retainer. At the familiar sight of Niles’ eyepatch and cold smirk, she cringed at what was to come. Leo snapped his book shut.

Niles briefly bowed his head towards his liege in respect. “Milord,” he greeted, then as a side thought, repeated it towards Sakura with a quick, “Milady.” He cleared his throat and took a few steps into the room, clearly making himself at home. “Sorry to have taken so long. It was quite the short notice I was given to fulfill this task.”

“I detailed it in my report prior to coming home,” Leo attested, crossing his legs where he sat. He took one last bite from his tomato before wrapping up the scraps in a handkerchief to throw away later. “You were supposed to weed out the Nohrian extremists in the castle—”

“Which I did,” Niles interrupted, holding his hands up. “I made a note of them and everything. And while I could have poisoned them in their sleep, I figured doing so would lead to suspicion and mayhem among the castle. Even so, the list is subjective. It’s hard to distinguish the butlers who are shy from those hiding secrets. And now that everyone knows you took a Hoshidan bride, it’ll be even harder to do so since they know you’ll be coming for them.”

Leo pinched the bridge of his nose with a huff. With his free hand, he ran his fingers over the edges of the cover, picking at the worn out pages. “Please tell me you went more into depth with your research,” he all but begged.

Niles smirked his sleazy smirk, sending an uneasy shiver down Sakura’s spine. “If they had families, I tried to check in with them. If their families showed hatred to Hoshido or my buddies underground said they had a history against them, they got written down. As I said, you were unclear with how you wanted me to dispose of their bodies, but as long as we got the weeds isolated, all you need to do is initiate action.” He crossed his arms, clearly proud with himself.
Tapping his nails on the cover of the book, Leo pursed his lips. “And you left no room for error?” he asked.

“So long as you have ordered it, so it shall be done, Milord.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Leo growled under his breath, but then stopped himself, inhaling deeply. “It doesn’t matter. They will be vetted by Xander and I accordingly, and if you missed anyone, hopefully they will lead to outing others. I sincerely hope that this won’t end up taking a large portion of our servants out of the castle.”

Niles took a written list from one of his bags and handed it to Leo. “It shouldn’t,” he assured.

Leo took it and, after giving it a brief scan, looked up at his retainer. “You understand what is at stake here, don’t you?” he asked calmly, with a subtle hint of vulnerability beneath his facade.

For the first time since meeting him during her first ever visit to Nohr, Sakura saw Niles grimace. “I would never rest until my liege is perfectly safe. Your life is more valuable than mine, after all—well, yours and your new wife’s—and as your retainer, I would do anything in my power to ensure your safety and wellbeing. Trust me when I say I did all I could.”

“And yet any mistakes could lead to our death,” Leo seethed, shivering at the thought. Sakura felt the icy tendrils of dread seep through her body and mind, numbing her as she imagined her name on a gravestone in a kingdom far from her birthplace, the skeleton of an unborn fetus buried six feet deep with her, because a maid got away with poisoning her food or a butler snuck up behind her and beat her with a blunt object. And yet, Niles did nothing but ease her worries.

_I would have never thought Niles would be so dedicated to Leo_, Sakura thought, pressing a hand to her chest in order to still her rapidly beating heart. _Perhaps I misjudged him. If he truly is doing all he can to make sure I’m safe, he can’t be that bad of a guy at the core._

“We will just need to remain extra vigilant in the meantime,” Niles suggested. Before Leo could ask him another worrying question, he changed the subject. “So, now that all three of us are in a room, I believe there’s a bit of catching up to do.” He swung himself into a chair in front of Leo and next to where Sakura stood, his usual smirk light on his face.

The smirk on Niles’ face grew even wider. He leaned over the table, pressing his elbows into his knees for support. With a catty expression, he asked, “Did you consummate?”

To say Leo was caught off guard was an understatement. His face immediately went red, and he wasted no time in snatching his heavy book, ready to use as a projectile weapon at his retainer’s head. “You dare ask something so personal?!” he barked, book at the ready.

Niles chuckled knowingly, easing back in his seat. “You didn’t,” he stated as if he was present on the day it didn’t happen. “You wouldn’t. It’s just not like you to cheat on Prince Takumi.”

At the mention of her brother’s name, Sakura perked up. “You knew about their relationship?” she gasped. Niles snickered at her.

“And here I was wondering if you didn’t,” he admitted, slinging his arms over the back of his seat. Leo slowly lowered his weapon. “Yeah, I knew for quite a while. I read his letters to the prince after they started courting.”

Leo mumbled words of hatred towards his retainer, cheeks turning a new shade of scarlet as he turned away, covering his mouth with the palm of his hand as he leaned his elbow on his knee. “I should have burned them,” he hissed to himself.

“Milord is a romantic sap when it all boils down to it,” Niles chuckled. “It was honestly kind of cute to witness. I’ll never forget that one line from one of his letters before sending it off to Hoshido. What was it? ‘Cold in my professions, warm in my friendships, I wish, my dear Takumi, it might be in my power, by action rather than words, to convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that ’till you bade us adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you.’ Or some gay shit like that.”

By now, Leo was screaming into the palm of his hand, hiding his face from his wife. His words were illegible, but he was no doubt thinking of murder in that very moment. Sakura was amused.

“Let’s not get started on that time he actually tried detailing their sex life like some sort of horny teenage girl’s fantasy diary—” Niles started, but was cut off by Leo growing a pair and chucking his book like a javelin at Niles’ chest, who recoiled into his seat. “Ouch! Milord can be very feisty when it comes to these things. I suggest you acquaint yourself to them, Milady.”
Minutes later when all seemed to calm down and Niles apologized for acting out as he did, he asked his second question without much hesitation. “So, you’re actually going to take care of a baby that isn’t yours? That’s a ballsy move, even for you. Especially for you. People will find out when it doesn’t have your features.”

Leo waved him off. “I have already thought of this extensively,” he said, folding his hands together. “Everything can be blamed for ancestry. Even if the child bears no resemblance to me, any features that Sakura doesn’t have that shows up, I can blame on my mother’s genetics suddenly reappearing. Nobody knows the identity of my mother, and she is long dead I’m sure. So it wouldn’t be too unbelievable to say it looks like its grandmother that nobody knows about.”

_That’s right_, Sakura thought, suddenly remembering everything Leo said. _Mother once told me that all of King Garon’s children except the eldest were all bore by concubines. That was something she said to make me hate Nohr even more... Poor Leo._

“Milord is so noble to be going out of his way to cover up Milady’s mistakes,” Niles leered, shaking his leg absentmindedly. “There’s nothing worse than an experienced woman, after all.”

Sakura bit her lip, eyebrows furrowing down at the retainer she had inherited by law. How dare a lowly retainer mock his second command? Sakura’s knuckles turned white as she squeezed her hands into tight fists.

“W-what’s so wrong with that?” she asked, her confidence short and fleeting.

When Niles turned to face her again, she knew she was in for an earful. “Don’t get me wrong, Milady,” he purred, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m all in favor of freedom of ‘expression’ and the like, but when women experiment with these things, it always leads to unnecessary drama. There’s nothing good that comes from women being sexual, is all. And you, Milady, are a prime example of that.” He jutted his chin at Sakura’s stomach, and Sakura felt nauseous knowing what he meant. Tears pricked at her eyes, threatening to fall.

She took a deep, quivering breath. “Women will do as they p-please,” she stammered, trying to make a statement but ultimately failing. “E-even if they end up p-pregnant... In the end, it was my choice in the matter.”

Niles scoffed. “A poor choice indeed,” he snickered, turning back to Leo. “You see, this is why I prefer spending my time with men and women who are sterile. To avoid all of this drama.”
Sakura stared at Leo expectantly, wishing with all of her being that her husband would stick up for her honor when she couldn’t do so herself. Instead, he shook his head. “I know, Niles,” he sympathized. “You don’t need to tell me every time you bed another innocent butler and brag about how it reminded you of wartime with Corrin’s army. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have better things to do.” He rose from his seat, Niles’ scribbles in his hand. He glanced over it once more before tucking it into his sleeve. “I will take this to Xander immediately. Niles, you are dismissed.”

As he left the room, Niles bowed and made his way out as well. But before he could fully step outside the door, Sakura grabbed him by the wrist, keeping him back. Niles looked back at her with an amused expression. She took a deep breath.

“I made my own choice,” she said with a newfound confidence that was so foreign to her. “I knew the risks, I knew what I was getting into when I... he and I did it...” She stared at the floor in shame, her grip on Niles’ wrist steadfast. “... may have made many mistakes in my life... But e-even so... I don’t completely regret the choice I made that night. It was not ideal. But I am taking responsibility for what I did, and doing all I can to make up for it. Is that not a good thing?”

“You traded your freedom and your future for a one night stand. Even I’m not that idiotic,” Niles scoffed, rolling his eyes. He turned his body to face her and Sakura dropped his wrist. “That experience must have made you ascend to another realm of Nirvana to make you not regret what you’re going through, what you’re putting Lord Leo through. Do you understand how selfish that is?”

Sakura bit her lower lip, glaring up at the man’s one exposed eye. It was cold and icy, just like him. “It isn’t selfish if it allows for new opportunities between our kingdoms. Leo could only have gone unmarried before the kingdom grew suspicious and pressured him into marriage. I understand he would rather be with Takumi, but like this, he will always have access to him, and I would never judge him for who he loves that isn’t me. He’ll be happy with this arrangement, everyone and everything will be fine.”

Niles elicited a curt laugh, a mocking scoff that made Sakura shrink. “You really believe that?” he asked, challenging her to answer. “Experienced women really are hopeless.”

He turned to leave the room again without giving her proper courtesy, but Sakura called after him. “Why do you treat me this way?!?” she screamed, her body shaking. Her tears finally fell from her eyes, spilling over her red cheeks and dripping off her chin. “What have I ever done to you?!”

“Let’s get something straight,” Niles interjected, and Sakura wiped her eyes to calm down. “I owe Lord Leo everything. I owe him my life and more. So much more. He saved my life and I will never be able to repay that debt. You, on the other hand--” he pointed to Sakura-- “I owe nothing. I don’t owe you respect, I don’t owe you my trust or my life. I will keep up airs in front of Milord and in
public, but at the end of the day, I don’t care about you or your little mistake that you have forced
upon him. All I care about is his wellbeing, and if I see you interfering with that, I will take action.”

That seemed like enough to completely silence Sakura. Her shoulders trembled from holding back
sobs, her hands covering her wet face. After a few long seconds of silence, Niles headed out without
apologizing, a satisfied smirk on his face. Sakura slowly moved herself back to the chair Leo once
sat in, carefully lowering herself into it as if she was made of glass. Ten days, and she was already
homesick.

*I really am disgusting.*

---

_Dearest Leo,_

_I understand that you want to take care of me, but please don’t worry yourself over small things. I
can take care of myself, thanks. Though I wouldn’t protest you coming back to Hoshido if it meant
me getting better and you not worrying as much. It's you who works too hard, not me._

_Speaking of which, Ryoma asked me to train the new archers again, so it’s not as if I can afford
unhealthy behavior. A lot of them are very young, about ten years of age, all of them sons and
daughters of nobles. I know you don’t really like children in general, but I enjoy spending time with
them. They’re so cute when they land a hit on the target. Ryoma says that ever since I started
teaching all those years ago, I’ve become more patient with others. So next time I get angry at you
for not doing something fast enough, blame yourself._

_If you want us to meet again, I believe a trip to Nohr is in order. After all, Hinoka wouldn’t want to
miss Nohr’s December holidays. I especially look forward to the Nagaergerisi festival. It’s been some
time since we visited your family, after all, and as much as you helped me explore the castle myself,
I’d like to see Sakura and how she feels in her new home. I hope you’re treating her well._

_You teaching her how to ride a horse makes me remember the time you tried showing me how to
ride one, and it was cut short by the horse running away into a nearby forest. I hope you do better
with her than with me. We need to continue those lessons, if you would have me. I’ll even finish
trying to teach you how to ride a kinshi if you manage not to get bitten again._
Please do not hesitate to let me know if there are unforeseen consequences of your union in Nohr. The last thing I need is to be anxiously waiting for your next letter, believing that no more will ever come. You know how I am, it’s the least you can do to indulge me since I am not there to help. I want to help in any way possible. Despite it now being illicit relations and thereby unlawful, I will never be ashamed of loving you while my own sister stands by your side.

I trust you in the meantime. We’ll see you in two months.

Love,

Takumi

Dear Sakura,

Your apparent joy in writing these letters is admirable. I mean this sarcastically.

Subaki has been tearing himself apart ever since you left. He said that he intended to be at the wedding with Hana, but was unable to do so because of the crowds of villagers always getting in the way. Then they intended to meet you at the port, but ran into some complications. Only that guy would say something like, “This is so not perfect. Hana, you must be holding me back,” and expect to see the light of day. Hana suggested they travel to meet you in Nohr, but Subaki has pegasus training to do in the meantime so I doubt they would be able to. It would be nice to have Hana by your side, however. I fear that she would be too threatening and protective to have in a foreign castle, but if you so wish, I can arrange her department. Subaki will just have to find some free time. He apologizes for everything.

Kaden and his group of kitsune were found at the edge of Hoshido. They were apparently looking for something or someone, or maybe they just got lost. Upon hearing this, we did offer some help, which ended with Kaden and his group having a picnic on the castle stairs. Ryoma didn’t mind at all, saying they were fond friends, and used this as a way to catch up on his life after the war. Apparently he came inside Hoshido many times for trivial things, having been exposed to a new culture in the army and being very curious about it, but he wouldn’t say what he was looking for. I don’t know if he heard about your wedding, as he seemed very standoffish. What a guy.
You also missed Hayato’s traveling show. Just two days after you left, he came and put on a performance for the peasants. I know how much you enjoy his show every time he comes to Hoshido, so I’m just letting you know. Perhaps he will travel to Nohr eventually? He seemed to catch wind of your marriage and wanted to wish you the best, having known you as a friend for so long. So, in his words, “Good luck with that one.”

I’m glad you seem to be getting along well with the others. Camilla is quite the character, but she’ll take care of you when you need it. I know you didn’t have much interaction with her over the years and instead focused on Elise, but they’re both worth being on their good side, not like you need to worry about Elise anyway. You know more about her than me.

I understand where she is coming from, however. It is the exact same problem Hinoka ran into into with her husband. Though she isn’t happy with him or his attitude, I’m sure someone like Elise will fare much better. Hinoka’s personality is not really like a wife, after all, and I don’t mean that in a submissive way. I mean it in a “much too determined and rash for her own good” sort of way. I hope this puts your mind at ease, if only a little bit. And yes, she already left, but I’m sure she still feels your sentiment.

Horses are a rambunctious sort, I don’t think it will be easy riding them. Not nearly as easy as training a pegasus, anyway. Horses don’t have the brains of birds. Best of luck, you’ll need it.

I mean what I said about Leo, as hard as it is to believe. He uses his books to drown out reality, so it’s important to bring him back once in awhile. Don’t be afraid to be forceful, the poor guy has no social life outside of the court. Just promise me you won’t hurt him.

And please stay safe yourself. I worry about you, living all on your own. Ryoma and I aren’t there to back you up if you end up in a scuffle. What kind of older siblings would we be if we let our baby sister get hurt?

Hmm, I’m not very good with baby names. Though I would suggest a Hoshidan name since I assume the father is also Hoshidan. Sorry I’m not much help here.

Love,

Takumi

Chapter End Notes
I just want y'all to know that this chapter was originally going to be much more crude and risque because Niles brings a lot to the party, but then I went back and toned it down a bit so I can maintain that T rating. I'm still not sure if this fic should or shouldn't have an M rating because consummation and sex is brought up a lot, even if it's not graphic. Let me know what you think.

And yes, the end letters will be appearing regularly at the end of chapters so long as they apply to the story (if Takumi comes into the picture, then they will obviously stop being written for a time). I also needed to change Takumi's letters because originally I have them written in very formal and eloquent language, but then I looked back at it and was like, "He'd never speak like this, let alone write it" so I really tried capturing Takumi's voice in them as best I could. I still don't think I did it right. OTL

Whenever I think of generic straight couples to put Xander and Ryoma in and not have anyone feel strong feelings either way, I always think Ryoma/Kagero and Xander/Charlotte. I don't feel strongly about them being together like that, so just know that they definitely won't be the focus of this fic. Sorry to all Xanlow or RyoMarx fans!

There's a couple of references I need to point out:
1: The quote Niles recites from Leo's letter is an excerpt from one of Alexander Hamilton's letters to John Laurens with the name and spelling errors fixed. Since I have zero knowledge on how to write love letters, this was the first letter to come to mind that screamed Hella Gay to me.
2: The "eating an orange whole" image was a reference to Chrom, lol.
3: Lao Tzu otherwise known as Laozi is a Chinese philosopher from 531 BC. I figured Camilla would overhear Leo and Takumi talking about philosophy and write it down for later.
4: S/o to WikiHow for teaching me how to ride a horse. Leo is teaching Sakura to ride English style instead of Western style, which is kinda different with how they move their bodies with the horse and how they hold the reins. I will forget this information in two days.
5: The holiday Takumi mentions in his letter is made from the Italian words for "birth" and "rise/soar" which is basically my best attempt to emulate feelings of Christmas in a fictional universe where Christ was replaced with dragons. I read a couple fics where the Nohrian capital was centered on real-life equivalent of Italy and where the official Nohrian language was Italian instead of English. Though I know a few people prefer to see the Nohrian heart in France, I think I like Italy better bc I'm part Italian. :)

And there you have it, three potential bachelors for Sakura's baby daddy. Who will it be? You need to wait and see. >D

The next chapter will probably feature a big time skip towards the fictional holiday Nataergersi (lol try saying that out loud) or at least some time in December. Quickly approaching Takumi's birthday, yay! :D

Thank you all so much for your kind words and encouragement. They all really make my day. Feedback me, reader-senpai. <3
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Leo hates birthdays.

Chapter Notes

*checks time*

It's still the 24th in some parts of Canada so I'll pretend I published this on the 24th.

Hey guys and sorry I haven't been updating lately. It's just... it's just... School, man. School kind of sucks. But I'm on break now so all is okay.

It has been an entire 2 months since the last update and I hope nobody forgot about this fanfic whoops. I'll try to bring it back to life.

*wake me up plays in the background*

So this is a birthday-themed chapter. Ideally, I would have published this chapter on Camilla's birthday, November 30th. This was my original plan. However, I was unable to do so, so I shot for Takumi's birthday, December 14th. But then THAT didn't happen because of Finals. So to keep with the birthday theme, I'm publishing this on the most important birthday of all, December 24th, my birthday. Also Peri's, but it's my birthday as well. *throws glitter into the air*

I also wanted the knock-off-Christmas/Hanukkah chapter on, well, Christmas, but that probs isn't going to happen. So I'll shoot for New Years or slightly after New Years, even though that probably won't happen either. shrug emoji.

Anyways, hope you guys enjoy this rushed almost-7k chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Camilla’s birthday came and Camilla’s birthday went. Like every year prior, she wanted to keep her birthday a private event among family and not a public festival. And like every year, she planned on bringing all of her new soaps, oils, salts, and shampoos that the staff bought for her and take them all to her favorite bath house to test them out with Elise and her wife. She extended the offer to her brothers, and like always, they turned her down citing the heavy workload they had. But what made this year different was that she extended the offer to Sakura as well.

“Taking hot baths isn’t very good for a baby,” Camilla crooned, resting one palm on her own cheek as she looked down at her sister-in-law with a pitiful expression. She clicked her tongue as she contemplated her options. “Surely we can find something for you to do while we’re bathing.”
“We can always save them for another day,” Elise giggled, kicking her legs under the ornate couch like a child. “Oh, but then it’ll be a long time before Sakura will be able to join us…”

Sakura held her hands out in front of her, backing away slowly from Camilla. “I-it’s okay,” she said. “Don’t stop having fun b-because of me. I’ll just stay here.”

“But it would be a shame not to come,” Camilla attested, pacing slowly towards the sitting room window. It was a bright day—as bright as Nohr could be—and the people of the kingdom were bustling about. The weather was slowly getting colder, but this did not seem to deter anyone from enjoying the gradual change in Nohr’s climate. “I really want to get to bond with my new little sister. We haven’t been able to do that enough, and I feel quite guilty.”

Images of that loincloth Camilla had previously gifted her flashed through Sakura’s head. Shaking her head feverently, she huffed, “I think we bonded a lot already. Really! It’s fine!”

Camilla smiled down at her, index finger poised on her own chin. “You don’t need to be modest, Sakura,” she reassured. “Really. As the birthday girl, I would like you to join me.”

Elise giggled to herself, pushing herself off the couch to stand near the other women. “It’s a birthday wish so you gotta do it,” she said with a wide grin splitting her face. “We’ll find a way for you to come!”

Sakura took a deep breath. Truth be told, she was starting to feel fatigued regularly, making her turn down offers for activities around the castle or sleep through the hours when it was okay to play with little Scarlet. Of course, ignoring these offers always made her feel a little guilty on the inside, but she always told herself that she would go through with it the next time it came up. Sometimes she held her promise, sometimes she didn’t.

“T-thank you,” Sakura sighed, putting on her best smile. “I look forward to doing... whatever with you guys.”

Camilla grinned softly before pulling her into a strong hug, suffocating Sakura with her large bosom. “I’m looking forward to it too,” she purred before Elise joined in, wrapping her arms around their shoulders for a group hug.

“It’s gonna be the best birthday yet!” Elise cheered confidently, and Sakura couldn’t help but feel a
“I won’t allow it,” Leo sighed, turning back to his stack of business contracts. Now that the weather was turning colder, the people of Nohr would need extra food and supplies to sustain the harsh winter. It would be tough convincing the fire and wind tribes to increase their exports considering their relationship with Nohr still wasn’t the greatest, but if Leo could word his proposal carefully enough, success was in his grasp.

Elise pushed past Sakura closer to Leo’s desk. “Sakura can do what she wants,” she huffed angrily, hands fisted at her sides. “She doesn’t need to listen to you.”

Leo’s quill scratched against parchment, forming perfectly scripted words in its wake. “Ignore me all you want,” Leo muttered, barely paying attention. “But above everything, you need to listen to reason. You know that Sakura and I are under scrutiny by the people. They are starting to think that our marriage has lead to a treaty in which Nohr will be compromised for Hoshido’s benefit, and the people are angry, not to mention that most of the people still hate Hoshidans and can’t get over the fact that one is married to their kingdom’s prince.” Leo put down his quill and brushed back his bangs, giving his eyes a break from work.

“I understand that,” Elise brushed off. “But what’s the worst that can happen? Maybe if she went out of the castle, she can put some of those rumors to rest when they see how sweet Sakura really is.”

“But don’t the people understand that this would be a crime against the throne and they could be executed for that?” Elise argued.

Or we could be kidnapped and killed,” Leo pointed out. “I believe I speak for everyone when I say we can’t let that happen.”

Leo shrugged his shoulders, working out the kinks that formed over the last few hours. “With the rest of the kingdom backing them up? Could possibly start a revolution if we don’t play our cards right,” he said.
“They never did that when Father had the throne!”

“Because the people were afraid. They aren’t afraid now,” Leo huffed. “In any case, going out of the castle while tensions are still high is very ill-advised. There are lots of things to do inside the castle that I’m sure you can have just as much fun with than going out to a hot spring.”

Elise’s eyes darted everywhere, quickly losing her confidence. “But... but it’s Camilla’s birthday,” she mumbled, defeated. “She really, really wants Sakura to join us.”

Leo rolled his eyes, cracking his knuckles one by one. “Oh wow,” he droned monotonously. “I guess that changes everything now, doesn’t it? Not. Plus, aren’t pregnant women supposed to not go inside those baths?”

“We were doing to find something else for Sakura to do in the meantime,” Elise recalled.

“And leave her alone?” Leo asked, wide-eyed. “I think not!”

While all of this was going on, Sakura could feel her temper rising. She was not a docile woman who could have her entire life chosen for her by those who thought they knew best. She could make her own decisions for her and her baby. She fought in a war not too long ago.

Taking in a deep breath, Sakura straightened her back and said, “I would like to go.”

Leo raised his eyebrows at Sakura, scrutinizing her carefully. “That wouldn’t be very smart,” he pressed, leaning his elbows heavily on the table and folding his fingers near his chin. “And you wouldn’t be doing anything.”

“I was thinking, while they were in the bath, I could get a massage,” Sakura pressed back. “The spring we’re going to is near a spa, after all.”

Tightening his lips, Leo picked his quill back up and returned to his work. “At least bring your retainers. That means Beruka and Peri.” He turned to Elise. “I’m sure Xander will be willing to trade retainers with you for a day. Unless you want to bathe with Arthur, which I assume isn’t the case.”
Elise cringed, her nose wrinkling. “You know me, Big Brother.” She paused, shaking off the mental image of her retainer in the bath before continuing. “You know, you wouldn’t need to worry about Sakura if you came with us.”

“And put myself at risk?” Leo sighed, tapping the dry nib of his quill on his desk. “I don’t think so.”

Elise deflated and turned to Sakura. “Let’s go,” she pouted. “There’s only fourteen hours of Camilla’s birthday left. And then we’ll have to wait all the way until mine! Oh, but if we included the extended family, then Takumi’s would be next, and that isn’t very far away. But we wouldn’t be celebrating in a spa, I assume.”

At the sound of Takumi’s name, Leo perked up. He looked into Elise’s violet eyes with a facade of disinterest. “When is his birthday, again?” Leo asked, accidentally dunking his quill into the ink far deeper than necessary while distracted.

Smiling at her brother, Elise took a deep breath with her hands on her hips. “I can’t believe you forgot! It’s in two weeks, December 14th. I remember when we were in the army and we all got together and celebrated his birthday and he was so flustered because he thought everyone forgot and we made special little cakes for everyone and we gave him cool books from here and he was so happy his face was totally red and it was SO FUN gods Leo, how could you forget? At least I never forget days that are so important!”

In truth, Leo didn’t forget the party part. Since they would be headed out on a new campaign soon, the army didn’t have a lot of time to celebrate. It had been a miracle that they could make time for Camilla’s birthday, so when Takumi’s came around, he vocalized that he wouldn’t care if everyone brushed it off simply because there were bigger concerns. But of course that didn’t stop Elise when she caught wind of the occasion. She had demanded that Leo gift some of his collection, his *private collection of most beloved texts* that he brought with him to Corrin’s castle, to the stubborn prince. At least they were going to someone who would appreciate them instead of casting the books aside if the tightness of Takumi’s hug and grateful smile was anything to go by.

“Well anyways, Sakura and I are going.” Elise dismissed, turning away. She grabbed Sakura’s wrist and started guiding her towards where Camilla was waiting for them. “I guess I should get Takumi a present while in town, but I’d bet he read every single book ever written! Sakura, you’ll tell me what to get him. Ah, I love birthdays!”

Leo stood from his chair, resting his palms on his desk and staring at their backs. “Don’t do anything reckless!” he advised. “Stay where the large crowds are and don’t go to any weird stores! If you see someone strange, run away! Stay safe!”
“You don’t need to dote on me!” Elise said offhandedly, waving her free hand back at him. “I can watch over myself, remember?”

With a sigh, Leo sat back in his chair, pressing his body into the back of the seat and staring up at the ceiling. “You’re still my little sister...” he mumbled more to himself than anyone else.

*But first, I have more important matters...*

Leo looked down at his work, carded his fingers through his hair, and groaned. *I hate birthdays.*

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Oh how Camilla loved birthdays.

“I think this one smells like fresh apples and cinnamon,” she noted, taking a long sniff at one of the packages of soap. There was a small mountain of them residing in a large quilted bag sitting at her feet. It might have just been Sakura, but the young priestess thought the carriage was cramped. Perhaps it was just the bag that took up a lot of the carriage floor. Looking outside at the bustling town around them did nothing to soothe her pounding headache.

She saw many shops brightly shining with different colored candles flickering in their large windows. There were libraries, armories, apothecaries, and the occasional restaurant with people coming in and out without fear. Sakura idly reminisced about how the first time she visited this town, it wasn’t nearly so lively. As crime slowly decreased during Xander’s regime, the citizens must have felt safer in bringing their businesses from the underground up to the surface. The townspeople soon followed, leading to the reconstruction of the many dilapidated buildings that now held convenience stores and salve shops.

The carriage bounded across the hard cobblestone streets, passing other carriages on its journey. Sakura counted how many they passed, reaching as many as 19 before getting distracted by a sweet shop advertising honey glazed tarts and custards across the street. Through all of the foreign scents of the bath paraphernalia, she could almost smell the bakery, making her more hungry than usual.
“I think it smells more like pears and lemongrass,” Elise said, taking a long drag of the soap’s scent. “It’s very earthy, don’t you think?”

Camilla took the small package back in her hands, putting it back in the bag with the rest. “I don’t know, but I like it.” She fished out a new present, one of her bath salts. “And this one reminds me of little pomegranate seeds. It doesn’t smell like pomegranate though.”

When she pulled it out, Sakura felt a wave of sickness in the pit of her stomach. She was used to hiding her discomfort, so she kept her eyes trained out the window. But the scent of that salt was just too strong, and her stomach was so sensitive. She felt blood drain from her face and swallowed the puke that threatened to rise.

Elise leaned over from her seat next to Sakura and sniffed. “Ew, you’re right,” she cringed, pinching her nose in disgust. “It smells like candle wax. It’s horrible. Don’t use that one.”

Sakura let out a sigh of relief when Camilla put the package away, stuffed under the rest of her presents. But her pounding headache was far from gone. The scents were too strong for her to take in, she was starting to wonder how Camilla and Elise could stand this ritual of theirs every year.

When the carriage finally slowed to a stop in front of their destination, Sakura was the first to clamor out, refusing help from Peri who gladly drove the horses. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with relatively clean air. Beruka hopped off the back and it was the first time Sakura noticed they were about the same height. Camilla and Elise respectfully accepted her help out of the carriage, silently shooting Sakura concerned glances.

“Peri will come with us to the baths,” Camilla said to Beruka as Peri heaved the bag of bath stuffs behind her. “You will go with Sakura and make sure nothing bad happens to her. When she is finished, we will meet up right here and go shopping. You are a more than capable bodyguard, I trust you with this task.”

Beruka briskly nodded, bowing her head with her hand to her chest. Her cyan hair fell in front of her eyes. “As you wish, milady.”

Elise ran over and gave Sakura one last hug goodbye, wishing her “the bestest massage ever!” Then Sakura started to traverse to the neighboring spa, feeling uneasy as Beruka’s eyes bore into her from behind.
As much as the threat of Xander finding out he failed to finish his work on time bore into the back of his brain, Leo knew he needed a break. He spent his time ploughing through the library, scanning and scrutinizing the castle’s selection. The library on the second floor was the largest by far and was the one most maids and guests went to when they had free time. Filled bookcases spanned entire walls, lining up the center of the maze-like room as if they were dominoes. It wasn’t exactly Leo’s favorite library, but it had the greatest selection of novels for when he was looking for something new.

Leo wasn’t looking for something new. *I need something sensible, sentimental but not something I wouldn’t want to give away. Something practical but not something I need to use. Something that expresses our relationship without being misunderstood or too forward. Something... something perfect. But what?*

From the front, an old grandfather clock ticked loudly, alerting Leo of every passing second. He passed texts about old wars, of legends and hero kings. He passed books about magic and time travel. Surely Takumi wouldn’t have any use for those.

By the time the clock struck four in the evening, Leo sighed in resignation. Nothing was exceedingly popping out at him, and the ones that did Leo swore he gave to Takumi in the past. As he walked out of the library feeling completely unprepared, he was more or less pleased to meet Niles’ countenance, passing by the library towards the kitchen.

“Milord, how was your day?” Niles asked with a small bow of his head, the respectful incline brushed off by Leo. “Do you have any more assignments for me?”

Leo fell into step with his retainer, matching his footsteps with every click of his boots. His hands folded neatly behind his back as per usual. Before giving his retainer an answer, he quickly glanced at his surroundings, making sure there were no eavesdropping maids or butlers to hear them. “Takumi’s birthday is coming up, and honestly I’m a bit worn out with just Camilla’s,” Leo admitted, deflating just a little. “You know how long it took me to find that book full of recipes for making custom soap. And now I need to find something else. Not only that, but the Nataergersi festival is coming up, which Xander will no doubt have me help plan and it’s becoming a bit much.” He ran one hand over his face, rubbing his tired eyes with the flat of his palm.
Niles looked down at his lord with pity. “Do you need me to look for something in the nearest city?” he asked with a smile. It wasn’t exactly a rare sight to see his master so burnt out like this, and while it was always fun to tease Leo, he didn’t want to aggravate him further on a serious matter. “Gifting presents for lovers is different than for siblings. I may know what to get him.”

Shooting him a glare, Leo straightened his shoulders again. “You don’t know him as well as I do, regardless of what you can find on the underground,” he huffed, attempting to keep his composure without his exhaustion coming through. “I know the struggle of getting l-overs presents. This isn’t my first year of seeing him. I just... I need to find the perfect thing and under such stress it’s becoming more and more difficult to brainstorm. Plus the gift should be something I pick out for him personally, otherwise what’s the point?”

Niles tapped his chin, coming to a halt. Leo stopped beside him, leaning against the nearest wall. “Well, let’s start with what he gave you on your birthday,” he offered.

Leo remembered his celebration several months ago. It was a private affair--there was no need to have a big celebration if he was not the king. He received some handmade clothes from Camilla, a new sword from Xander, a blown glass “tomato-shaped paperweight” from Elise, and Takumi...

“He got me a new shogi set,” Leo lied, trying his best not to melt under Niles’ gaze. “He said I should use it to practice for next time we play together.”

“Oh really?” Niles asked with a quirk of his lips. “I don’t remember you getting anything shogi related.”

“Well anyways, we need to find something for him,” Leo brushed off quickly, hoping his face wasn’t too hot. “Something that should keep him waiting until the next time we meet.”

Niles’ eyes narrowed briefly, seeing through his poise, but did not push his master. “If you really want to get something for him yourself, I can accompany you out of the castle,” he suggested.

Leo clicked his tongue in thought. “I promised myself I wouldn’t leave until tensions went down,” he sighed, staring down at the gray stone floor. “After what happened with the traitors among our staff and the lengths Xander took to make sure they would never become a problem, I’ve been extremely wary. The numbers of people who want me dead are more than I expected after all, and I can only assume there’s more waiting outside the castle now that the ‘rats’ in here have been taken care of.”
“You know I would never let any harm come to you, Milord,” Niles swore solemnly. “I have kept this promise since the day I was sworn as your retainer, and I intend to keep it until my dying day.”

Leo smiled back at him. To everyone else, Niles was a perverted disgrace of a man. But to him, Niles was probably the one person besides his family and Takumi that Leo had trusted the most.

“I don’t want to be a hypocrite to Elise and Sakura,” Leo admitted, leaning his head back on the hard, cold wall. “Imagine what they would say if they knew I left when I told them not to go.”

Niles shrugged. “If I may state my opinion, milord, I believe you should let them throw a fit. You can deal with them later.”

Leo let out one last sigh, biting the inside of his cheek as he mulled the plan over.

Camilla’s birthday celebration went off without a hitch. Beruka kept an ever-present watchful eye on Sakura as the masseuse slowly went to work on the princess’s knots. She must have been extra careful in her movements, cracking under the ex-assassin’s gaze because Sakura did not feel any bit threatened by the spa staff. Though the princess felt bad that Beruka could not partake in such leisurely activities, at the same time, she wasn’t sure if Beruka would have liked partaking in them if given the chance.

Camilla, Elise, and Peri were anxiously waiting for Sakura and Beruka at the same street corner. Half of the presents in the quilted bag were gone, making it easier for Peri to lug around as they went shopping. Beruka was extra vigilant, always scanning the area for any suspicious people that might pose a threat.

“I want to go to the hatchery,” Camilla mused, strutting across the sidewalk and fixing her lilac hair, carding her fingers through the long wavy strands until they fell from between them. “The young wyverns are always so cute, I wonder if they’re having an adoption day.”

“We should get Sakura a wyvern now that she’s a permanent resident,” Elise cheered with a wide
smile. “Maybe for her birthday! They’re much more obedient when you raise them from the egg and they’re so fun to ride! Uh, but I’ve only ever rode one with Big Sister, so I can’t really say what it’s like to ride one alone.”

Sakura gave Elise a quizzical look as they made their way to the marketplace. “Why did you never get your own wyvern?” she asked.

But Elise shrugged. “I have one, but she’s not mature enough yet. It’s not good to ride a young one, especially since they’re too small and easy to fall off. So I just stick to horses…”

Just as they were on their way to the heart of the market, they started to pass a place vaguely familiar to Sakura. Distracted, she looked up and saw the same advertisements for custard and tarts that she saw before. The sweet, honey-coated scents wafted to her nose and she couldn’t help but be entranced.

“H-hey, can we stop here for a second?” Sakura asked, making Elise and Camilla pause and turn towards her. “I-if that’s okay with you two.”

Camilla gave her sister-in-law a soft smile while Elise skipped into the store. “Of course,” they said in unison as they headed into the shop lined wall-to-wall with confectionary displays. Sakura felt her mouth start to drool, eyeing the chocolate drops and pecan candy. She wasn’t quite well-versed in Nohrian confections, but since she would be living in the country, she made it her new goal right there and then to try every last dessert the kingdom had to offer.

“We should take some back to our brothers,” Elise remarked, ogling the small cakes from behind a glass barrier. “Since they’re never able to come with us. I’d bet we can make Xander and Leo smile after being cooped up in their offices for so long.”

Camilla walked up behind her, looking over Elise’s shoulder at the same strawberry shortcake. “I think that’s a great idea, dear. What should we get them?”

Elise glanced over all of the on-display cakes and cookie boxes, humming in thought before landing her eyes on a certain meringue pie. “I think Leo likes this one,” she said, pointing to it. “What do you think, Sakura?”

But Sakura wasn’t listening and was instead pushing a box full of chocolate cookies to the store owner, already pulling out her coin purse.
“I have to go organize these presents with my other ones. Elise, take this cake to Xander. Sakura, you take this one to Leo. We’ll see each other for dinner. Come on, Peri.”

They arrived at Castle Krakenburg just as the sky was turning dark. Camilla dismissed everyone, turning towards her chambers and leaving Elise and Sakura alone. The two girls chatted idly about everything (well really it was just Elise talking and Sakura listening, but that was how they liked their conversations) going from cakes to the cute hatchlings they saw in the market to Leo and Xander to their husbands.

“Did Big Brother get you in touch with some of the charity programs?” Elise asked, balancing the cake box on one hand. “I know that you wanted to get behind one of those when you first married.”

Sakura stared down at the paper box in her hands. She was trying not to jostle the meringue pie as much as possible. “No, he said that he was too busy and that I should get used to living in Nohr before doing humanitarian work like that.”

Elise puffed out her cheeks. “But the winter season is the prime season for charity. I guess you can hop on board one of them when it becomes a lot more cold,” she said, then added, “I’ll go with you!”

Lighting up, Sakura turned to her friend. “You will?” she asked, a hopeful tinge in her voice.

“Yep!” Elise nodded with a wide grin. “You and I, fighting the cold with a bunch of poor homeless people. We’ll serve them warm soup and get them all some mittens and blankets. It’ll be fun!”

Sakura smiled back. “Y-yeah. I look forward to it.”

They parted when they came upon Xander’s study. “You know where Leo’s office is, right?” Elise asked as a joke. Sakura nodded. “Want me to come with you?” Sakura shook her head. “Okay, see
you in a few.” Elise quickly shut herself in Xander’s office, bounding towards her brother with childlike energy.

Sakura took a deep breath and trekked down the hall to the one place she knew her husband would be. She knocked timidly on the door, wondering if Leo was too busy to accept her present.

There was no answer.

“L-Leo?” Sakura called, knocking again.

Nothing.

She opened the door without permission, revealing an empty room with half-written contracts strewn across the desk as if Leo left very suddenly. A pang of worry courses through Sakura’s blood as she left the room, closing the door behind her.

“Lady Sakura!” she heard a voice call from behind her. She turned to face Arthur, who ran up to her with an uncharacteristic frown. “Are you looking for Lord Leo?”

“Y-yeah,” Sakura stammered. “How did you know? Do you know where he is?”

Arthur sighed. “I wish I did,” he admitted, deflated. “It started with me looking for his criminal retainer, but I searched the entire premises to no avail. I even checked the wyvern stalls! Have you ever been to the wyvern stalls?” Sakura shook her head. Arthur made a disgusted face. “I advise against it. But as I looked for Lord Leo to ask where his retainer had gone, I realized they were both gone. Couldn’t find any of them anywhere. I even asked every maid and butler I came across and none of them had a clue. I can only imagine what happened to them.”

Sakura gulped, her hands tightening around the cake box. “A-are there any clues as to where they might be?”

Gulping down the guilt in his throat, Arthur looked down at the floor. “I’m sorry, I haven’t found anything worthwhile. What a horrible defender of justice I am!”
“Or we could be kidnapped and killed.”

“In any case, going out of the castle while tensions are still high is very ill-advised.”

Sakura dropped the cake.

By the time Leo’s disappearance reached Xander’s ears, most of the castle was already in a panic. The most loyal of servants aided in the search effort while the more mischievous ones took this as an opportunity to raid the prince’s room for trinkets and jewels that might be of value, things he wouldn’t notice missing upon return.

Camilla was the most anxious, pacing the dining hall and refusing to eat until news of her baby brother reached her ears. Xander ate a little of Camilla’s birthday dinner, but opted to mostly wait until Leo was found. Flora sat at the table, urging her wife to eat something but failed, becoming quiet as she fed Scarlet instead. Elise and Sakura sat at the table, sharing whispers every so often but for the most part consumed by silence that was offset solely by the ticking of the clock.

“Where could he have gone?” Camilla asked nobody in particular. “Usually he would be in his study, his chambers, or his nook in his favorite library. He never leaves those three places, and if he did he would never be far from them!”

“Relax, Camilla,” Xander ordered. “I’m sure he was taking a walk in the garden to stretch his legs or something. Regardless, he’ll attend dinner soon.”

Camilla pouted back at her brother before sighing, one hand on her chest. “I sure hope so. I’m just too nervous to eat.”

As the evening ticked on, a stir assembled at the front gate. The royals heard shouting coming from the main entrance and servants ran to investigate. Everyone ran across the castle halls to get to the foyer, trying to get the best look at whatever was happening outside.
Two cloaked figures were held down by a maid and butler, hands tied behind their backs. Long hoods covered their faces as they kept their eyes cast downward in submission. Xander pierced the crowd with just his presence, the servants making a path for their king. Everyone else stayed behind.

“What is the meaning of this?” he growled, more so at the unidentified people than at the staff.

A new, young maid-in-training approached her king with a look of demure, holding out a package wrapped with brown paper. “King Xander,” she squeaked, tufts of blonde hair covering her eyes. “We found this on one of them and several weapons on the other.”

Xander took the package slowly from her hands. “Let me see…”

The butler holding down one of the captives hesitantly cleared his throat. “My king, what shall we do with these two?” he asked.

“More importantly,” Xander said, ripping the brown paper off of the package to reveal a book. *How to Read Dreams* read the leather cover. “Who are they and why are they here?” He quickly flipped through the pages, wondering if there was a secret pocket or hole cut out of the pages hiding a stolen item. There was none. It was just a plain book.

Before the maid and butler duo could tug the hoods from the cloaked captives, one of them let out a small chuckle. “Surely, you’ve been waiting for me, Big Brother,” he said. “Sorry I took so long, I hope you ate without me instead of letting dinner go cold.”

Xander’s eyes widened at the one being held by the maid. “You... Leo, is that you?” he asked hopefully.

Leo threw his head back so the hood fell from his head to rest around his shoulders. “Sorry, I didn’t think I would take so long,” he admitted apologetically. Niles did the same right next to him, revealing his smug face to the staff, who quietly took two steps away from the renowned retainer.

“Where have you been?” Xander asked, tension seeping away from his body. “We have been looking for you for hours. It is not very polite to be late for your sister’s birthday dinner, nor is it very genteel to leave without notice.”
The maid and butler stepped away, letting Leo’s and Niles’ wrists go free. Leo took some steps towards his brother. “You see, I... well I got that book,” he offered as if he just explained everything.

Xander eyed him over skeptically, then glanced over the book, then back at his brother. “... And why did you feel the need to go out into the city to buy this particular book?” he asked slowly.

“Well, we didn’t really go shopping with a plan, but--”

“**LEO!**” Elise screamed, rushing towards them with her cheeks puffed out, clearly upset. “You said that you wouldn’t go out to town ever! You told Sakura not to! And then you went! You...! You...!” She looked quickly back at Camilla who took Scarlet into her arms. “I can’t even say what I want to call you because there are CHILDREN here! You dumb, dummy, dumb-face hypocrite!”

Sighing, Leo gently took his book from Xander’s hold. “I know, I know,” he soothed, wrapping his arms protectively around the text. “But something came up. It was an emergency.”

“What could the emergency possibly be for?! Elise screeched. “You’re a hypocrite!”

“Now, now, dear,” Camilla cooed, placing a hand on Elise’s tense shoulder. “Now that he is back, we can eat dinner. Let’s put this aside and be merry.”

Elise huffed but soon relaxed, unable to hold a grudge. Leo handed the cloak off to the maid to be returned to his room while Niles wiggled his eyebrows suggestively at the butler who formerly restrained him, murmuring something along the lines of, “We should do this more often. The you-pinning-me-down-from-behind part.”

Leo passed Sakura on his way to the dining hall, who fell into step with him. “We were all so worried,” she admitted quietly, hoping her husband could hear. Leo did, turning his head to face her. “Especially Camilla. She missed you, Xander missed you, I missed you...”

“I was only gone for a few hours,” Leo groaned, running his hand through his hair. “Did everyone really get so worked up?”

“With how you kept talking about how dangerous it was outside,” Sakura quipped back, “everyone thought you were dead.”
Leo stopped walking.

“What?” he asked as if he didn’t hear. “Everyone here knows me better than that. I would never allow myself to be kidnapped or go into a dangerous situation without a guide in case something goes wrong.”

“But things can always go wrong,” Sakura stuttered, looking sadly into Leo’s eyes. “We all thought the worst because we all care too much about you.”

Of course she had said those words without thinking, but they made Leo ponder over them, running her last phrase through his mind again and again. Somehow, believing that his siblings “cared too much” for him was a difficult thing to do. But coming from Sakura’s mouth, it sounded as if there was a very real possibility that it might be true.

Leo swallowed the lump in his throat. “I-I’m sorry,” he apologized, his voice sounding absent. “Really. I mean it. And thank you for... caring.”

Dinner went off without many more problems besides Scarlet throwing her food across the table and hitting Xander on the nose, resulting in many laughs. When Leo returned to his study to pick up his work, he could the partially crushed cake box with the meringue pie inside with a fancy note that said, “From Camilla, Elise, and Sakura for missing Camilla’s birthday. XOXO”

My dear Takumi,

I am so glad to hear that you will be visiting Nohr soon. There have been many changes since the last time you came. The hunting grounds are fuller as more game are being imported to hunt, especially after last spring. The city is also more densely populated with businesses rising from the ashes. Though I cannot guarantee that I will be able to go there with you, it might be worth checking out while staying here in case you get bored. I would be more than happy to continue your horse riding lessons as well. Shall we begin arrangements for allotting you and your brother (and your sister if she is able to make it) bedrooms or will you be sharing mine like last time? I’ll warn you,
now that Sakura is staying here, her bedroom is directly next to mine and will be able to hear most of what goes on.

Speaking of her, as I’m sure she will write to you in her letter, Sakura spent some nice quality time with Camilla and Elise. Those three sure are bonding a lot, and I’m glad that Elise finally has someone her age to spend time with full-time. I’m sure you feel the same way about Sakura. All of us have had our eyes peeled for suspicious people, but after the purge of disloyal servants who we believed to have been a threat to Sakura and I, all of us feel more or less at ease. It shocked her a lot to see just how many people did not like her without even knowing her, but she doesn’t need to worry about that now. For the sake of her sanity, we never told her that they were all shipped away as slaves. At least they were not killed, for Xander is merciful.

If you noticed already, enclosed with this letter is a package that I hope did not get damaged on its way to your castle. I feel horrible for not being able to be there with you on your birthday, but I hope this will suffice. I tried to pick out something that you can read through, but we can put everything into play once we meet again. Hopefully it will come in handy, unlike your gift from my birthday this year. I still have that thing hidden in the far, dark tresses of my closet. I pray that a maid did not find it and thinks differently of me. At least with this, you can still look your servants in the eye if they find it.

Happy 22nd, Takumi. I love you and can’t wait to see you again.

Love,

Leo

Dear Takumi,

Wow, I didn’t realize so many things would happen the moment I was gone. It kind of makes me feel like I’m missing out on something.

I feel so bad for not making time to personally escort Hana and Subaki into the wedding. I should have made it a priority, but I did get a little drunk by the end and was expected to stay by Leo’s side
the entire time. Tell Subaki that he is forgiven and that he should come and visit sometime. Especially if he can take off for the Nataergersi festival coming up. Hana as well. As much as I want her to be around as a familiar face among many strange ones, I couldn’t see her comfortably living in a Nohrian castle for the rest of her life just like me. It isn’t as if I am ever unguarded, there are many trusted retainers that look after me every hour of every day, and I never feel threatened by any of them. She belongs among the cherry blossoms if she can help it. But she would offer a lot of comfort if she is able to visit occasionally.

Kaden was always weird, wasn’t he? I mean, his fur is very soft and he’s good for taking naps, but that’s really his only redeeming quality don’t you think? I hope the picnic was fun, though.

I wonder if Hayato is going to be able to perform his act on one of the days of the festival. That would be so cool, and it would be nice to catch up with him as well. It’s been so long since I last spoke to my pastry pal.

You’re coming for the festival as well, right? I can’t wait to talk with you and Ryoma in person. To be frank, I’ve kind of been homesick. Sometimes I dream that I’m still in Castle Shirasagi with everyone else because I just can’t get used to Castle Krakenburg. These dreams are slowly fading away though, as they happened more frequently when I first arrived. It’s not as if I don’t like it here, per se. They have a lot of cool new sweets to try. But I want to visit Hoshido one day, I don’t think I can survive without seeing the cherry blossoms in bloom. Promise me I’ll be back in Hoshido soon?

Love,

Sakura

PS. You should really come and play with Camilla’s young daughter Scarlet. She is just too cute! I think she would like you since you have a natural gift for taking care of kids. The stain at the bottom of the page is just from her spilling my ink bottle, don’t worry about it. You should come play with Xander’s son Siegbert as well, but from what I hear, Siegbert rarely likes strangers. I’d bet you can make him like you.

Chapter End Notes

#LetEliseSayFuck

Next chapter we’ll probably see a lot more of Takumi as he visits Nohr for the first time in forever so stay tuned.

I need to spend the rest of the morning knitting an emergency present scarf for my friend who got me a Christmas present that I did not get a Christmas present for WHOOPS.

Until then, feedback me (and leave birthmas wishes) reader-senpai. Happy holidays and
a happy New Year everyone!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

No Sakura stop doing that, that's disgusting.

Chapter Notes

I swear I'm going to update The Leo Project next, I swear-

This was a very ambitious chapter to write. I originally had a lot more planned for this one, but I ended it where I did because it began to get way too long. This is probably going to be our longest chapter because we passed the 10k mark on this one.

Something I didn't address before was our passing 1k hits and 50 kudos! That is so amazing! Thank you all so much for showing interest in this fic. I know sometimes I might seem ungrateful for the milestones my fics hit, but just know that I love all of you guys. I'm planning on doing something to commemorate these milestones, but I don't really know what to do. Do you guys want me to draw some art to go along with the fic or do you want me to write more of a spin-off chapter that happens in between chapters? Drop me some ideas in the comments. :)

Also, I apologize for not being able to update more. You see, I joined my university's chapter of The Odyssey, which is basically an online publication and Buzzfeed-look-alike. I'm able to post whatever I want, but I need publish something every single week, which as you can imagine is taxing on my creativity. I want to focus more energy on my fics, but while working for The Odyssey I can't do that as much as I like. If you want to follow my last-minute short stories, poems, and editorials, follow me on tumblr @Puppy-Butts-Art-Blog where I occasionally post digital art as well. Or just follow my main account @Puppy-Butts :DD

As I said, this is a long chapter. I'd say a good 80% of it is dedicated in some way to leokumi (which I had been neglecting in previous chapters) and 20% sakulise (yeah totally didn't see that coming). But my calculations might be off because I'm bad at math.

I'm sorry if the interactions between Sakura, Elise, and Camilla are all boring. I don't know who Bechdel is or why that guy is giving me a test, but by golly I'm going to pass it.

I really need a beta reader. And patience.

Anyways, hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a week before the first Nataergersi festival and Sakura was starting to show.
She should have expected it to happen sooner. From the day of her wedding all throughout her stay in Nohr, Sakura was finding an increasing amount of dresses that did not fit around her midriff. Limiting herself to loose-fitting dresses instead of the stiff corsets and laces that Elise’s dresses had, Sakura grinned and bore her gain in silence. She had helped enough pregnant women during her days in the army, she knew exactly how to help every symptom, every discomfort. There was no cure for weight gain during pregnancy, but by drinking her weight in ginger tea, she was able to stave off most of the morning sickness and constipation. She would need to start planning her diet and exercise carefully if she wanted to refrain from the worst symptoms her baby will bring.

“I’m sooo excited!” Elise exclaimed from her seat. She held her teacup in her hands, hovering slightly over her matching saucer. She kicked her legs under her seat like a child. “Especially for the feast!”

Camilla nodded slowly, staring at her reflection in her own teacup. Together, their chairs made a triangle with Sakura’s seat around a round table. The walls were furnished with decorative dishes and cabinets filled with the castle’s best silverware. A cool breeze drifted through the nearby window, blowing the sheer curtains behind Sakura gently. The tea set they used was painted gold with pink floral patterns around the side of the pot. The earthy scent of the tea seemed to calm everyone down. Even Elise, who usually held boundless amounts of energy, seemed more subdued than usual.

“It will be nice, going around Windmire and seeing all of the lights,” Camilla said dreamily, imagining all of the bright decorations last year. Colorful glass-blown lanterns of purples, oranges, and reds were strung out and hung from store to store, casting a warm glow across the entire city. What scarce evergreens that survived Nohr’s history were decorated with shiny foil and ornaments that reflected the season’s merriment. Even as the sidewalks were covered in a light dusting of snow and everyone scrambled to stay warm, the festivities in the center of the city were always alive and bright.

Elise turned to Sakura, who tucked her feet under herself on top of her seat to truly get comfortable, a habit that neither Camilla nor Elise bothered to correct. “You said that your siblings will be visiting this year?” Sakura nodded, taking a sip of her lukewarm tea. She was starting to feel increasingly bloated so she began to slowly rub the top of her tiny bump. “Hooray! The more the merrier!” Elise cheered.

“R-Ryoma promised that he would be here,” Sakura answered, leaning closer to Elise. “He’s probably bringing Hinoka and Takumi. I can’t wait to see them all again.”

“That reminds me, it has been nearly three months since you started your stay in Nohr,” Camilla piped up, setting her teacup and saucer on the round table in front of her. “How have you enjoyed
your stay? I hope everyone so far has been treating you well.”

Sakura seemed to shrink within herself at the risk of offending her sister-in-law. “I-I liked it h-here,” she stammered, keeping her eyes on her teacup. “Even though it’s very different from my home in Hoshido... it’s still pleasant. I don’t get lost as much and t-there’s a lot of places to curl up in. The staff really keeps to themselves, so that’s good...” She shrugged her shoulders, hoping her answer was enough.

While Elise seemed satisfied and unfazed, Camilla’s face dropped. “You’re homesick,” she remarked. “We should have known this would happen. We should have furnished your room with more things from Hoshido instead of leaving it as it was. Perhaps we could import some things to make you more comfortable. This castle is just as much yours as it is mine or Elise’s.”

Face flushing, Sakura shook her head quickly. “I-I don’t believe that!” she protested, wide-eyed at Camilla. “I-I’m doing just fine, I swear! I just...” She took a deep breath, hiding her gaze once again. “I want to see my family again... you know?”

“I can’t imagine being separated from you two,” Elise sighed, leaning back into her seat. “I love all of my siblings so much, including you Sakura. I hope I never have to leave.”

“Oh, but Elise...” Camilla trailed off, cocking her head at her little sister. “In April...”

Elise pursed her lips, rocking her legs anxiously. “That... isn’t... It’s not tomorrow so I don’t need to worry about the wedding...” She huffed and looked away, crossing her arms.

Sakura gulped down the rest of her tea. “... S-so when are we going to greet my siblings?” she asked tentatively, hoping the mood hovering over them wasn’t too tense. Camilla smiled at her while Elise seemed lost in her own world.

“Xander said they should be arriving soon,” she answered. “They are traveling by coach, which is a lot faster than riding individual horses. If all went according to plan, the ship would have docked at dawn, so they should be here at around dinner time.”

Smiling to herself, Sakura replied honestly, “I can’t wait...”
The Hoshidan delegation arrived around midnight. They were all sore from the bumpy ride and agitated from being confined to a small space for so long, but Ryoma was able to keep his composure better than his younger siblings who openly stretched their limbs and cracked the kinks in their backs with satisfied smiles. The entire royal family stayed up to greet them properly, though Camilla had protested the most, stating that she needed her beauty sleep for the next day and would say hello during breakfast. In the end, she stayed, but only after tucking Scarlet in and reading her a bedtime story.

“It is always a pleasure to visit our dear friends,” Ryoma stated, stepping into the throne room with a wistful smile. “I am sure this year will be as grand as the last. But more importantly, how is my little sister faring in her new castle?” He turned to Sakura with an eager look, folding his hands under the sleeves of his red kimono, the color of his kingdom.

Sakura stepped out from Leo’s side, feeling so foreign in her flowing purple dress. “I-I’m getting along well,” she reassured him, her head low but her gaze steady on her brother’s face. “Truly. It’s not bad at all here. I-it’s different, but nice in its own ways.”

After checking to make sure Sakura was okay and giving her a quick embrace, Ryoma was pulled into a deep conversation with Xander, taking him away from his sister. Hinoka and Takumi, however, stayed by Sakura’s side a bit longer.

The two were dressed in their own kimonos, Hinoka in yellow and Takumi in a light blue. Hinoka’s hair was a shaggy, unmanageable mess of red as per usual, but Takumi seemed to actually put effort into his appearance. He braided parts of his hair and put it all into a ponytail held by his favorite ribbon, a style he learned during Xander’s coronation. Now that Sakura hadn’t seen either in months, she finally noticed how long their hair was getting. Hinoka’s mass of red waves barely grazed her shoulders while Takumi’s finally surpassed the small of his waist by a couple inches.

Was Takumi always taller than Hinoka...? Sakura wondered. Why did I not notice...?

“So how’s my favorite sister?” Takumi beamed, looking her up and down. Hinoka rolled her eyes and scoffed, nudging him with her elbow. Sakura giggled at their act since she knew they were just joking. After being in the same carriage for hours, she wondered why they weren’t out for each other’s blood instead, but cast off the thought quickly.
“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Sakura smiled a genuine smile, mirrored by her relieved siblings. “I just really missed you all so much, it’s so amazing to finally see you all here.”

At those words, Takumi and Hinoka finally gave in, squeezing Sakura in a tight, well-deserved hug. Sakura sighed happily, wrapping her arms around her siblings’ backs. It truly was amazing to be with them again, to feel their warmth against her. They smelled like Hoshido, like home.

She felt Takumi flinch after a couple seconds before he pulled off of her, turning to face Leo who must have touched him to get his attention. Hinoka tried to carry on a conversation, only giving passing glances towards Leo and the others. But Sakura was more interested in the exchange happening beside her.

Leo and Takumi smiled fondly at each other, clasping each other’s wrists in greeting. “It’s nice to see you again,” Takumi said softly. They looked into each other’s eyes for the first time in months with every bit of tenderness they had. For someone who didn’t know what happened behind closed doors, their compassion could have gone unnoticed, dismissed as a tight friendly bond. But Sakura knew better.

Leaning in slightly, drawing his body closer to Takumi’s but not too close, Leo replied, “It’s nice to see you again too. How was your trip here? How do you feel now that you’re a year older?”

Takumi drew his hand back, rolling his eyes. “Oh you know, me being in my old age, I’m just not cut out for coaches anymore,” he joked. Leo struggled to stifle a laugh. “I threw out my back eight times on the way. The ride jostled my old bones inflaming my joint pain. Those carriage seats really need some arch support.”

Sakura did not notice the fourth face until an unexpected blur of light brown pushed past Hinoka and made its way directly in front of her, making her backpedal in surprise. “Sakura!” Hana chirped with her widest grin painting her face bright. “Prince Takumi told me about your letter. What do you mean I ‘belong with the cherry blossoms’?! Are you trying to get rid of me?!” she teased. Sakura would be alarmed at the accusation, but she knew her dear friend. Hana’s pout held no real spite and very quickly dissolved into a grin. Then a look of uneasiness as she once again took in the vast grandeur of Castle Krakenburg, feeling small and powerless in Nohr.

It was one of the few times Sakura caught her friend without a katana strapped to her side. Though her guard was up, Hana seemed to be gradually accepting her surroundings. Growing up as a samurai trained to kill Nohrian soldiers, her spite never completely ceased. She did end up making Nohrian friends in the army, but they did little to permanently quell the fire in her heart. Her situation was just as Sakura thought: as much as she loved her friend, Hana did not belong here.
“I didn’t think you could make it, Hana,” Sakura explained, feeling giddy inside. Despite being 20-years-old, Hana had never married or had kids. She had no other commitments, only to serve the Hoshidan royal family. “But I’m glad you did.”

Hana huffed. “What do you mean ‘didn’t think I could make it’? Of course I can!” she said, poising her hands mischievously in front of Sakura. “You really do want to get rid of me! After all these years together being best friends, I can’t believe it!”

“N-no, it’s not like tha--” Sakura started, but was cut off by the feeling of Hana tickling her rib cage. Her words dissipated into her high pitched laughter and she fought not to keel over on the cold stone floor right there.

But then Hana attacked her stomach and Sakura reflexively slapped her hand away hard. The sharp sound resonated off the walls and echoed into the hallways. Everyone’s attention was briefly brought to Sakura, who stood stock still, stunned by her own action. Hana cringed backwards, staring at her friend wide-eyed.

“I... Hana...” Sakura gulped, cracking under the pressure of everyone’s gaze. “I didn’t mean... to...”

“No, no, that’s okay,” Hana reassured her, rubbing her hands together. “I shouldn’t be doing that to someone of your status.” She paused to take a deep breath, her countenance dead serious. “Anyways, I’m here to protect you for as long as you want. I don’t care if I had to stay here for the rest of my life. Over the past three months, I’ve missed you. Subaki misses you. We just want the best for you, as we always have. Please allow me to serve you again here in Nohr.”

“Hana...”

Sakura tried to say more, but was cut off. To get everyone’s attention, Xander clapped his hands together. All conversation stopped to listen to what he had to say. “Since you all have missed the lovely feast we prepared for your arrival, which is of course no fault of your own, we will skip to settling in for the night. We have your bedrooms prepared, however, we were not expecting another guest.” Xander eyed Hana warily. “A retainer’s bedroom shall be made in due time. For now, let us relax and bid the day farewell until tomorrow at breakfast, where we will discuss the festival in more detail.” He beckoned the maids and butlers to escort everyone to their rooms. “Goodnight everyone, be sure to get plenty of rest.”

The throne room was filled with tired dismissive “goodnights” from everyone else as they filtered out to their respective wings. Because it would be tragic if a fire broke out in one of the nobles’ bedrooms or gods forbid a raider attacked, each noble was assigned their own wing that consisted of
two rooms for retainers, one personal bedroom, one spouse’s bedroom, one private study, and one nursery. Many of these rooms went unused and were completely empty. In terms of guest rooms, the quarters were split between statuses. The higher class guest rooms were above Elise’s wing while rooms that were more general for another noble’s retainer were located over Camilla’s. Because Hana was Sakura’s retainer, she would be staying in the retainer room across from Niles. Everyone else had to be relocated to a room upstairs.

Elise bounded towards Hana. “I love your hair!” she chirped as if she wasn’t drained for energy. “And your kimono is gorgeous on you!”

Hana, stunned by her boldness, looked Elise up and down before nodding slowly. Her eyebrows shot upward. “Thank you...?” she said, almost stumbling upon her words. “I... love your hair as well?”

Beaming up at her, Elise quickly ran her hand over her blonde plait, pulling it in front of her shoulders. “Let’s be friends, okay?” she asked, batting her eyes innocently at Hana.

“Um... sure?” Hana replied, visibly thrown off by her words. She stared at Sakura for approval, but was only met with her friend trying to hide her giggles behind her hand.

*Maybe I was wrong about Hana,* Sakura thought. *Maybe she’ll get along here just fine.*

Sakura heard everything.

She was one of the first to settle in for the night, foregoing her bath as a new wave of fatigue washed over her. As the maids scrambled to set up Hana’s bedroom and were ever present in the halls, Leo and Takumi had found respite talking just outside the hall to give the illusion of two friends who were too eager to share their experiences over the last three months. But once the maids stepped away and retired while Hana bid her liege a good night’s rest, Sakura could hear two pairs of footsteps quickly making their way to Leo’s room.
The door locked with a loud click, and there were sounds of scuffling and fabric rubbing against each other. Then came the wet smacking sounds of lips coupled with eager groans barely hidden in the night. Leo broke away for two seconds, hushing Takumi and whispering into his ear that “If we aren’t careful, everyone will hear us.” With a shudder, Takumi had half a mind to reply, “Let them hear. It has been too long.”

They collapsed on the bed, limbs tangled to the point where they didn’t know where the other ended and they began. All they could do is feel and touch, commit the scars of their muscles to memory and stoke the flames between them which had been burning for so long, all with the other’s tongue shoved down their throats.

Within the next half hour, the bedroom was filled with the muffled sounds of skin on skin and moans covered under the palms of their hands. Despite trying to not make a lot of noise, the headboard of Leo’s bed knocked against the stone wall ever so slightly. Sometimes one of them would let out a particularly sharp cry but was quickly silenced, followed by a sudden halt of activity to make sure nobody heard. After making sure, they would resume quieter, but their restraint was fleeting as they indulged themselves once again. And again. And again.

Sakura heard everything.

And honestly? It made her sick. Not just in a literal sense—oh no, she was sick of herself, sick of her actions. What started as her trying to ignore them ended with her ear pressed against the wall as best she could from her bed, suppressing her own silent shudders. She sickenied herself in the way that she attentively tried to decipher her husband’s moans from her brother’s while her husband fed him the sex they so desperately needed. She sickenied herself in the way that she couldn’t stop her hand from dipping low, feeding herself the same kind of pleasure. She sickenied herself in the way that some irrational part of her enjoyed listening to them, every gasp and every shudder and every pant and every groan and every push and every pull and every kiss and every suck and every scratch and every beg and every plead for more, more, more, gods, please, so good, I love you, I need you, more, so good.

They didn’t hear her when she sent herself over the edge, too lost in their own world. Sakura slid back into her covers as Takumi let out one final choked scream behind his wrist. All went silent after that. All except Sakura’s mind.

Her body trembled with an amalgam of fear, guilt, and pure unbridled shame. How could she do that with her brother involved? How was she supposed to look them in the eye now? How was she supposed to look into the eyes of anyone? What would happen if they found out about her sin? What if anyone found out?

I really am disgusting.
I really shouldn’t have done this.

I don’t deserve to be here.

I shouldn’t be here.

I’m so, so, so sorry.

Takumi pressed his naked chest to Leo’s back, resting his head on one of the soft pillows. He remembered a time when they could be as loud as they wanted—there was nobody else in the wing and Niles already knew of their relationship so why did they need to care? Now that things were different, Takumi wasn’t quite sure he liked the arrangement. He shouldn’t have to hide his relationship even more than before.

He took Leo’s left hand into his, squeezing it gently. Leo squeezed his hand back, running a calloused thumb over the ridges of Takumi’s knuckles. Then they stretched out their left hands towards the direction of the lit candles on Leo’s side of the bed, comparing what they saw. Leo’s fingers were slightly longer and skinnier than Takumi’s, the result of years playing the piano. While Takumi’s nails were maintained, Leo’s were jagged from biting them down to a stub whenever he was anxious in private. Leo had a ring on his ring finger while Takumi did not.

They watched the tiny ruby glow, shimmering with every flicker of the candle. The gold band burned bright like embers as if trying to singe Leo’s hand, cleanse him of his wrongdoings, make him pay his penance. It hurt him to wear this ring. It hurt him and Takumi both.

Leo felt Takumi’s soft breath against his neck and finally turned to face him. Takumi let his hand fall, resting gently on the blanket covering Leo’s waist. They paused to look deep into each other’s tired eyes before Leo gingerly brushed his fingers over Takumi’s cheek, caressing him with his warm palm. Takumi gave him a small, half-hearted grin in response.
“Where did you put it?” he whispered to Leo, cupping the hand around his cheek and giving it a brief kiss. At first he thought Leo didn’t hear him, but he was soon met with a confused look. “The ring. The one I gave you for your birthday.”

Russet eyes flicked towards the mahogany wardrobe located at the far end of the bedroom. Inside at the very bottom, beneath his clothes and armor, was a chest to which he kept the key hidden. The chest hid Leo’s personal trinkets and tchotchkes from the rest of the world, collected after years of travel. Wrapped in a red ribbon was all of Takumi’s old letters from when they began courting behind their families’ backs, all 108 of them. Leo liked to read through them when he felt particularly down or lonely, scanning through lines of love directed towards himself. Next to these letters was a small box containing a plain, bronze ring. It wasn’t a wedding ring or an engagement ring. It was a symbol, a promise.

“Please tell me that you will wait for me,” Takumi told Leo all those months ago, faces flushed crimson with embarrassment. “Once enough tension blows over, we’ll get married. Even if it takes five, ten, fifty years of waiting. I’ll do it if you do.”

In the end, Leo couldn’t wear the ring. People would notice it and wonder just who he was promised to. The staff would look at him funny and question just who stole the prince’s heart. He did not need to be the subject of rumors, and so he never got a chance to wear it publicly. Now that he was married to someone else, Leo wished he did.

“It’s in my wardrobe,” Leo replied simply, running his thumb along Takumi’s cheekbone. “I would never throw something so precious away.”

Takumi smiled shyly, nuzzling further into the pillow below him. “I know you wouldn’t, I was just making sure.” Then his expression faded, corroded into something sour. “Just promise me you’ll keep it forever, okay?”

Leo knitted his brow. Something was amiss. “What’s wrong, Takumi?” he asked. “Are you questioning the strength of our bond? Is there something I’m doing wrong?”

With a gasp, Takumi furiously shook his head. “N-no, that’s not it!” he attested. “It’s just... it’s just...” He gulped, dodging Leo’s gaze.

“It’s just...?” Leo parroted, prompting an answer. So much for pillow talk, he thought.
Takumi settled down on his pillow again, deep in his own thought. He sighed. “... There’s no way around this,” he said with great amounts of effort. “I was going to have to tell you eventually.”

Now Leo’s interest piqued. “Tell me what?” he asked, much too eager.

Waiting for Leo to settle down, Takumi kept a blank expression on his face as he met his eyes again. “Now that you’re married... that only leaves me. After Elise gets married to her fiance, I’ll be the only bachelor.”

He paused, keeping Leo waiting. “And...” Leo said slowly. “You’re insecure about this because...?”

Takumi huffed. “Recently, there have been a lot of suitors and suitresses coming my way. For the most part, Ryoma has been doing his best to keep them away because he knows that I’m not interested in anyone but you. But then, very rarely, he’ll... he’ll say that I should consider them.”

Leo felt his heart sink. He stared back at Takumi with wide eyes. His throat became an arid desert, unable to swallow properly. His body tensed and he had trouble focusing on who was in front of him. To think, one day, this would all come to an end. He had a hard time fathoming it. Was this how Takumi felt when I married Sakura?

He drew in a sharp breath. “You’re... you’re getting married...” he stated as a fact.

Takumi shook his head. “Not yet, but... perhaps some day,” he sighed, drawing shapes into the mattress with his fingertips. “Ryoma is looking into the ones that only want to marry into the Hoshidan descendancy for money and resources, not the ones who are interested in love or family. He thinks that they will be more okay with me seeing you behind their back, but I’m not counting on it.”

“Sounds like more trouble than it’s worth,” Leo growled lowly. He wasn’t angry at Takumi, he was angry at Ryoma for considering this plan. He was angry at their entire circumstance. “Don’t get married just for the sake of marriage. Even if it will keep the suitors at bay, is it really worth it?”

“To Ryoma it is,” Takumi spat, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. “But I know he just wants the best for me. He thinks it’s useless to stay unmarried since now we’ll never have the chance to do so. Unless something happened to Sakura, gods forbid that happens.”
Leo wondered what was worse to Takumi: losing his lover or losing his little sister. It seemed like an obvious answer, but neither outcomes were preferable. Of course, Leo would never make him choose between him and Sakura, but this entire situation was making him uncomfortable.

He leaned over to kiss Takumi’s forehead. “Don’t worry,” he soothed, tucking strands of long silver hair back behind Takumi’s ear. “Just like before, we’ll make it work. With both of our intellects combined, we can overcome anything. Don’t you think so?”

Takumi nodded, smiling widely in response. He pressed his head into his pillow. “Of course,” he said. “I... I trust you.”

Leo pursed his lips, watching as Takumi shifted his body under the covers to get comfortable. He wanted to ask him more, but it was late, much later than he would have liked. The room was surprisingly warm for the winter, being located over one of the furnaces. The two had no problem only draping the sheets over their naked bodies instead of bundling up. When Takumi stopped moving and closed his eyes, Leo turned his body to face the candles and blew them out, trails of smoke wafting towards his ceiling. Together they fell asleep to the faint scent of ashes.

“Goodnight, Takumi.”

“G’night, Leo.”

“I love you.”

“L-love you too.”

Sakura knocked on their door in the morning looking unlike herself. It was the crack of dawn and she had black circles under her eyes from the lack of sleep. When she opened the door and peeked in, Takumi rolled away on his side to hide his body, neck covered with purple bruises. Leo yawned and reached for his clothes, hiding what he could from Sakura with his sheet.
“I thought you would want to be ready for when the maids came to wake you up,” Sakura shrugged off, already moving to leave and close the door. She really didn’t want to bear witness to last night’s aftermath, but she didn’t want them getting caught after their romp in a compromising position. Where there were questions for Leo, there were questions for her, and she didn’t necessarily want to give out the answers.

Leo slipped his black leggings on while Sakura wasn’t looking. “Thank you for being considerate,” he said, sliding his arms through the sleeves of his white dress shirt. “Why are you up so early, though? Shouldn’t you be fast asleep?”

Light poured through the far window, whatever pieces of the sun that could fight its way through the thick clouds towards Nohr waking them up fully. Takumi stared at the sunlight from his place on the bed, unused to the kingdom of darkness being so bright. He couldn’t wait for the festival to begin next week.

Sakura bit her lip. “I couldn’t sleep,” she answered, leaning her head on the doorframe. But the implications of her words made her jolt. She didn’t want them to think that they were the ones keeping her up the whole night, even if they technically did. “I, um, spent a lot of my time reading because of that...”

“Oh, really?” Leo said offhandedly. “I do that quite often. What book did you read?”

Sakura gulped, her blood freezing. Her sleep-deprived mind didn’t think he would care to ask.

“I-it’s a really girly romance novel!” she gushed stiffly. “C-Camilla gave it to me. It’s r-really not something you would be interested in!”

Cocking his brow, Leo didn’t say anymore. By the time he was dressed in his casual clothes, Sakura bid them farewell with a slight bow, leaving to her room to get dressed herself. Takumi rose from under the covers once his sister was gone.

“I should probably go to my room,” he sighed, quickly picking up his previous night’s kimono from the ground and fixing it to his body with expert grace. He used Leo’s mirror to fix his hair as he had it the previous day, scoffing at the bruises that trailed up his neck. “You’re so lucky I brought a scarf with me. I knew this would happen.”
Leo snickered, sitting at the edge of his bed and crossing his legs. “It’s not as if you weren’t begging me to leave them or anything,” he joked with a sarcastic wave of his hand.

Takumi huffed, holding his ribbon between his teeth. His eyes narrowed at the braids he made, angrily redoing them to be the same size. “Actually, I wasn’t. Besides, I’m the older one, I’m supposed to be the one with hearing problems.” He set his hair back to place, tying the ribbon tightly on his ponytail.

With a curt laugh, Leo approached Takumi from behind and wrapped his arms around his middle. He buried his face into his bruised neck, inhaling the scent of his sweat and last night’s musk. Takumi tilted his head to give Leo more access, leaning his back into his chest. They stood like that in front of the mirror for what felt like forever, neither willing to let go.

But Takumi knew he needed to leave before everyone else had risen. “Hey... Leo...” he whispered into Leo’s ear. They backed off of each other only to meet face to face. “I... C-can you...” he gulped, but the words never came out.

It was odd to think about. While Takumi usually didn’t hesitate to speak his mind, for years it had all been an act to not show his weaknesses. Leo had a background of Nohrian boldness, and while he wasn’t perfect at asking for displays of affection, he certainly was better than Takumi who was raised to believe subtlety was key. Of course, this didn’t include times of desperation. The ring, the letters, the nights spent together... He was beginning to feel that Leo was slowly drifting away from him, that the more time passed, the less chance they will have to be together always. This feeling of desperation was slowly driving Takumi crazy, driving him to take more risks and be more affectionate. That didn’t make things any easier.

Leo hummed, a teasing smirk quirking at the corner of his lips. “What is it?” he asked, a tinge of mischief in his voice.

Takumi puffed up with narrowed eyes, staring up at Leo with quickly fading confidence. “C-could you...” he trailed off before taking a deep breath. Taking another risk, he took Leo’s head into his hands and pulled him into a soft, quick kiss. He tried to part as soon as their lips touched, but not before Leo stole his breath once, twice, thrice more.

“Hmm, I think I can count the times you’ve initiated a kiss with me on my fingers,” Leo teased, wrapping his arms around Takumi’s shoulders. “I think this is... seven times? Over the past two years?”

“S-shut up,” Takumi stuttered, face flushing red while his hands instinctively wound around Leo’s
“I’m not as demanding and needy as you are.” A lie. A complete lie. But he wasn’t about to admit that.

Leo pressed his lips to Takumi’s temple. “As much as I am glad that you are slowly opening up to me more, this isn’t exactly the best time to talk about that.” The light from the window was getting ever brighter. While it still wasn’t as bright as the morning light of Hoshido, the two could easily tell that time was running short. “Go, now. Before everyone wakes up. I’ll see you shortly at breakfast.”

Takumi nodded, detangling himself from Leo. “Right, see you...” He turned to walk away while Leo focused on putting his on his boots and vest. At the doorframe, Takumi turned back to look at Leo one last time before closing the door behind him. Hearing faint movement from Hana’s room, he ran towards the nearest staircase as quiet as humanly possible.

The days prior to the festival passed under the chaotic storm that was the planning of its events. Xander had to split his time evenly between entertaining his guests, negotiating with contractors who would get Castle Krakenburg ready for the festival, and of course taking care of his family. On the fourth day, a light blanket of snow covered Nohr’s soil, spreading itself from the castle grounds to Windmire. It was thin and fluffy, not quite thick enough to frolic in, but watching the snow fall from inside made the entire Hoshidan delegation giddy. Hoshido occasionally had a good snow every few years, but not nearly as much as Nohr's frigid winters. Everyone had wanted to visit the city, but neither Xander nor Leo had been free to escort them. And so they had promised to do so as soon as the festival had ended, much to Takumi's chagrin.

On the first day, Camilla burst into Leo’s room wearing her outfit from last year. She struggled slightly to keep her crown of twigs on her head, the weight of the candles sitting around the ring making her neck sore. Her white dress flowed around her wherever she walked, the subtle silver accents glimmering in the dawn light. The red sash hugged her waist and stood out from the rest of her costume.

“Good morning, my dear little brother!” she purred. She grinned at him like a ray of sunshine before looking him up and down, confusion masking her face. “Why are you already up? Don’t tell me you spent the entire night overworking yourself.”

Leo rose from the edge of his bed, a thick volume in his hands. “Nonsense, I woke up only ten
minutes ago,” he dismissed, setting the book on his nightstand by the burnt candles. “I thought I might as well get dressed and wait.”

Camilla huffed. “Well that’s no fun,” she stated, crossing her arms over her chest. “But I guess you’ve always been the early riser. I had to order Beruka to wake me up early enough because I knew I’d be out like a log.”

After some hesitation, Leo turned to his older sister with a question at the tip of his tongue. “Camilla,” he said slowly. “Don’t you think you’re getting a bit old for this tradition?”

Fixing the crown of twigs on her head, Camilla replied, “A bit, yes. But the tradition does state the eldest sister wakes everyone up and, well, my dear little Scarlet isn’t old enough to take on the role just yet.”

Leo sighed. “I suppose so. How is she, by the way?”

Camilla beamed again. “Absolutely lovely. Last night while I was reading her a bedtime story, she wouldn’t stay under her covers, so I kept telling her that she would end up getting cold. She started bouncing on her bed, fell, hit her head on the side table, and threw up. After that, she slept just fine.”

“Oh...” Leo’s face dropped as he began towards his bedroom door. “Sounds like you’ve got quite the, uh, little problem on your hands.”

“But I love her dearly all the same,” Camilla cooed as she patted Leo’s back, leading him slowly down the hallway. He wasn’t sure if any of the maids remembered to wake Hana up and lead her to the barracks where the staff ate their breakfasts, but he was banking on Niles being considerate enough to do so without Leo’s command if that was the case. Or maybe that was just him being hopeful. “And you’re about to do the same with Sakura, so you should take notes on what I do.”

Leo scoffed, nudging Camilla away in the middle of the hall. His demeanor turned sour. “I never agreed to take care of... whatever comes out of Sakura,” he protested, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I have more important things to do than rear a child.”

“‘Whatever comes out of Sakura,’ you say that as if you don’t really care what happens to her,” Camilla frowned, placing one hand on her hip, her stance wide. “She is your wife. You can’t say that you’re completely emotionless towards her.”
“Actually, I can say that,” Leo sighed, carding his fingers through his blonde hair, exasperated. “You know as well as I do that this whole marriage was arranged for her benefit and that alone. I don’t have to feel anything if I don’t want to.”

He began to walk towards the next wing where he knew would lead to the dining hall, but Camilla intervened and grabbed his wrist, pulling him back and demanding him to look into her deep purple eyes. “But is this really what you want?” she asked, shoulders drooping. “To live in a stagnant marriage for the rest of your life while you and your wife are practically strangers? The least you could do is try to make it work like I did.”

Not having any of her shenanigans, Leo yanked his wrist out of her grip. “I know what you’re doing!” he accused, baring his teeth. “Stop meddling in things outside of your control! Besides, how would you know what I want or what is best for me?”

Camilla recoiled at his scalding words, flipping her lavender hair over her shoulders. “Leo, there are people here that care for you,” she murmured softly, shaking her head. “How long is it going to be until you realize that? I remember all those years ago, you came to me with concerns that you weren’t good enough and I thought we laid those to rest. Was I not a good enough sister?”

Leo shook his head, but his eyes stayed narrow. “You were perfectly fine over these years and I do not resent you for that,” he sighed. “Just, please... Do not get involved with this arrangement. There are certain things that can be swayed and some things just need to take its course naturally. My marriage to Sakura is one of those things.”

“But are you sure?” Camilla asked with a pitiful look. “Are you sure you do not want your big sister’s help? Because this is one area where it’s safe to say I have more experience than you do, my dear brother.”

“I’m certain.” Leo said with a nod before walking towards the dining hall with his chin high. He knew Camilla’s way with words and how she was trying to get under his skin by guilting him into letting her into his relationships. If Leo allowed her to meddle with him and Sakura, she would surely begin to see the reality of their relationship and where Takumi factored in. “Sakura and I agreed to the terms of a loveless marriage and those are terms I intend to keep.”

Camilla sighed, knowing she had lost. “Fine,” she said. “I won’t try to help you. But know that you can always come to me if you do end up needing assistance in anything.”

Leo made it a few steps away from his sister before he heard her call out, “Leo! Your shirt is inside-out!” which sent him storming back to his room in a fit of anger as he quickly redressed himself in
He entered the dining hall alone, greeted by Sakura and Xander. Camilla still needed to wake Elise as well as the guests, so she left Leo’s side with a sorrowful look back. Xander’s shoulders were tense and he had back circles under his tired eyes much like Sakura did, but he greeted his little brother with a curt nod. Leo bid them both a good morning and took a seat next to his wife and soon everyone else began to trickle into the dining hall. Takumi entered wearing one of his spare red kimonos, his neck wrapped with his favorite blue scarf. When he sat at Leo’s other side, Sakura averted her eyes. Even after these few days, she still felt awkward in his presence.

“Where is Queen Charlotte?” Ryoma asked, his back straight as he looked across the table to his friend. His hands disappeared into the folds of his sleeves as he crossed his arms over his torso. “I thought she would be joining us.”

Xander gave him an apologetic look. “You see, last night was quite... eventful,” he struggled to say. “We had to stay up all night taking care of--”

The door opened with a harsh bang, revealing the sobbing queen. Charlotte looked as if she hadn’t had the time to get changed into her day clothes or do her hair because her long blonde locks tangled down her back and she was still wearing her thin white nightgown. Tears dripped down her red face like a waterfall, eyes bloodshot and puffy. This sight alone was enough to make everyone stand from their seats, ready to spring into action if necessary.

“XANDER!” Charlotte screeched, rushing over to her husband. Xander embraced her tightly, running his thumb over her wet cheek to wipe away her tears. She babbled incoherently, trying to enunciate what was causing her pain, but she was shaking too hard and was struggling to catch her breath.

Xander bent his knees to look into his wife’s eyes. “What is it, Charlotte?” he asked in the softest voice he could muster. Despite its softness, there was an undertone of urgency. “What happened?”

Charlotte wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands, her glimmering blue orbs unfocused and ringed with red. She sniffed back her snot and cleared her throat. “M-Mother,” she stammered in her hysterical state. “I-I checked her one l-last time, and... and...”

One of Xander’s hands found its way to Charlotte’s shoulder, squeezing it tightly. “What happened?” he demanded again, this time a little more impatient.
“She’s even worse!” Charlotte wailed in the middle of the dining hall, breaking into new tears. “Her face is all blue! She won’t respond to me or anything! She can’t even breathe!”

Immediately pushing past his crying wife, Xander stormed out of the hall, leaving his guests behind. His strong gait could be heard going towards the guest quarters where his mother-in-law laid debilitated and struggling for her life. Everyone else went silent.

“Is there anything we can do?” Ryoma asked Charlotte, who hardly noticed him approaching. “Anything at all, no matter the task.”

Between her unbridled sobs and sniffs, Charlotte answered, “She needs healing. I thought the maids and butlers had it under control, but…”

Sakura felt a hand grasp her wrist. Elise began pulling her towards the doors with a look of determination. “We’ll help her!” she assured the queen. “Sakura and I were the main healers during the war, we’re better than the servants. We should be able to stabilize her!”

Charlotte couldn’t speak, too distressed by the situation. So she nodded to them and sent them off, leaving their siblings behind. Everyone else tried their hand at consoling Charlotte to no avail.

Elise continued pulling Sakura to their destination, the latter tripping over her feet. “E-Elise, wait!” Sakura begged her friend, yanking herself out of her grip and nearly falling face-first on the stone floor. Both of them were panting with effort, adrenaline coursing through their veins. “Why us? Surely there are better healers than us. What if we’re rusty? I don’t know about you, but I haven’t healed anyone in years!”

Not having any of her low self esteem, Elise gripped both of Sakura’s shoulders, forcing their eyes to meet. Sakura had never seen her friend so… stubborn, so… gallant. “Sakura,” Elise said. “You are the best healer I know. Even if you’re a bit rusty, I have zero doubt in my mind that you’ll bounce back to your old self. Someone’s life is on the line right now, no different than on the battlefield. She needs you, Sakura. We both need you.”

Sucking in a deep breath to calm her nerves, Sakura nodded, matching her friend’s expression. “Right,” she said, more to herself than to Elise. “You’re absolutely right.”

Working together, hand-in-hand, Elise and Sakura stood over Charlotte’s mother with staffs at the ready. The butlers and maids quickly exited the room and waited outside in the hallway in case
something went wrong. Xander supplied them with the necessary supplies before bidding his mother-in-law one last farewell. The mending staff felt foreign in Sakura’s hand, the powerful drums of magic contained within cool metal. It pulsed to the beat of her hammering heart, her inner mana flooding the staff and activating its potential. Elise shuddered beside her. Surely she felt the addicting surge of magic as well.

Charlotte’s mother was frail. Her thin skin exposed her blue veins and creased around her face. Wiry gray hair thinned, adhering to her forehead with her sweat. Her mouth was wide open, sucking in harsh breaths but not getting enough oxygen. Sakura had often heard rumors that she had pneumonia and the flu, but had never seen the damage until now.

They would save her. Sakura knew this as their staffs simultaneously flashed to life, the old woman surrounded by a bright glow. They would save her no matter the cost.

The castle was quiet for most of the day. With Elise and Sakura busy caring for the king’s dying mother and the Nataergersi festival beginning that night, everyone anxiously waited for the hours to tick down. Nobles from all over Nohr filled the throne room and sat in groups, playing gambling games with their gold coins. Sometimes when the gold pile got too high and the wooden top landed on “take all” there would be a chorus of loud shouts and laughs coupled with accusations of cheating. Each guest seemed to be enjoying themselves except for the royals.

As much as Xander and Camilla urged them to begin enjoying the festivities being held in the throne room, Ryoma, Hinoka, and Takumi almost felt guilty having a fun time while their little sister was off keeping Charlotte’s mother from the brink of death. They tried to keep themselves busy. For Ryoma and Hinoka, this meant going to a private sitting room and drinking tea with Xander and Camilla, chatting about trivial things. For Leo and Takumi, this meant holing themselves in the library, away from everything else.

“You know,” Leo murmured from behind the pages of his text. “This year, we’re having a ball on the last day. We didn’t really have a lot of time to plan it last year because of Brother’s wedding, but it’s a tradition we plan on bringing back.”

Takumi looked over to Leo from across the table they both sat at. “What, are you going to save me a dance?” he smirked. “Don’t you think you should be dancing with my sister?”
Leo rolled his eyes. “Maybe for one or two songs, sure,” he muttered, leaning his head into one palm. “But there’s many places we could hide to be private.”

“What are you suggesting?” Takumi asked with his brows cocked.

“I’m suggesting...” Leo started, placing his book down on the table, open to the page he was on. “... that I should show you how to do the waltz.”

Takumi’s face scrunched at the notion. “Didn’t you already try to teach me how to do that one?” he asked.

“Do you remember it?” Leo asked.

“... No,” Takumi admitted.

Leo sighed, leaning back against his chair. “I suppose I should set aside some time to reteach you and Sakura,” he reasoned as he stared up at the high library ceiling. “Not like you were very good at dancing before.”

“Hey, I tried,” Takumi huffed. “You’re just a bad teacher! And stop acting as if spending time with me is a burden to your schedule!”

“Oh, you’re never a burden,” Leo reassured him. “You might have been agile during the war, but when it comes to dancing, you definitely have two left feet.”

“S-shut up! I do not...”

“I beg to differ.”

“You know what it is?” Takumi groaned. “Nohrian style of dance is very different than Hoshidan style. You would stumble and suffer just as I do if I taught you the Hoshidan way. Mother used to praise me for nailing certain moves that she wished to teach Hinoka, but Hinoka was always out
training when we were very young. Mother... taught Sakura and me a lot of things.”

Leo paused, unsure of how to proceed. He wondered how badly thoughts of his deceased stepmother affected Takumi, he wondered if he needed to be consoled. Sure, it has been years since her passing, but to lose someone so dear was something Leo could not relate to. Leo did not break down when his father passed, though he remembers a hollow feeling in his gut knowing the kind father he knew as a child was dead for so long. His mother was already long gone, he didn’t remember much of her. To lose a parent that was loved dearly... Leo didn’t quite understand.

Luckily, Leo didn’t have to say anything because the library doors opened at that instant, revealing a young butler. “Princess Elise requests the presence of Prince Leo,” he said stiffly, hands pressed to the sides of his uniform. “The matter is urgent.”

Both Leo and Takumi rose from their seats. Was there any progress with Charlotte’s mother? Was she still alive? Outside one of the large windows, the sky signalled that evening was close. As far as they knew, Elise and Sakura had been working nonstop for seven hours. They didn’t even show up for lunch and needed to be brought trays of food. Leo couldn’t imagine what Elise needed his help with or if the time was appropriate, but he put those thoughts behind him as he headed to the door.

“What am I supposed to do?” Takumi asked after him, not quite sure where to go. “I should go with you.”

Leo shook his head. “Whatever they have in mind, you may end up getting in the way. I promise to help you get dressed later.” Takumi sighed and deflated, slowly reclaiming his seat in the now empty library.

When Leo arrived, Elise and Sakura sat hunched over in their chairs, used staffs casted off to their sides. Charlotte’s mother seemed a bit pinker in her cheeks, but was still breathing in shallow breaths. The temporary state of stability would only last her so long. With a lot of effort, she could now open her dull blue eyes and look around the room, and during some periods of lucidity would call out for her daughter. But Elise and Sakura always reassured her to rest for she was still weak.

One final push, one last burst of magic strong enough to last, might be able to return her to a more permanent stable condition if they just tried harder.

Leo could tell that the two healers were spent. Their foreheads were soaked with sweat and he could sense that the magic in the room was low. They sat back in their seats, exhausted from hours of effort. Sakura rubbed her stomach and Elise eyed Leo tiredly.
“I need you to do something for us,” Elise murmured, straightening her back and rolling her shoulders. “We tried everything we could think of with different results and, well... if this last plan doesn’t work, we might have to settle for just this little progress.”

“What is it you need me to do?” Leo asked, looking over the old woman curiously. As per request of Xander, he had not seen her ever since she fell into her weak state. Now he could see why. Once Charlotte’s mother recovered, she would probably throw a fit about looking horrible in front of men and young ladies.

Elise took a deep breath and laced her fingers together. “We need you to channel your magic into both of us,” she ordered. “You’re the most powerful mage in Nohr, possibly the most powerful in the world! But you’ve never touched a staff in your life, and it’ll take too long to show you how. Maybe with your magic, we’ll be able to amplify the effects of the healing staffs and be able to produce better results.”

Leo ran a hand over his chin. “... You’re on a suicide mission,” he stated. “Look at you two. You both are spent. You already did what you can do, so why don’t you both call it quits for now--”

“IT’S NOT ENOUGH!” Elise shrieked, jumping to her feet. “You’ll never understand what it’s like to be the difference between life and death until you’ve become a healer, Leo! You can save people in the heat of battle and shield them with your own body until they can get some help, but you’ll NEVER know the true power that comes with having a healing staff in your hand, doing all you can do and seeing that person still walk away with a limp or cuts, knowing that you could have done so much more if you just tried harder and yet they’re still in pain! She’s still in pain, Leo!”

Eyes flicking over the old woman again, Leo agreed with his little sister. She was indeed in a lot of pain. But at this point, both Elise and Sakura looked just as much in need of rest as she did. Exhaling a breath he didn’t know he was keeping, Leo clicked his tongue once and said, “... Fine. But don’t blame me if you wake up tomorrow and miss out on the feast today.”

Elise and Sakura switched out their staffs for new ones as Leo settled between them, one hand on their shoulders. They breathed together in a steady rhythm, concentrating on the flow of magic in the room. It was a familiar meditation Leo used on Elise when she was beginning to show prowess in the dark arts when they were children. The two girls shuddered as they felt Leo’s strong magic surge through their veins like a drug. A steady drum of power danced underneath their skin, the current tingling their fingertips. If they didn’t start to expel some of it through their staffs, their mental restraint would surely begin to break.

The change was not immediate. It took nearly thirty minutes of constant concentration, but eventually
the old woman’s breathing began to slow and even out. Her lips were no longer purple and her hands were no longer trembling. She was beginning to show signs of life she hadn’t shown before.

An hour before the feast, Xander knocked on the door and was surprised with a disheveled Leo. “What happened?” Xander asked his little brother, taking a step back.

Leo took a deep breath. “She’ll live,” he said simply. “Just let them rest a bit.” Without saying more, he began walking away towards his study to take a short nap. He felt it was rightfully deserved.

Peeking inside the room curiously, Xander made out two silhouettes beside his mother. The girls curled up against each other while seated in their chairs, Elise leaning her head against the crook of Sakura’s neck. They snored softly. Someone must have put a blanket over them. Xander quietly closed the door and allowed them their right to sleep.

Wearing the accepted fashion of the kingdom while visiting was not something required nor enforced. While visiting Hoshido, Ryoma had made it a point that Xander’s family should not feel the need to adhere to their customs, especially as foreigners. As such, Xander gave Ryoma’s family the same right whenever they visited Nohr.

But that didn’t mean they hadn’t tried wearing new types of clothes, especially during festivals. During the last cherry blossom festival in Hoshido, Leo had spent a good hour trying to put on his dark purple kimono. It had been custom made from Oboro and Takumi was having a great time watching him struggle. After some out-of-context grunting and frustration, Leo finally yelled at Takumi for help. Turns out putting on a kimono was a lot easier than he thought, but Leo wasn’t exactly good at putting on clothes in the first place.

This time around, it was Leo who got to laugh at Takumi as the Hoshidan ambassador hopped around the room on one leg, trying to shuffle into his pants without falling over. “Damn Nohrian pants are too tight!” Takumi complained loudly, squeezing into the black custom trousers and pushing the button through the slit in front, drawing its strings. “It’s a wonder how you guys even walk!”

“All of my pants are well-worn and ready to go,” Leo explained, hiding a giggle behind his hand.
“Yours might be a bit stiff because it’s new.”

Takumi raised his voice and groaned. “You said you would help me out, not just stand there and eat shit.”

Leo grinned, crossing his arms. “I might help if you say the magic word,” he teased.

Takumi pouted, flashing him the best puppy-dog eyes he could manage. It wasn’t difficult to do with anyone else, but Leo was more or less immune after giving into that look many times in the past. Then Takumi huffed. “Pleasee,” he begged in a sickeningly sweet voice. When Leo didn’t move, he continued with, “If you don’t help me, I’m going to pelt you with whatever-these-things-are.” Takumi held up his tiny cufflinks in the palm of his hand as if they were a threat.

Humming, Leo considered teasing him more, but figured for the sake of time constraints that he should give in. “Fine, fine,” he drawled, picking up the collared shirt from the bed. He held it open and Takumi stuck his arms through the puffy sleeves like a child.

Leo was not a butler, so when it came to helping Takumi button up the front of his shirt, he struggled to be of great help. But the two managed with some patience to complete Takumi’s outfit. The velveteen blue vest was embroidered with a pattern like thorny black vines and trimmed with gold. The amber stone against his cravat contrasted the color scheme and highlighted his matching eyes. Leo thought the outfit was very fitting and the tailor did a job well done.

After braiding his hair into a long silver plait tied with a black velvet ribbon, Takumi exited his chambers, his gait stiff. He began murmuring to himself, and while Leo couldn’t quite hear all he was saying, he did manage to make out, “Oh how my balls weep for freedom.”

A crowd of constituents gathered in front of Xander, held off by the castle retainers plus Hana. Everyone stood beside him as Xander held up a torch for all to see. Elise’s hair was loose for once, showing off her long blonde curls, while Sakura’s medium-length pink hair was braided on both sides. They both wore jeweled dresses with sashes around their middles, Elise in an emerald green and Sakura in a pale yellow. They deadpanned towards the crowd, hands folded in their laps.

“We are gathered here today,” Xander started those well-remembered prayers, “to commemorate the strife of our ancestors thousands of years ago. During the old age, the dragon in the name of Dusk fell from the night sky, taking stars and the moon with them. As a result, they blessed the land with gold and wealth. This kingdom quickly became a den for the dragon as they hoarded the gold from the people. But when people began to immigrate, the kingdom was soon filled with noise. The land was barren, it could grow very few crops. The winters were harsh and many people would die.”
“Finally, the Dusk dragon was found in their den below the surface. The people begged the dragon for wealth, richer soil, and warmer winters, but Dusk would not give in. They told the people, ‘To receive my wealth, my soil, and my blessings, you must defend my name on the surface. Do so and you will receive prosperity.’ Quickly, Nohr became a military nation, defending what little we had in the name of Dusk. What the dragon gave was not much as the stars and gold alone did not help the people fill their stomachs or keep them warm. Impressed by the loyalty of their people, Dusk made a promise to all those who still believed in them.

“‘For all those who stay loyal to me,’ Dusk said, ‘I shall return to the sky. For all those who pray in my name, I shall bring back what you need the most. I shall bring back droplets of the sun.’ And so, the dragon ascended into the sky, leaving the people to defend Nohr on their own, but not before the sun beamed bright over Nohr for eight whole days and nights. Today, we await Dusk’s return to Nohr by celebrating this miracle of fleeting light. May we see Nohr bright and sunny in years yet to come.”

Taking his torch, Xander walked over to an oversized candelabra placed at the edge of the room far from any hanging tapestries. There were eight tall candles lined up in a row, one for each night. He reached over with his torch and lit the candle farthest to the right. The crowd broke into applause. The long awaited signal for the night’s feast had been lit.

Everyone took their seats as dinner began to be served. Bards and minstrels played their music and all were eased into relative ease. Chatter picked up and the entire room had a merry, light feeling. Sakura allowed herself to rest against the back of her chair, a lazy smile on her face as a plate of food was set in front of her.

She had her family beside her, familiar faces surrounding her, all laughing about one thing or another. How could she ever ask for more?

“Hey, Elise,” Camilla said to her little sister, nudging her with her elbow. “Isn’t that your fiance over there?” She pointed to a spot behind her sister and Elise had to twist her body around in her seat. Her expression quickly went sour and she sank back into her chair. “You know he’s going to come up to you and ask you to sit with him.”

Elise shielded her eyes. “I would prefer not to,” she muttered, barely audible above the din.

Sakura squinted to get a good look at the guy. He was average all over with brown hair and a general air of benevolence. Though Sakura knew not to judge by appearances. She immediately did not like the man.
But he must have saw them. Sakura was going to warn her friend that he was coming closer, but it was too late. He began greeting his soon-to-be family and asked Elise if she wanted to spend time with his.

Elise’s eyes darted to Sakura, then to her fiance, mulling over thoughts of turning him down. But she cut her losses and gently placed her hand in his. Giving her family one last look goodbye, she let herself be pulled by her fiance away from the people she loved the most. Sakura watched as she sidestepped dinner tables, ducked under trays of food, and disappeared amid the gamblers and the drunks.

Chapter End Notes

The "Sakura masturbates to her husband and brother in the other room and feels very guilty about it" scene was in my head even before starting this fic and I'm glad I finally got to write it. I know it seems out of character but you can always blame her pregnancy hormones.

I headcanon that magic more or less has a mind of its own. It takes a lot of restraint and willpower to wield magic, hence why Leo can contain a lot within his body (AND WHY TAKUMI HAS NONE PFFT). Sakura and Elise have slightly less restraint but are still above average magic wielders. This makes sense because Nyx could not control her magic during a time of mental weakness which lead to her cursing herself. Magic also acts like some sort of drug to those who come in contact with it because it is raw power, which is why it is hard to control and a lot who get overcharged with magic can end up going berserk.

I had a lot of fun making up Nohr's religion. Of course I mentioned Nataergersi being a mix of Christmas and Hanukkah traditions. I took the Scandinavian holiday St. Lucia's Day (even though that's technically on Dec. 13th) and the "decorating the evergreens" tradition. I might also include mistletoe if there's a demand for that. On the Hannukah side, I took the eight days of celebration (the menorah) and the gambling game with the dreidel. Nohr decorates trees because they are a symbol of fertile soil and a sign that Dusk is returning and people gamble with the spinning top in hopes of taking some of the dragon's wealth. The oldest sister wakes everyone else up dressed like Camilla as if she is the one discovering the dragon and waking Dusk from his slumber. Obviously, the real-life traditions are butchered to fit a fictional universe and I personally think it all turned out really cool.

Anyways we're slowly starting to sink our teeth into the meat of this story. Please let me know what you guys think about this chapter, especially because it's so packed with lots of things happening. I want to hear all of your reactions and all your ideas to help celebrate passing 1.5k hits and 50 kudos with you guys. Comments and kudos greatly appreciated, they encourage me to get off my lazy ass and write. <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Elise is Really Gay™, Leo is a dick, tea parties make Sakura cry, and the plot thickens...

Chapter Notes

Me: I'm not going to update this until I update The Leo Project
Also Me: *does exactly Not That*

Hehe, it's been a while. Happy 100+ pages! Last semester really kicked me in the ass, so I wasn't able to update at all. Now that I'm on summer break (actually I've been on break since last week but that's how long it took me to write this chapter), hopefully I can update once or twice more before school starts. Next semester shouldn't be too hard since I'm getting my gen Ed done, so maybe I'll be able to update during then as well. Thank you all for being so patient with me! I hope this 11k chapter makes up for it! :D

Also, pay attention to the ever growing list of tags. Sometimes I go back and change things so new chapters make sense, and future chapters remain untagged until they are published. This chapter takes us from a somewhat lighthearted but intense romance to much darker underlying themes, so be warned. I don't know whether or not to tag this chapter for gore or death so I'm staying on the safe side. Let me know what you think.

I apologize for any errors. I wrote most of this chapter on my new phone and autocorrect is a bitch.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I like to think I’m a good person. I’m quite peaceful, I would never wish harm to someone else regardless of what they did, and, you know, I love it when people get along and not fight,” Elise remarked, pressing her hands together in front of her face as she stared off into the distant corners of her bedchambers. “I sincerely believe that there is good in everyone. But right now, just for a second, I really want to kick something.”

After the banquet had ended and the guests either left to their manors or private rooms far away, Elise had grabbed Sakura and practically dragged her to her room. Sakura sat seiza atop her mattress, hands folded politely on her lap while listening to her friend pace to and fro in front of her. Elise was a great socialite, but having been toted around by her fiance and interrogated by her soon-to-be in-laws the entire night, even she had to admit her limits. Sakura understood the feeling of wanting to avoid someone. So she did her best to listen, and hopefully, she would not be found by her family until the morning.
“Maybe we can sneak off to the barracks?” Sakura offered. “They always have fresh dummies to beat up, don’t they?”

Elise huffed, turning to her vanity across from the foot of her bed. She took her amber-encrusted brush and began brushing the knots out of her long blonde hair. She looked to Sakura in her mirror. “I don’t think we could get there without the guards noticing,” she sighed. “Security is always tighter during the holidays. That’s when the assassins come out of hiding.” Before Sakura could question what that meant, Elise continued. “I remember a time before we went to war and there would be this game that the villagers played. I would always watch them from my bedroom window. They would have a ball and they would kick it around in a big circle, or sometimes for distance.”

Sakura drummed her fingers on her lap. “Did you used to play with them?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” Elise answered, pulling her blonde locks over her right shoulder and brushing the ends. “Only if I could sneak out. Then Father or Big Brother Xander would catch me and drag me away. It’s kind of hard to kick a ball in a dress, but it’s really fun, especially when the dress gets all swishy.”

Sakura imagined Elise as a child playing in the fields with unidentified village children. She imagined a tiny blonde girl with pigtails that whipped around her face every time she turned her head and a little fur coat that kept her warm in Nohr’s cold climate. She imagined that the girl would sometimes miss the ball and trip on her own feet, falling to the grass and laughing at herself with a laugh that sounded like silver bells at night. She imagined this girl crying when she accidentally kicked the ball at her playmate’s face and frantically trying to heal her friend with what little resources she had. Moreover, she imagined a teenage boy with equally blonde, curly hair finding her and gently placing his hands on her shoulders before whisking her away from the field towards their Father’s throne room.

They fell into a silence until Sakura asked suddenly, “How old were we when the war between our countries started?”

Elise paused in her slow brushing, humming as she thought. “It started when Father kidnapped Corrin, so... we must have been four or five? Why?”

Sakura licked her dry lips. She was thirsty. “Just wondering,” she answered. “I have very vague memories about when Corrin still lived in Hoshido. Actually, I don’t know if they’re real memories or if they’re just stories Hinoka told me about Corrin when I grew a little older...” She pursed her lips and stared at Elise through the mirror, who, deeming her hair to be free from knots, started braiding it. “... About how Corrin, Takumi, and I used to always play together as children. We played with dolls that Father’s first wife, my birth mother, got us when she was still alive. And whenever we went to court, we would always trail after Mother like ducklings following her yukata in a line. How
Elise made a picture in her mind and smiled. “That’s cute,” she remarked, her fingers twisted and tangled in her own hair, one plait slowly taking shape. She huffed through her nose, a thin smile on her lips. “... You know, I think I would have liked to meet Queen Mikoto. She sounds like she was such a lovely, kind queen during her life.”

Nodding enthusiastically, Sakura said, “Oh yes! She was an amazing queen and mother. I have no idea how she managed to raise us while raising a kingdom, but she managed and it’s more than I could have asked for.”

Tying off her right braid with a pink ribbon, Elise switched over to the left side of her head where she left half of her hair untied. “Is that so? I’m glad.”

Sakura pursed her lips again, watching her friend expertly maneuver her long hair. “I remember,” she continued, “that Hinoka began her training early against Mother’s wishes. She began at age seven. I don’t know when Nohrians begin training, but in Hoshido, we start training at age ten. It’s not really training though because it’s just teaching children different survival skills and how to use fake weapons safely, but it goes a long way when they are older and can handle a real sword or bow. Mother didn’t want Hinoka starting so early, but Hinoka was surprisingly persistent to be like Ryoma. And then after Hinoka was found overworking herself... she just wanted to protect Takumi and me. We were practically babies at the time, she didn’t want us to put ourselves in harm's way.”

Finally tying off her second braid, Elise turned to Sakura on her vanity seat. “It’s amazing how dedicated Hoshido is to their army,” she gaped, her eyes glowing. “My siblings and I were all taught by private tutors, so I don’t know when it’s okay to start training in Nohr. Father made sure that he could oversee everything we learned. Whether that’s a good or bad thing is anybody’s guess...”

The air became tense with memories of the previous king. Sakura drummed her fingers quicker on her lap, clicking her tongue. “... Did you need to learn healing in secret?” Sakura asked.

Elise stared at her curiously. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think a king as... well, bloodthirsty as your father--no offense--would want one of his children to be a healer when you could have been a warrior.”

Elise thought about Sakura’s claim for a moment, flicking her tongue over her dry lips. “... You are
“correct,” she confirmed. “It was Leo who first told me that I had an unnatural talent in magic, unlike Big Brother Xander. Camilla has a bit of magic that allows her to use tomes, but only the easy ones that aren't as taxing on her body. Then Leo is the genius that can use just about anything if he put his mind to it, especially anything magical. He said he was able to sense my magic whenever we were together, so he began to channel it when we were little. Then Father found out and ordered me to start using tomes.” Elise paused in her train of thought, tightening one hand into a fist. “But I didn’t want to be destructive. I... I only wanted to help people. I begged Leo to teach me how to use a staff, but he didn’t have time to learn how to use one. So the maids taught me. Then Father found out about that and all of my siblings rushed to my aid and convinced him that I could be of use without a weapon. I was... very scared.”

Sakura let them fall into a tense silence, her staring tenderly at her friend. “Do you regret it?” she murmured, letting one hand fall to her side as she leaned towards where Elise sat.

But Elise shook her head. “Not for a moment,” she claimed. Then she stood and approached Sakura, sat at her side on the edge of the mattress, and pulled her into a soft hug. “If I were a warrior, I can’t imagine the amount of blood that would have spilled because of me. And being healers is one of the things that brought us together, right?”

Leaning into her warm touch, Sakura returned the gesture and whispered into her skin, “Right.”

When they pulled apart, Elise flushed and said she was tired. She thanked Sakura for getting her mind off the party and dismissed her. Sakura stood and, with one hand on the door and the other on her baby bump, left for the night.

“Hey! Fat girl with a weirdly shaped birthmark on her buttcheek!”

Sakura turned to face the speaker in one of Castle Krakenburg’s many stone hallways. It was morning and there were no responsibilities either of them needed to do, so she knew there was no escaping him this time. “Takumi...” she said uneasily as her brother approached her with an easy smile. No offense was taken at his choice of epithet. She avoided his gaze all the same, staring at the window to her side, watching the snow fall. “W-what are you doing?”
“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” Takumi answered, his face falling into a look of concern. “You have been avoiding me on and off all week. Every time I tried to speak to you during our meals, you answer in only two words and you hardly look at me. I thought you were just being moody, but I don’t want to spend my time in Nohr like this. Did I do something wrong? Are you angry at me?”

Opening and closing her mouth like a fish, Sakura searched for a proper response. Her dress felt tight around her chest, and suddenly it felt hard to breathe. “I-I... n-no... I’m n-not angry,” she stammered, looking everywhere but at her brother. Her brother, who only wanted the best for her, who only wanted to protect her and ensure she was happy... “I’m not, I swear!”

Takumi crossed his arms over his chest. “Then why won’t you look at me?” he accused. “Obviously there’s a problem that I am not understanding. Just tell me what it is, I’m sure we can fix it.”

Sakura gulped. Her throat felt dry. “W-well...” She considered telling him the truth about her embarrassment, but nothing came out. She searched for phrases in her mind that could be useful. There was nothing. She fell quiet.

“... Look,” Takumi sighed, uncrossing his arms and walking towards her. He placed a gentle hand on her left shoulder so Sakura was forced to look at his blazing amber eyes. “Why don’t we go to the library and play a game? I know where Leo keeps his chess set. Did anyone teach you to play chess?”

Shaking her head, Sakura said, “N-no. Elise tried once but I got lost.”


And he did. They spent the next two hours in a secluded corner of the library in front of a chess board. Takumi carefully pointed out all the names of each piece and what they did, comparing it to shogi so Sakura understood. In the end, Sakura relaxed against the back of her seat when Takumi let her win and pretended to be surprised. She fiddled with the knight piece between her thumb and index finger, inspecting the intricately carved horse head. Takumi tried to keep the conversation going, which to an introvert like him must have been exhausting.

Eventually Leo found them and asked if Takumi had a minute. Takumi pushed off his chair, telling Sakura that “We should do this again sometime.” Leo regarded Sakura with a nod, then turned his back to leave. If Sakura did not act quick, Takumi would leave with him.
They only took a few steps forward when Sakura forced out, “Wait!” The two men pivoted and asked her what was wrong. Sakura gulped and pursed her lips. She had to say something. She had to, or else nothing would get fixed. Sakura took a deep breath. “P-please... when y-you’re in your... ah, room... I-insde, and you... uhh...” The two men waited patiently for her to finish her sentence, but the end never came. Instead, Sakura punctuated her statement with a mumbled, “Never mind.”

Leo was about to leave and leave it at that, but Takumi said to her, “No, go on. What did you want to say?”

Sakura sighed, her face hot despite the winter chill. “J-just...” she tried. “... Be quiet at night. I-I need to sleep. F-for the baby.”

Takumi paused. He didn’t believe for one second that that was all Sakura had to say. But he left her alone about it, nodding his head and saying, “Yeah, we can do that.” He then left alongside Leo to do gods-know-what. Sakura thought it was best not to know.

She sat alone at an empty chess table, reclining her back against the chair with the edges of the knight piece digging into her palm, already lost in her thoughts.

Leo had to admit, he was a cruel person for doing this. For five nights in a row, Leo had sent Takumi away at night instead of sharing a bed on the account that the festivities were tiring him out. Takumi had joked that he was becoming an old man, but had not pressed the matter. They went to their separate chambers, much to their dismay. However, Leo knew for a fact that if they had woken up in each other’s arms, Takumi would have slept well, and Leo couldn’t have that if his experiment were to work.

And so, predictably, Leo woke up in the middle of the fifth night to the sound of Takumi’s distant scream.

Leo bolted out of his room towards Takumi’s guest chambers. Ryoma had already gone to check on his little brother, but his visit was short lived because nightmares were no rare occurrence. Hinoka was too much of a heavy sleeper to even notice. Takumi sat on the middle of his mattress, bent over with his knees tucked into his chest and hands clutching the sides of his head. His silver hair was free
and tangled, suggesting that he tossed and turned for most of the night. In the silence of the night, he struggled to calm his breathing.

A pang of guilt twisted itself in Leo’s stomach for leaving Takumi like this, but this was the only way, and it was nothing Takumi couldn’t recover from. He slowly made his way towards the bed so as to not startle his lover, lowering himself onto the mattress beside him. As soon as Takumi registered Leo’s presence, he shifted and quickly wrapped his arms around Leo’s waist like a child and his stuffed animal, pulling him close and resting his chin on Leo’s shoulder. Up close, Leo could hear the barely concealed high-pitched whimpers at the back of Takumi’s throat.

“It was awful,” Takumi admitted to Leo’s chest, leaning heavily against him once they had gotten comfortable. Leo wrapped his arms around his lover and carded his fingers through Takumi’s long hair, pulling at the tangles and knots at a languid pace. Takumi’s shoulders relaxed at the gentle touch, eyes closed and breathing finally steady. “I had a dream that... Sakura died because of me... and then you almost killed me, but I-I had to defend myself so I ended up killing both of you... Oh gods, it was a bloodbath. The entire country of Nohr was in shambles and I singlehandedly had gotten rid of every successor to the throne...”

Leo had learned through lots of caution that Takumi’s nightmares were far from prophetic. There were some dreams that vaguely resembled something that ended up happening, but was never a specific or important instance. Sometimes he would still get “messages” from his mother telling him to behave or persevere. Leo had assumed that his vivid dreams were due to stress from the war, and then later, stress in general.

But dreams were windows to the psyche. If they were being caused by a part of Takumi’s mind being restless, wouldn’t it be best to find a way to lay that part to rest?

“That would never happen,” Leo whispered, nuzzling the top of Takumi’s head and taking a deep breath in. He could smell that Takumi had recently used Nohrian shampoo since he smelled of citrus instead of green tea, a scent characteristic of Hoshidan soaps. They hugged each other tighter. “With how the line of successors in Nohr is expanding, I doubt something like that would be possible.”

It was a small comfort, but looking at his dream logically seemed to make the bulk of Takumi’s nerves begin to ebb away. “But why would you try to hurt me?” he asked towards himself more than anyone.

Leo’s hand was getting tired of running through Takumi’s hair, so he settled for tracing light circles on his shoulder instead. “I don’t know,” he answered plainly. He kept his eyes trained to the nothingness in front of him, not focused on anything in particular. It was difficult to see with the moon as the only lightsource.
Takumi’s voice came out raspy and weak against Leo’s ear. After his initial fright had subsided, he was obviously very tired. “You make the nightmares more bearable,” he admitted.

Leo sighed, content. “You know that I would stake my life to keep you safe and sound.”

Takumi smiled against his chest and shifted so he was looking down at Leo’s eyes, leaning on his elbows which gingerly dug into Leo’s ribs, though not painfully. “And I, you.”

There was a moment of peace between the two. They stared into each other’s eyes, highlighted by the white glow of the moon, and Leo reached his hand upwards to brush Takumi’s jaw with his fingertips. Takumi grinned wider, his eyes falling closed as he relinquished himself to Leo’s gentle prodding. Leo caressed his palm over Takumi’s cheek, the pad of his thumb running over his cheekbone. When he slid his index finger under Takumi’s jaw, their restraint slowly came undone like ribbon on a present. Takumi pressed many chaste kisses to the corners of Leo’s lips, lazy as if he were in a trance. After so long of merely teasing each other, Leo finally reached up behind Takumi’s neck and pulled him down, tasting the one thing that would quench his appetite.

Ah, right, Leo thought to himself as a line of shared saliva dribbled down his chin. There’s a reason for me being here.

“Takumi,” he cleared his throat, pushing himself to sit up. “Did you ever read that book I got you? The one for your birthday?”

It took him a while to recover, but Takumi slowly nodded despite the fact that his eyes were still heavily glossed over with fatigue and lust. “I flipped through it,” he said. “I’m not sure what to think of it, really.”

“Did you bring it with you?” Leo asked.

Takumi nodded and shuffled off the bed towards his guest bookshelf. Every guest had a bookshelf in case they took books or tomes from one of the castle libraries, so long as they stay inside the castle. Takumi touched each of the books he managed to hoard during his time, trying to distinguish them without any light to help. Leo sighed and reached to the nightstand where matches littered the surface. He struck a match and lit two of the candles, casting a soft glow around the room. Takumi grunted his thanks and plucked the book from the shelf.
“I hardly think now is the time to be talking about dreams,” he muttered, handing Leo the book. Leo crossed his legs on the bed and flipped through the large text, looking surprisingly giddy considering the time.

“Nonsense,” Leo dismissed, settling on a page focused on death. “Now, what did you say happened in your nightmare?”

Needless to say, Takumi didn’t take kindly what happened that night. At dawn when the servants began rising from their slumbers, some maids reported that they heard angry shouts from the guest hall. First they heard, “Is that what I am?! An experiment?!” then “I am not some kind of creature that you can psychoanalyze like a fucking dog!” and finally “I’ve had enough of this! Get out and fuck off!” Lord Leo was violently shoved out of Takumi’s room, dejected and sore. When the time came to meet for breakfast, Takumi was not there.

“Takumi has been having nightmares since the war started,” Ryoma sighed, poking at his poached egg with his butter knife. “I remember when he was little, he would sleep with Mother whenever they happened. Sometimes he would be laying on her so much that she couldn’t get up. It would be noon and I would come see if anything was wrong that she wasn’t awake already, and she would be lying very stiff with Takumi on her lap who was still fast asleep. She felt so guilty when he finally had to be removed.”

“I remember that!” Hinoka laughed from behind her glass of juice. “Whenever Takumi did that to me, I just slapped him across the face until he woke up.” The entire Nohrian side of the table widened their eyes at her, their forks halting midair. Hinoka sputtered, shrinking in her seat. “I never said I was a good big sister back then! I was little!”

When breakfast finally ended, Leo dismissed himself to Takumi’s room which he found empty sans a maid who was busy fixing his sheets. Of course he would be hiding so his siblings couldn’t coax him out of the safety of being a social recluse. Leo decided to let him be and not worry too much--when Takumi wanted to make himself known, he did.

He considered his options for the day which consisted of holing himself up in his office doing work and holing himself up in the library reading. Deciding that Xander would not want him to work during the holiday, Leo made a beeline to his favorite nook in the library after lunch. It was cozy and
warm near a fireplace and the couch was wide and soft for reclining. Much to his disdain, however, Elise had already found it and was in the middle of her own novel, the fire freshly stoked. Leo wondered briefly why she wasn’t with Sakura, but decided not to ask.

“Move,” Leo commanded, his book *Ethics Naturalis* already under his arm. Of course Elise had to take up the majority of the couch by stretching her legs in a very un-princess-like manner.

Elise glanced up at him and huffed, subtly closing her legs and making sure her purple satin dress was not ruffled above her knees. “I was here first,” she claimed.

Leo was already nudging her feet off the couch. “I was born first, now move.”

Scrunching up her nose with disdain, Elise finally righted her posture, curled up to one of the couch’s arms while Leo took the other. They ignored each other for the most part, paying more attention to their books and the soft crackling of the firewood. Of course, Elise was not the one who had great amounts of focus, so there came a point in their relaxation when she kicked up her legs again and rested them on Leo’s lap. Leo shot her a glare and shoved her feet off of his body, but Elise was persistent.

“Come on, Leo!” Elise whined. “I was up all night and didn’t sleep well, and I just want to get comfortable. I’d let you do the same to me if you were tired!”

Leo scoffed. “No you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t... Your feet smell,” Elise gagged.

“You smell.”

“You face smells!”

Leo allowed himself to chuckle behind his book, his eyes crinkling at the outer corners. “We’re too old to tease each other like this,” he tutted, shaking his head. Elise stared at him with a wide grin and knowing eyes. She considered poking him with the corners of her novel, or perhaps sticking her feet under his nose as he tried to read, but his words latched onto her and soon she remembered something she really should have remembered before coming to the library.
“Holy shoot!” Elise screamed, jumping off the couch. Leo flinched, caught off guard by her exclamation. “I forgot I promised to help teach Sakura how to waltz! Frick!” She threw her book onto the couch for later and turned, pivoting on her heels before turning back and facing Leo again. With a special amount of strength that nobody except her family would attribute her for having, she grabbed his arm and hoisted him onto his feet. His book fell to the ground, forever losing whatever page he was on. Leo winced in pain, staggering to find his balance after being yanked so sharply. “You should come with us because you’re going to be the one to dance with her!”

Leo rolled the shoulder of his afflicted arm. “And why exactly should I have to be there?” he groaned. He just wanted to read, was that too much to ask? “If you know how to waltz, it doesn’t matter who dances with her.”

“Well she needs to get used to dancing with someone tall like you,” Elise reasoned, though Leo saw through it easily. “And you get to spend time with Sakura. Everyone likes spending time with Sakura!”

This time, Leo leaned back, sitting on the arm of the couch facing his little sister. He crossed his arms and sighed. “Are you collaborating with Big Sister? Forcing me to spend time with her that is unnecessary? You and I both know quite well that Sakura and I are not happily married,” he said, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. “And we never will be.”

Instead of giving him the whole “give it time” and “things can change” spiel that Camilla gave him before, Elise just lowered her head to face the ground. Her hands balled into fists at her sides, her shoulders dropped in resignation. She didn’t look angry (Leo had seen her many shades of angry before) but this time she only looked... sad. It may have been the crack of the fire, but Leo swore he heard Elise mumble, “I know... it hurts...”

With a quirk of his brow, Leo leaned towards her with a look of concern. “Elise, is there something you want to say--”

Before he could finish his sentence, Elise recovered and grabbed his arm again, pulling him towards the direction of the library exit. “We’re going to be late!” she yelled loud enough for everybody in a mile radius to hear. “She should be waiting in the ballroom. I don’t want to keep her waiting!”

Leo looked back to where his text had fallen like a soldier on the battlefield. He tripped over his own feet, stumbling across the library floor with a solemn expression. *Such a novel-ty item gone to waste,* he thought, unwavering. *I suppose I must book it for later.*
While Sakura had been open to the idea to dance with someone she would later be dancing with on the last day of the festival, she still felt uncomfortable with Leo in practice. Elise was a masterful dancer and great at concealing whatever mistakes Sakura had made on her own two left feet. Elise was patient and encouraged her to go on. Leo was also great at dancing—Sakura assumed all the siblings were—but he made no such encouragements when she stepped on his toes or fell on her butt. He only offered his hands to pull her up to stand and try again to Elise’s beat. At one point, Sakura heard him mutter, “You’re just as bad as your brother.”

The truth was that Sakura’s ankles were swollen, but she kept that to herself since learning to waltz was something she absolutely needed to do.

Finally, Elise finished her “One, two, three. One, two, three”s and sighed, dejected. “I guess you’re not used to dancing with a taller partner,” she guessed, sitting on one of the chairs at the edge of the room. “We’re going to be here all night.”

Guilt settled at the pit of Sakura’s sore stomach and she felt herself blanch. “I-I’m sorry,” she said to Elise, her face to the orange tiled floors and away from Leo, who stood next to her with a dull expression. “I’m s-sorry for wasting your time.”

Elise waved her off immediately. “It’s not a waste,” she said. “In fact, I’m kind of having fun. Let’s get some snacks in here and eat because all that dancing made me hungry.” She turned to her brother with a devilish expression. “You have the afternoon free to eat with us, don’t you Brother Dearest?”

Leo grit his jaw at his little sister and said nothing to her, opting to sit on a chair nearby. Of course he had a free afternoon that he could spend privately doing whatever he wanted to do, that was the point. And yet if he mentioned that he would very much like to get back to reading, Elise would no doubt accuse him of being to lonesome and make him stay anyway.

“I suppose I could stay for a pre-dinner treat,” Leo conceded. “But I can’t stay for long.”

By Elise’s request, the maids and butlers set them a table and covered it with trays of fruit and tarts and a kettle of black tea with honey. Sakura wasted no time stuffing her cheeks with the bite-sized biscuits. Elise and Leo ate and drank at a much slower pace chatting about what happened last night.
with Takumi. Leo told her that Takumi had a nightmare and that he must have said something while consoling him that made Takumi freak out. After some fruitless prodding, Elise let the matter drop as soon as Hana entered the room.

“Lady Sakura, I’m sorry I haven’t seen much of you lately,” she sighed, approaching her master with tired eyes. Her pink Hoshidan uniform set her apart from the rest of the staff, something she refused to take off. “They’re really treating me like a retainer here. Ever since I got here, the head of staff put me through all sorts of drills and procedures, gave me jobs to do, and didn’t really give me any time to myself. Not to mention I’m pretty sure I still have sea lag. This wasn’t exactly what I pictured my Nohr experience to be...” She trailed off, finally locking eyes with the two Nohrian royals. Hana straightened her back and cleared her throat. “Of course, I’m not a guest, I’m a retainer. I will do what I need to do without question. It’s just... different. And I want to spend time with you.”

It was Elise who spoke next. “You work so hard, Hana,” she remarked, gesturing towards the empty chair across from her. “Come and sit with us.”

Hana stiffly sat between Sakura and Leo, feeling very out of place. Sakura’s presence helped her nerves relax, but the addition of the Nohrian royals had her on edge at the back of her mind. Her neck began to sweat with anticipation and her hands fidgeted in her lap. She did not hate the Nohrians—no more, at least—but that did not mean conversing with foreign royals came easy.

Elise naturally carried on the conversation, asking Hana all sorts of questions that only a Hoshidan soldier could answer. “What is it like to work at Castle Shirasagi?” “What do you think of work life at Nohr?” “Are the barracks comfortable for you?” “Do you think we can improve our living conditions for our servants?” Hana answered them all as honestly as she could without feeling like she was insulting royalty. Even though Elise meant for it to be a frivolous conversation, Hana’s mind raced through the consequences she might face if she gave an unfavorable answer. She supposed that to a princess, matters of labor were frivolous topics that were normally spoken offhandedly to ambassadors during parties. Besides the war, Elise had never worked a day in her life, at least as a menial servant. If they do not listen to their staff, how would royals know what was a serious problem and what was not?

“I’m sorry I’m not very good at being interviewed like this,” Hana said in a rush of a single breath. She was sweating more.

Elise waved her off. “No, no, you’re great at conversation,” she chuckled. “You didn’t take anything. Eat! Drink! Please take something.”

As time went on, Leo found it harder to keep up with Elise’s conversation. His mind was stuck on someone and he was hoping to find an opening to bring up his reason to leave. It came in the form of Elise taking a biscuit at the same time as Hana and Sakura focusing on fixing her legs in an attempt
to sit comfortably. He stopped picking at the flakes of his tart and cleared his throat.

“This has been a fine snack,” Leo said, rising from his seat. “But I must go. Thank you for joining us, Hana. You have been lovely company.”

Elise licked the crumbs from her lips. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I have to search for Takumi and apologize,” Leo hissed through his teeth, berating himself again for his past actions. “If I don’t fix things today, tonight’s gathering will be very awkward for everyone.”

He bid himself farewell and braced himself for what was to come. The women watched him leave, silently praying for him to make it through the encounter unscathed. Now that he was gone, Hana turned to Sakura with a lowered voice. “Lady Sakura, I have a question...” she said carefully.

Sakura sipped her tea, too full of sweets to eat any more. “What is it?”

“Well, ugh...” the exact words came difficult to her. Sakura was her childhood friend, and Hana liked to believe they could speak to each other about anything without being reserved. But her topic of choice was so hard to swallow that she paused between every few words like she was testing the waters. “Back in Hoshido, the staff said a lot of things about, well, you. I can see why you wouldn’t want to share the truth with me, even if I’m your friend and all, but I just really have a tough time believing what they said about you and I wanted to see if they were true.”

Sakura’s hand tightened around her teacup. “W-what did they say?” she tried to say steadily, but there was no hiding her fear for the worst.

Hana bit her lower lip, leaning in a little. “They said that Lord Leo got you pregnant during his last stay, and that is what spurred on your wedding,” she stated. “I know you said that you and Lord Leo had been sending each other love letters for a long time, but I don’t remember you ever receiving letters with a Nohrian seal on them. It all really sounded like a cover-up and I can’t imagine you not telling me about the love aspect at least. To me, it just sounded a lot more likely if he...” She lowered her voice, just in case someone was listening to something so scandalous. “...if he forced you.”

Sakura almost choked on her tea. She coughed lightly into her hand, staring at Hana with wide eyes the size of saucers. “Leo didn’t force me to do anything!” she exclaimed, realizing too late that she needed to keep her voice down. “I swear! I have never been forced into that kind of position before!”
“Yeah!” Elise cut in, staring at Hana suspiciously. “My brother wouldn’t do that! Besides, their marriage is actually a funny story looking back on it. You see--”

Several thousand thoughts ran through Sakura’s head at once. By the sounds of it, Elise was going to say the entire truth about Sakura’s pregnancy, how she was keeping the father a secret, and how she was the one that forced Leo into a position he did not want to be in. If Hana was to go back to Hoshido like Sakura had all but ordered, she would probably hunt him down by herself since she did not have the busy responsibilities that Ryoma or Takumi had. She was fully capable of finding him. Sakura could not have that happening, she wouldn’t let that happen.

She gripped Elise’s arm so hard that she made her friend wince. “The story is half true,” Sakura blurted out. “We did not send correspondence, however, we, umm... we did end up making a baby in a moment of poor hindsight and that’s why we got married so suddenly.”

Elise cleared her throat when Sakura took her hand off her arm, leaving crescent shapes in her pale skin from her nails. “But Sakura...” she whispered into her ear. Sakura just shook her head and kept her eyes on Hana.

Hana stared at her friend, her face neutral. She didn’t know what to say. Surely it made sense, but would Sakura really allow that to happen? After all they had been through, she thought Sakura was more predictable than that. She wouldn’t have consented to that... would she?

Her chair grated against the ballroom floor as she suddenly stood up and began storming to the exit. “I’m going to kill him,” she growled under her breath, brown eyes full of determination. “I’m going to kill him next time I see him. How dare he--how fucking dare--!”

“No!” Sakura shouted, running after her friend and grabbing her by the wrist. “Don’t, please! Leave him alone, he’s innocent here! I’m the one who did this, all of this!”

“No!” Sakura shouted, running after her friend and grabbing her by the wrist. “Don’t, please! Leave him alone, he’s innocent here! I’m the one who did this, all of this!”

“What do you mean?!” Hana shouted back at her.

Sakura looked like she was going to cry. Behind her, Elise slowly stood and began making her way towards them. Sakura paid no attention to her. “I-I’m the one... who wanted this...” she murmured, her breath shuddering. “Leo didn’t. He didn’t want any part of this but... it was all me.” Now her tears were overflowing, riding down her cheeks in thin rivulets. Her body wouldn’t stop shaking, it has hard for her to breathe, and gods these pregnancy hormones were terrible. “He didn’t deserve any of it and I can see how much he sees me as a burden on his life and I didn’t mean for things to turn out like this and I’m just a horrible, horrible person who is lucky she could be married to someone half as nice as him! He’s sacrificed so much to keep me from harm and make sure the baby
and I were safe and happy and I... and I...” She was beginning to feel dizzy. She needed to stop.

Hana listened to her tirade and softened, gingerly placing a hand on the small of Sakura’s back to cease her tears. “I thought he loved you,” she said, confused.

“No, he doesn’t,” Sakura hiccuped, her voice raspy and spent. Elise approached her from the side and pulled her into a gentle hug, arms wrapped around her waist. Sakura in turn placed a hand on hers and squeezed, halfway returning the gesture. “B-but that’s fine... because I don’t love him either...”

There were a lot of gaps in her story and Hana caught wind of them all. However, she decided not to bring them up, at least not now when her friend was having a meltdown. She gave Sakura some space followed by Elise detaching herself and taking a step back. Sakura wiped at her wet, hot cheeks, sniffing away the clogs in her nose. She had never broken down that much before.

So Hana settled for looking Sakura up and down and remarking, “... So you really are pregnant, huh...?” Sakura slowly nodded her head, rubbing a circle around her middle to accentuate her point. Even though she was only starting to show, her midsection was still quite tiny since she had just entered her second trimester a couple weeks ago. She looked like she just gained a lot of weight. Hana let out a slow breath that might have been interpreted as a whistle. “Congratulations. On the baby. I never got to say that before.”

Sakura sniffed again, her eyes finally dry. “Thank you, Hana.”

Thankfully Leo’s plan to have a servant alert him when Takumi went back to his guest chambers worked, and so he immediately went to see what he could say to him, like a hunter inspecting a catch. He knocked on Takumi’s door which earned him an offhand grunt from the other side. Leo imagined Takumi laying on his bed, flipping through his most recent find from the library, snickering as Leo panicked from the other side. Leo imagined Takumi laying on his bed, flipping through his most recent find from the library, snickering as Leo panicked from the other side.

“Takumi, please open the door,” Leo sighed. He did not hear any shuffling from the room, so he knocked again. “Takumi, open up. I need to talk to you.”
With enough patience, the door swung open, nearly hitting Leo on the head. Takumi had his hair loose, his jinbei rumpled from tossing on his bed. Obviously, he had planned to ditch dinner and the festivities entirely and simply stay in his room reading. Ryoma and Hinoka would worry for a little bit, Xander would send his dinner to his room, and the night would continue as normal.

Takumi crossed his arms, leaning his body against the doorframe. “Out with it,” he commanded, but his soft voice did not hold any real spite.

Leo began his rehearsed lines in a rush. “I’m very sorry for what I did and said,” he apologized. “I didn’t even consider that it might be hurtful to you. I only wanted to help you get rid of your nightmares because it brings me pain to hear you go through them when I am not there to console you. I thought I was doing the right thing, but apparently I wasn’t, and I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Takumi raised a brow, looking Leo up and down. After a brief pause, he clicked his tongue and pushed off the doorframe, uncrossing his arms. “Sure, I’ll forgive you,” he drawled. “... If you say everything you just said with more feeling. Gods, you have the emotion of a brick sometimes.”

Leo smiled down at Takumi. “Would you like me to get on my knees and serenade you as well?” he joked.

Takumi’s eyes glowed. “Could you?!” he teased.

Chuckling softly, Leo shook his head with a renewed, kind sort of love for Takumi, and immediately leaned down to kiss his cheek. “Perhaps another time when I warm up my vocal chords,” he promised, though he knew he never would. Takumi smiled back up at him and they rested their heads together. All felt right in the world again. “... So this means I am forgiven?”

Opening his eyes again, Takumi hummed and pulled back. “Nope,” he stated, turning his back on Leo to saunter deeper into his room.

Leo blinked. “... No?” he asked.

“No,” Takumi confirmed. He stood staring out his window, hands folded behind his back. He did not make eye contact, but Leo knew good and well that he was just teasing him more.
“Come now, Takumi,” Leo groaned, inviting himself into the room. “You’re being unreasonable.”

Takumi hummed but said nothing.

“What must I do for you to forgive me?” Leo asked.

Apparently, Takumi had been waiting for him to say this exact phrase because a wide grin grew on his face as he slowly turned to face Leo again. Leo, on the other hand, took this as an opportunity to question his own life choices leading up to this very moment.

“Actually, there is something I want to do with you...”

“I don’t know if you’re numb with excitement or you accidentally got drunk back there or if my prediction that you are a physical manifestation of the sun storing immense amounts of heat within your body for the winter came true, but it’s fucking cold outside, even by my standards.”

Takumi balanced on the mounting block, gripping at the horse saddle with his wool gloves and heaving himself up with Leo’s help. The two had made a deal to leave the party early since their presence would not be necessary until the last day. Takumi had desperately wanted to go horseback riding to the point of begging, and Leo did not have the heart to turn him down. Because it was winter, more importantly winter in Nohr, the two had to bundle up. Leo shivered under two layers of fur and heavy boots, and Takumi wore two of his kimonos, a thick haori, and borrowed pants and boots. Despite the fact that his breaths came out in white clouds and snow kept nipping at his face, Takumi had a smile that did not go away.

“So this is how horses look in the winter,” he said, ignoring Leo’s statement. He patted the neck of his steed, a wooly chestnut mare. “I didn’t know they grew a heavier coat during the cold. I just assumed you threw blankets over them to keep them warm.”

“Horses are quite durable, but if they went to a colder climate, they would surely freeze,” Leo stated, checking Takumi’s form and correcting how he held the reins. “Are you sure you want to do this? I
I am actually going to die tonight, Leo thought as he mounted his own pure black stallion with practiced grace. There was something wistful about every time Leo rode on his favorite horse’s back. During the last year of war, the stallion had been twelve years old, having bonded with Leo as a foal when his master was a child. Now that the stallion was pushing seventeen, Leo began wondering how much strain he should be putting on a senior horse, especially after being a veteran. The occasional stroll was nothing to worry about, but chasing deer for hours on end during the summer or running to the nearest city made Leo wary.

His hands tightened around the reins. After weeks of minimal activity because of the snow, both horses looked more than ready to race off. They snorted and shifted with anticipation, pawing at the snow and dirt with their hooves, and Leo could feel his stallion’s energy build. The weather did not deter them in the slightest.

“Ready?” Leo asked Takumi.

Takumi shrugged. “How do I start this thing again?”

With a swift kick to the horses’ underbellies, they were off to the nearest wooded area. Castle Krakenburg was built inside of a crater with a network of bridges and walkways, but just outside the perimeter were thick forests filled with regenerating trees. After years of neglect due to poor local climate, vegetation began to slowly appear and the woods started the process of healing themselves. Game returned to make habitats of the trees, and while there are not as many large hunting animals in Nohr as Hoshido, the kingdom started looking up at this small change.

Underneath the spider web canopy of the dead tree forest, wind began to slow. Patches of dirt and grass were left uncovered by the snow. Leo and Takumi cantered over the many roots and fallen branches of the dead trees, mentally mapping their way out.

“Damn, I should have brought a hunting knife, or at least asked for a bow from the barracks,” Takumi said to himself, hardly containing his giddiness. “Do you think we’ll find a bear’s den while we’re out?”

Leo shook his head, his cheeks and nose completely red from the cold. “They’re hibernating now,
aren’t they? Let’s not disturb them.”

“But now is when they’re vulnerable,” Takumi stated.

“I know, but I don’t think we could take on an angry mother bear who you woke from her beauty rest to send a knife through her cub’s throat,” Leo said monotonously. His grip on his reins tightened.

Takumi sighed. “Fine... But if we see a fox den, I’m inspecting it.”

Deeper into the forest they headed. Even if Leo had gotten confused at some part on their way, Takumi knew how to map the stars and guide them back. As evening fell into night, the moon and stars came out, dull behind Nohr’s thick clouds. The main constellations and largest stars, however, were still prominent and Leo began reciting the constellations as he remembered Niles did on the many nights they spent patrolling a camp. Takumi listened quietly as they stared up at the canopy through the gaps in the branches, letting their horses guide them slowly deeper.

When Leo lowered his head to face Takumi, he found that his lover was very focused on the canopy, squinting and straining his eyes ahead. Leo put this to the back of his mind, even after their conversation faded away.

“I want to get off here,” Takumi said, pulling at his reins to stop the mare from going further. They had found a small grove to rest, though Leo didn’t exactly want to sit and chat while he was still freezing. His body had become used to the cold, however, so he did not put up a fight when Takumi swung one leg over the horse’s back in an attempt to dismount by himself. Leo was faster and more experienced in this action, so he dismounted his stallion easily and ran over to help Takumi before he fell and broke something.

When he was steady on his feet, Takumi pulled Leo close, arms wrapped tight around his waist, chests pushed up against each other. “I finally have you to myself,” he huffed, blowing his white breath to Leo’s face.

Leo scrunched his nose suspiciously. “Was this all some sort of elaborate plot to fulfill some sort of outdoors sex fantasy of yours?” he asked. “Because honestly that is the very last thing I want to do right now. In fact, I could think of about a hundred things I would rather be doing than having sex outside in the fucking snow, including but not limited to being stabbed by Peri and eating something Arthur made.”
Instead of being offended, Takumi laughed and pressed a chaste kiss to Leo’s lips. “No, it’s not. I just wanted to be with you alone is all.”

“We could have met in our rooms,” Leo sighed, finally wrapping his arms around Takumi’s shoulders to close every gap between them. “I hardly think talking to each other would warrant us being miles away in an abandoned forest in the dead of night. What are we, forbidden star-crossed lovers from rival kingdoms?” He bit his lip after he said his last sentence, not realizing until then just how accurate it sounded.

Takumi might have picked up on it, or might have not. Either way, it did not show on his face. “No,” he said. “But I would feel much less of a nuisance if there wasn’t butlers and maids crawling around the castle all the time.”

Leo cupped his numb, red cheek. “You’re not a nuisance,” he automatically said.

Their horses trotted over to the edge of the grove, picking at the uncovered patches of grass with their teeth. They had both been trained to stay within a certain radius of their riders if possible, so if Leo and Takumi decided to have time to themselves, they would never be far. Despite the cold, Leo decided that a small amount of indulgence was fine, only if they could make it back to the castle before dawn and sit next to a fire until morning.

Takumi had him pinned to a tree in no time, pressing kisses to his lips, his cheeks, and the underside of his jaw since most of his neck was covered by his coat. Each kiss seared his skin, the cold connecting with something so hot, such that when Takumi flicked his tongue at his ear, he felt like his skin was melting.

After having enough of his teasing, Leo flipped their positions, catching Takumi off guard. He pressed a long open-mouthed kiss to Takumi’s lips, and then another. Takumi had moaned into it, and fluttered his eyes open when they pulled apart to breathe.

Everything had been going so well up until that point, so when Leo felt Takumi suddenly tense up and freeze, he had thought he did something wrong. Leo pulled back to ask, and was met with an up-close look of pure, unbridled fear in Takumi’s expression. He didn’t move, didn’t seem to be breathing. Leo didn’t understand, he couldn’t have been *that* bad, could he?

It took him longer than he really should have to understand that Takumi was not looking at him, but looking at something *behind him.*
“... Leo...” Takumi whispered. “... Look behind you...”

Assuming the worst, for maybe they really had disturbed a bear den or were found by a pack of bandits, Leo slowly turned his head, his heart racing in his chest. Flashbacks of the war came back to him like a flood, and he knew that if they had been ambushed, they were not ready at all. But when Leo had fully turned around, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were no bears or bandits in sight. Initially, Leo thought Takumi had messed with him for the last time. Then he looked up towards the forest canopy.

There, hanging from a thick rope several meters high, was a human corpse. The man wore thin, villager clothes, his neck cut and dripping scarlet blood. It fell off his still body, staining the white snow below.

“Oh my gods!” Leo exclaimed, practically jumping off Takumi and covering his mouth with his hand. “How did he get there?!?”

Takumi swallowed hard. “I-I saw him a while ago,” he admitted. “But I thought he was a wild boar caught in a trap! I swear!”

For a while, they just stared, a sense of hopelessness consuming them. At first glance, it looked like a suicide, but the deep cut on his neck suggested murder. The rope he hanged from had an end tied around the trunk of the tree some feet high and was thrown over a branch that provided support for the dead man’s body. It was unfortunate, and the two didn’t quite understand the circumstances behind this man’s death, but dawn was fast approaching and they both figured this was some serious villager business that they should not get involved with.

“Perhaps he stole from a shop and the owner got a bit more than revenge?” Leo reasoned as they began walking towards their horses, which were still grazing on tiny patches of grass.

“Maybe,” Takumi said stiffly, hugging his waist.

Both of them were used to death. Leo moreso, since his father had forced him to watch public executions as a child, including the execution of his mother. They both had seen death happen before their eyes many times. Sometimes, they were they ones doing the killing. Warfare had made them grow cold to human life. That was the reality of being in the army and fighting for one’s country. But seeing death before them after so long began to raise many old memories that they had hidden away for the sake of their own sanity. Neither of them had wanted to kill, they didn’t have a choice.
Leo heard a soft wheeze from his right. “Are you okay?” he asked, Takumi. He had assumed his lover was taking the sight a lot harder than he was.

But this was not the case. “… I didn’t make that sound…” Takumi murmured with growing unease.

They looked around themselves, searching for bandits that might have actually been lurking behind bushes in the darkness. But the bushes were thin and could not hide anyone for long, even during the night. As far as they could see, there was nobody but them and the hanged man.

Leo braced himself and looked up at the corpse again. A long, drawn-out, strangled wheeze was coming from his direction.

“Oh my gods…” he said to himself, covering his mouth once more. “Is he... is he breathing?”

Takumi bolted to the knot around the tree. Having hunter experience had its perks outside of hunting, and disabling traps was one of them. He identified the knot and knew exactly where to pull it so it came undone with just a little harsh tugging. The body fell to the ground, cushioned by snow and dirt. He was bleeding too much.

Up close, the two could see an intricately carved symbol in this man’s forehead and hands which were tied behind his back. Leo removed the rope, hoping that this man would stay alive, if only so he could have answers as to why he was hanged in a forest so close to the castle. There was something off about him and the symbols, and it made Leo sick.

“We have to get him to a healer, Leo!” Takumi shouted from the other side of the body. “If he really is alive, we have to try to save him! We can’t just leave him here!”

Leo paused, surveying the body one last time before standing. “Help me wrap him in one of the horse blankets and get him onto my horse. I have more experience with riding, his weight might throw you off.”

Takumi nodded and silently complied. With the bleeding man in his lap, Leo rode towards the castle in silence, Takumi guiding the way by the stars. It took him until they arrived at the castle gate to calm his erratic heart.
“Leo, I swear to the Dusk Dragon, I hope you have a good excuse, a very good excuse, for leaving the party and only coming back just now, far after dawn,” Xander seethed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Leo and Takumi sat in his office across from him at his desk, and after explaining what had happened, Xander had not been pleased. At the mention of a found body, Sakura offered to tend to it, but Elise cut in and said that she would do it. The event had caused a minor uproar among the staff, who all tried to catch glimpses of the body. Leo had a feeling they would not stop talking about it for the next few weeks.

Leo cleared his throat. “Alas, I do not have a good excuse. I only wanted some fresh air after being cooped up in the castle for so long, and it was Takumi’s idea to ride into the woods,” he said, gesturing to the man sitting next to him. Takumi looked as guilty as a man being judged for his sins. He kept his head down, avoiding Xander’s intimidating eyes, and fiddled with his fingers in his lap. To Leo, it was a sad sight to behold.

Xander turned to Takumi. “Is this true?” he asked as calmly as he could muster.

Takumi nodded and bit his lip.

“And why did you choose to go so late at night? You could have been attacked by bandits.”

Takumi shrugged his shoulders like a child.

Xander sighed and leaned back in his leather chair. “I only ask because I worry about both of your safety,” he confessed. “Something malicious was hiding in those forests as you were in them because if the man was still alive, he was hanged just before you entered. You’re very lucky you did not have an encounter with them without any weapons.”

Both Leo and Takumi nodded, but Leo had the gall to mutter under his breath, so low that Xander did not catch him, “Don’t treat me like a child.”

“Leo,” Xander said, “I don’t suppose you know what the symbol on the man’s forehead meant?”
Leo shook his head. “No, Brother. I was hoping you would know.”

Xander hummed, leaning his elbows on his desk and lacing his fingers together. “Then our best course of action is to have Niles inspect him. If anyone knows anything about the occult or gangs, it’s him. Go fetch Niles and have him take a look. Then bring him back to me as soon as possible.”

Leo stood and bowed to Xander. Takumi immediately asked, “Would you like for me to go with him?” He hoped that he would be able to get away from Xander, but the king had ordered him to stay. Leo gave Takumi one last look before turning to the door. Takumi lowered his head again.

Out of all of the Nohrians that Takumi had the pleasure of getting close to, Xander had been the most elusive. The two were polite, but kept conversation to a minimum. Something about Xander’s emotionless countenance put Takumi on edge. The man was unpredictable like his father.

Xander leaned towards him from across the mahogany desk, over a stack of paperwork and ink. “Do you know how many attempts on Leo’s life there have been in the last two months?” he asked.

Takumi shrunk in his seat. “I do not,” he answered.

“Do you know how many attempts on your sister’s life there have been in the last two months?” Xander asked again.

“I do not,” Takumi repeated.

Xander paused. “I ask because I was almost certain that Leo would have mentioned them in some way or another in his letters to you,” he said, pulling back and taking his quill from the ink well. He turned to his paperwork and began signing documents and contracts as he spoke. “Gods know what you two manage to talk about.”

Now that Xander was focused on something else, Takumi looked up. “You knew we were sending letters to each other?” he asked hesitantly.

“I noticed the Hoshidan seal on each letter every time I handed him his letter personally, and I don’t believe there is any reason for King Ryoma to be contacting him so often.”
Takumi did not know what to say to that, so he stayed silent.

Xander’s quill glided along the document, his signature flourished and fancy. From their position, Takumi could not read his decree, but he waited patiently as Xander crossed his T’s and dot his I’s. When Xander spoke again, he asked, “Whose idea was it to go out in the middle of the night?”

Takumi swallowed hard in his throat. “It was mine, I’m sorry,” he admitted.

“I did not ask you to apologize,” Xander sighed. “This may come as a surprise to you since you and your brother are so casual with each other, but I spend my days, my entire life, to making sure that not only my country, but my family is safe. I suppose this makes me look cold and distant, but I watch my siblings and I am always so proud of them, especially Leo. Every decision I have made on their behalf had their wellbeing in mind.”

Takumi stared up at him attentively, his head tilted to the side. He clenched his hands over the fabric of his kimono. “Why are you telling me this?”

This time, Xander met his gaze, his hand pausing on the paper. “There is one time in recent history,” he started, “that I did not make a decision based on the wellbeing of my family. It was a time that I put the good of Nohr above us all, and this might have been my biggest tactical mistake yet. It was when I decided to ask Leo to marry your sister.”

At this, Takumi knitted his brows. “What do you mean?” he pressed.

Xander set his quill aside in its inkwell and leaned back into his chair. He looked exactly like Ryoma did when he was upset over something serious, like when the street riots in Hoshido started right after Sakura had left for Nohr. Xander laced his fingers again and started down at Takumi, who just wanted to disappear.

“Your brother came to me, desperate,” Xander said. “He knew that Lady Sakura’s pregnancy would cost her her life at Castle Shirasagi and marriage was the only safe cover-up for her respectable image. At the time, all I could think about was her dowry and how our kingdoms would forever be unionized, something Nohr desperately needed despite all the help Hoshido has given us in the past. Inside, I knew something like this would happen, and yet I ignored it for King Ryoma’s favor. He and I both saw how much you two loved each other, and at the time, that was not enough for me. I should be the one apologizing to you.”
Takumi quickly shook his head. “No, you shouldn’t apologize,” he said. “You and Leo saved Sakura and my family from a life riddled with scandal. That is more than we could ask of you.”

Finally, Leo returned with Niles, who looked surprisingly grim. Niles bowed low to the king, his mop of white hair falling over his face, followed by a salute. Takumi couldn’t remember a time when the perverted former outlaw looked so serious. He and Leo stood to the side of the room while Xander and Takumi stayed seated.

“You were faster than I thought you would be,” Xander remarked.

“Niles wanted to see the body himself, so he was already there,” Leo huffed. “The man had died, by the way. It was too late for Elise to revive him.”

Xander’s jaw set as he nodded slowly. “I see. And what did Niles conclude from his visit?”

Niles sighed, his one good eye staring at his king apologetically. “It seems as if your predictions were wrong,” he started. “You see, one good look at him and I knew that this was not just an act of murder. It’s something more or less concerning, depending on how you take it.”

Xander tapped his fingers on the edge of his desk. “So... what was it?” he asked impatiently.

“I’m afraid that it is a sign of a rather specific gang activity,” Niles admitted. “One I used to partake in myself when I was a mere street rat. You see, some of the more... ah, dragon-fearing villagers will sometimes choose a member in a time of crisis and cut the anagram into his head and hands, kill, and hang him to be a spokesperson or a charm to the gods. You would send your prayers to him, he would relay them to the dragons in a more ‘direct’ sense, and try to swindle fate in your favor. It’s quite a gruesome practice, I’m glad I wasn’t chosen to be a charm.”

Leo’s and Takumi’s jaws dropped in disbelief while Xander hid his face. “Are you saying...” Takumi started slowly, “…that that man was sacrificed in the name of religion?”

Niles shrugged. “To put it bluntly, yes. Usually people need to be real desperate to do something like that, though,” he said.

The royals paused, morbid pictures swimming in their heads. Xander cleared his throat. “Why do you think bandits would feel the need to make the... charm?”
Niles shrugged again. “It’s anyone’s guess what the specific reason is, however,” he drawled, “if it has anything to do with the underground’s unrest, then I would say that you should be careful.”

This caught everyone’s attention. “Tell us what is happening,” Xander commanded. “Do not hold any details back. Withholding important information will be taken as an act of treason against the crown of Nohr.”

Now that he had successfully riled the king up, instead of cowering like most of the staff would have done, Niles smirked and crossed his arms. “Of course, Your Majesty. I wouldn’t dream of it.” He paused to collect his thoughts. “The underground is in a state of chaos. There are people who believe that the increase in sunlight is a sign of the apocalypse and that the Dusk Dragon is on his way back from the sun to kill everyone and start a new Nohr. Some believe that the increased vegetation will bring along with it pestilence as part of a plague. The most concerning, however, is in regards to Nohr’s new access to Hoshido’s throne.” His eye glanced over to Takumi and Leo briefly before returning to the king. “Some say that now there is no Nohr left, and that the union was the final sign of Nohr’s complete destruction.”

At that, Xander muttered to himself, “If they were in the woods by the castle, they might have made it onto castle grounds. I will increase security by three, no, fourfold for the rest of the festival...”

But Takumi had other plans. He groaned and slammed his hands down on Xander’s desk, rising to his feet. “You have got to be kidding me!” Takumi growled in a fit of rage. “Do you have no idea how much Hoshido gave to Nohr to help your people?! We gave you our food, our crops, our lumber, we opened our ports for you, and for what?! We help your ungrateful people survive and they continue to treat us like we’re pests?! We thought a peace treaty was enough but apparently not! You Nohrians are so ungrateful for everything my country has done for you! You’re selfish! You don’t care about anyone but your own kind! You--!”

Takumi clamped his hand over his mouth, swallowing the rest of his words. The Nohrians stared at him, not with anger, but with empathy. Takumi glanced over at Xander with wide eyes, only to find that the man also had a look of pity. Leo whispered a pathetic “Takumi...” to get him to calm down, but it did not work.

“I am so sorry,” Takumi apologized to Xander. “I-I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It is fine,” Xander said softly. “I understand why you would think something like that.”
“No, no, I really should have more control than that.” Takumi held his throbbing head, running a hand through his hair.

Xander finally stood, surveying the three other men in the room. There was too much tension to continue on the subject. “If we are finished here, you are all dismissed,” he commanded. “I must get back to work.”

The three of them bowed and left. Niles asked if he could be of further service to Leo, who quickly sent him off. Takumi walked alongside Leo, poorly hiding his guilty expression.

“I didn’t mean what I said, I swear,” Takumi apologized again.

“I trust you,” Leo said.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Everything will be fine.”

But somehow, Leo did not believe himself.

Chapter End Notes

I love Sakura, I really do. She’s my favorite female royal and my third favorite royal overall behind Takumi and Leo respectively. I just have a habit of treating my faves poorly and mentally breaking them down, because that’s just what writers do.

I have nothing else to say about this chapter other than I’m sorry it took so long to write. I intended for it to be out last week when I first got out of class but then it turned into a Long Thing. The part about the sacrifice was actually inspired by an episode of Reign, which I began watching with my mom, but I changed it up a lot to fit the plot. Reign provided a lot of inspiration for me to continue working on this, I highly recommend the show!

Right after the last chapter, I drew a picture to go along with this fic, but didn't have a chance to advertise it. See it on my art blog here: https://puppy-butts-art-blog.tumblr.com/post/157129284857/hi-my-name-is-puppy-butts-and-my-talents-include and follow my tumblr @Puppy-Butts or @Puppy-Butts-Art-Blog if you just want to see what I make.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Leo and Takumi debate the usefulness of thongs, Camilla shares the pain of a boob, Leo tells a ghost story, Sakura hecks up at the festival, and things get intense...

Chapter Notes

Another chapter that is way longer than intended... at least it didn't take as long as the last one. I intended to get this out for Leo's birthday... then I tried for Kiragi's birthday... but Kiragi isn't here yet so I guess that wouldn't have meant anything.

I liked writing this chapter. As always, it's un-beta'd, so please excuse any mistakes or illegibility. Accept my word vomit for what it is. Hope you guys enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leo did not have constant nightmares like Takumi did. He did not have dreams often. But when he did, they were vivid.

He dreamt of his mother that night. She had a pointed nose, broad shoulders, and long, thick eyelashes, all of which Leo had inherited. He dreamt of her crooked smile and her overbearing scent of lavender perfume. He dreamt that he was trailing after the hem of her long emerald dress down the corridors of Castle Krakenburg’s concubine house, his deceased half-siblings staring at him with a level of malice unfit for children their ages. His mother laughed her ugly little laugh and locked him away in the library with her “special” tutor that taught him the skills of assassins six times his age. Herbology, anatomy, self-defence, pressure points, poisons...

He hated her. He hated her with an intensity that burned brighter and hotter than his hatred for his worst enemies. Ever since the moment he was born, he knew that she did not love him. Ever since Camilla had explained his purpose, he understood that he was just a political tool.

But still, he was stuck in a restless dream world, fighting and grasping for a way out. His memories flashed before his eyes: his mother’s chilling grip as she wrenched him across the castle for missing his target, a pool of blood his half-siblings made in the second sitting room just hours before daybreak, the time Camilla saved his life before one of the mothers could slip needles into his breakfast, the day Queen Arete disappeared, the day his mother and 71 other concubines that partook in corrupting their own children were sent to the gallows, lined up with one single, long chain, on the shore of one of Nohr’s ports for everyone to witness their execution.
His mother, in a dirty nightdress not nearly regal enough for someone of her beauty, stared at him with a soft half-smile. She was so glad her son was one of the few survivors, so happy that he could continue her legacy and steal the crown from under Prince Xander’s feet. While almost every other mother wailed for their departed sons and daughters, praying for the Dusk Dragon to reunite them in Heaven so they could atone for their sins, she just stared, her chocolate eyes piercing the skull of her precious, perfect little murderer. The wind carried a salty breeze through her long blonde hair, her imminent demise doing nothing to stop her giddiness. She had won. She emerged victorious in the Concubine War.

The executioner pulled the lever and just like that, 72 women had their necks snapped all at once. Camilla had covered his eyes while they watched, a too-young, crying Elise resting on her hip. Xander’s hand tightened on his shoulder, probably to distract them both from the horror before them. A child with long blue hair stood at the shore in silence. Leo did nothing, not even cry.

And she rose from the dead to haunt me forever, watching my every movement, waiting for the moment she could have her name written down in history as the mother of a king of Nohr. That would make her a queen and even though she’s dead, she would still have gotten everything she ever wanted. Her bloodline would still be under her guard, my children and my children’s children catching faint glimpses of her shadow in their dreams...

Leo woke with a gasp, his hand darting under his goose-feather pillow to rest on a book he had hidden from sight. It glowed a soft purple, his strong magic flowing into it, warming it like an automaton rising from a long rest.

Brynhildr.

A bead of cold sweat ran down his neck as Leo tried to stop his breathing from being so erratic. Upon realizing that his mother had not risen from the dead and it was all just a dream, the warm violet hue beneath his pillow died down, as did his nerves. Leo exhaled and settled into bed facing the faint outline of Takumi’s back. Takumi slept soundly--he often did when they slept in the same bed--and the sudden burst of Leo’s magic did not disturb him one bit. He had no magic within himself; he had no ability to detect it like Leo did. He snorted and mumbled pleasant things in his dreams, dreams where he didn’t have royal responsibilities, dreams that didn’t make sense. Leo did not want to disturb him.

Scooting himself closer, Leo wrapped his arms gently around Takumi’s torso like he was hugging a stuffed doll and pulled their bodies closer, burying his head in Takumi’s shoulder and inhaling his scent. His simple touch calmed Leo’s mind once and for all. Soon, he found his eyes slowly closing, fatigue taking him over for the night.
In the hour before dawn, Takumi would awake. He would chortle at Leo for being so childish and laze in bed another few quiet moments, just to ingrain in his memory the feeling of Leo’s arms around him.

“My birth mother?” Takumi coughed when they were alone in the library. A butler had brought them a small bowl of fruit on Leo’s request which they began picking at with their forks, balancing eating with playing chess. Currently Leo was winning, but Takumi wasn’t far behind. “That’s really random. Why do you ask?”

Leo shrugged, hoping that he seemed nonchalant about the subject. “I was just wondering,” he answered, leaning his cheek onto his palm. “Queen Mikoto was just your stepmother, so I was wondering if you had any memories of the queen before that. Your biological mother.”

Takumi paused, fishing out a grape. Because the skin was thicker than the other fruits in the bowl, he had trouble sticking it to his fork. He managed to corner it against the side of the bowl and press his fork into it with a satisfying popping sound. If he had used chopsticks, he wouldn’t have to go through the trouble. “I don’t remember anything,” he admitted, delicately placing the grape in his mouth. “I grew up thinking Mother was, well, my only mother. It didn’t occur to me that she wasn’t, and by the time it did, I didn’t care to research her or anything.”

Leo stuck another piece of diced pear into his mouth and moved his bishop to take one of Takumi’s rooks. “You aren’t the slightest interested?” he asked.

Scanning his face for a brief moment, Takumi sighed dramatically. “I mean I could research her when I go back to Hoshido if you want,” he teased. “But all I want to know is why.”

Scrunching his nose, Leo shot back, “I really don’t care. I was just having a conversation.”

To this, Takumi mumbled, “This isn’t exactly a normal conversation topic...” and moved his knight to capture Leo’s bishop.
They fell into a silence, one that was not unwholly uncomfortable. Takumi occasionally coughed
into his hand before turning his undivided focus onto the chessboard. Leo suckled on a honeyberry
spear at the end of his fork and gave Takumi some time to think about his next move. He leaned
back in his chair and let his mind wander. He really didn’t care about Takumi’s biological mother, or
the fact that Takumi had the chance to have a loving matriarch take care of him and Leo did not.
Takumi moved one of his pawns to block a check—a small oversight by Leo, to have left an opening
—and Leo quickly snatched it with his queen. Takumi grimaced, having been placed in check again.

“The queen piece is too powerful,” he stated, staring at Leo’s offending black queen in the shape of a
pillar with a small crown on top. “Sometimes I forget it can move everywhere since there is no
equivalent in shogi.”

Leo quirked a brow at his comment and gestured for him to make a move. “It’s not as confusing as
shogi’s system of promotions, in my opinion.”

Takumi shook his head. “I didn’t say the queen was confusing, just that it was weird.” He moved his
king out of the way. “Why would the queen be the most powerful piece in the game? The king
should be, but he can only move one space at a time.”

Leo hummed and scratched his chin, surveying the board while Takumi took another piece of warm
fruit. “I suppose it’s because the queen is supposed to protect the king,” he shrugged. If he moved his
queen to put Takumi’s king in check again, she could be captured by his last remaining rook. “You
know, Nohr has a history of having queens that used to be war generals or powerful soldiers.
Xander’s mother Queen Katerina was a particularly skilled tactician and knight, or at least that is
what our genealogy in the library said. If the king were to be put in danger, it was up to the queen to
sacrifice her life as a last line of defence to protect him. A king can always remarry. It only makes
sense.”

Takumi’s eyes glowed with awe, if only because it was a valuable history lesson. Leo moved his
queen out of danger. “That’s... very interesting,” Takumi said, tapping his fork lightly on the table.
“The way you describe them makes them sound so gallant and, well... graceless. Something like that
would never go well in Hoshido. I mean, Kagero can hold her own, I’m absolutely sure, but she
didn’t even want to have a baby until the entire castle pushed her to do so. Even though she loves
Shiro with all her heart, she wasn’t ready, and I could tell she was mentally breaking at losing her
mobility and freedom. But it was worth it, at least to me, so she could be properly provided for. We
have a very different stance on royal women than you, if Hinoka had anything to say about that. She
has an opinion on everything.”

I’m not surprised, seeing as how Hoshido has been so isolated for centuries, Leo wanted to say, but
held his words in since that was a conversation he did not want to have.
"I think that’s what I find so shocking about your culture," Takumi continued, moving his knight and watching Leo strategize. His mind went to Sakura. "Nohr puts a certain pride in their women, and Hoshido puts pride in them too, but in a different way... Does this mean if you get in trouble, tiny little Sakura will have to save your sorry ass?"

Snorting through his nose, Leo shook his head. “I’m not a king, I wouldn’t make her do that.” Takumi frowned and narrowed his eyes. "... Listen, I promised I would take care of her, didn’t I?"

That seemed to satisfy Takumi for a while. “It’s just so strange...” he trailed off.

Leo tutted and took one of Takumi’s pawns. “You say that now, but you obviously have not seen the female barracks. We aren’t as different as you think.” He waved his fork in the air to accentuate his point. “Camilla has been trying to get Xander to outlaw battle thongs for years, but he always has more important laws to focus on. That, or he’s just trying to stall for time because he has a thing for women strutting around in their smallclothes on the battlefield.”

Takumi turned red at the mental image and coughed shyly into his hand. “Y-yes, well...” he trailed off, his shoulders tense. “He did marry a woman who sliced off the heads of many men wearing... armored undergarments...”

The difference in culture was astounding indeed. Hoshidan women were thin and coy, hiding behind the sleeves of their kimonos and fleeting expressions. Good-natured flicks of their wrists would have men staring from miles away. Their bodies, with the exception of those who fought in the army, were hidden under the kimono’s long fabric until the moment came for someone else to take it off. And their skin, as one would have it, would always be unmarked and unscathed by the sun or by a labor accident. It made sense for Takumi to flush at the sight of an unfamiliar woman who stood mostly-naked in a pool of another man’s blood.

Nohrian women did not have the same outlook of courtship. They were thick-boned and bold, taking nearly half of a poor father’s work because outdoor labor in Nohr was so intense that even men were easily strained by it. They were dirty with Nohr’s sharp topsoil, strong from carrying basket upon basket of coal and ore, and as a result had to expose their bodies for freedom of movement. They drank, they spat, they tested their strength alongside men to the point where only wealthier women could break away from that mold. The only ones that got out of the mines or the very few plantations were the pregnant and the weak. Queen Charlotte had faked her status for so long by playing a hapless princess figure, her scars and discolorations hidden with makeup and asking brawny men for help with basic lifting, but it was only time when Xander had found out the truth, that she could not hide her brash and unrefined personality of a commoner forever.

The subject of women never really left as they continued to talk about their types. The two laughed and gossiped like young ladies at court behind their feathered fans. The fruit goblet was left empty
and Leo won for the 9th time in a row, much to Takumi’s disdain.

Sakura made her rounds on foot since pacing the vast halls of Castle Krakenburg helped calm her nerves. The last time she had seen Xander, about half an hour ago, he had looked like a completely different man than what she was used to. He looked tired with black bags under his eyes, his hair not completely combed. Apparently Siegbert had been acting up and Charlotte was too busy taking care of her mother to multitask, so his son had been entirely in his care since four in the morning. This would have been fine--after all, Xander had insisted that Charlotte should not be completely alone in raising their child--but Siegbert was a fussy child. And, sensing the presence of guests for the festival, had thrown so many tantrums in the last week that Xander was at his limit balancing ruling a kingdom, the festival plans, and child rearing. Honestly, Sakura didn’t know how he managed.

Sakura had caught a glimpse of the blonde baby, only a year old. He was on the floor of Xander’s office, playing with toys on a soft blanket while Xander rested his head on his desk like the defeated man he was. Once upon a time, he had helped guide an entire army to victory and negotiated the way to prosperity in Nohr. To be defeated by his nineteen-month-old son was a low blow.

He’s so cute, Sakura thought, smiling to herself. He’ll grow up to be a very handsome man, I’m sure.

When Siegbert realized Sakura was peeking through the office door, he immediately burst into tears. His shrill cry made Xander wake with a start, bits of black ink that had not completely dried smeared across his left cheek. He walked over to Siegbert and picked him up, holding his son to his chest and shushing him gently. Sakura backed away from the door, feeling guilty for taking away Xander’s precious minutes of sleep.

But that was how it was with Siegbert. He was horrible with people he did not know. Charlotte thought he was just unsociable. Xander thought he was scared of strangers. Sakura did not know what to think, but throughout her stay at Nohr, her meetings with Siegbert had been limited for that very reason. Only two maids and one wet nurse were allowed to even be in the same room as him, because if someone else was there, he would start to cry and fuss. Sakura had tried to win him over by talking to him and playing with him, but to a very limited extent. He would only let her hold him after he had been calmed down, and only for ten seconds at a time. Playing with him was off-limits.
I’m so sorry, Xander. I couldn’t help myself, Sakura mused, turning a corner towards Elise’s chambers. I hope my child won’t turn out like him.

To her surprise, there was chatter coming from Elise’s room. Camilla was inside, reclining on her little sister’s bed while Elise fiddled with her own hair in front of her mirror. They were talking about how that night was the last day of Nataergersi and neither were looking forward to the events taking place.

“It’s always the same broads that come every year, I really don’t see why we need to keep doing the same thing,” Elise huffed, her long hair cascading down past her hips. “I don’t know why Xander is forcing us to stay the entire time too.”

Camilla filed her nails at a content pace, pulling them back every so often to examine their shape. “It’s tradition, dear,” she sang with false joy. “I hope his plans don’t make me have to cancel my massage today.” She gestured to her own voluptuous chest, visible clearly with her deep-cut dress, with her file and Elise glanced at her in the mirror. “It had been years since these girls have grown to their full size and they’re still giving me back problems. If I have to step into a room full of people with an aching back, I fear the day might end in bloodshed.”

Elise swiveled on her vanity chair and approached her bed, flopping onto her stomach near Camilla’s feet. “You know, I’m still jealous of your boobs,” she sighed. “Here you are, looking like the picture of motherly grace, and I’m still flat as a board despite the fact that I’m an adult. Do you know how humiliating it is to stand next to you as a sister during public gatherings? It isn’t fair!”

Camilla chuckled and nudged Elise with her toes. “You might grow a bit after your first child—I know I did. Besides, a woman is more than just her chest size, Elise,” she said. “And I don’t think you would enjoy the pain that comes with them.”

“I would put up with the pain every day!” Elise whined.

Camilla tsked at her naivete. She pushed herself up and leaned down to look Elise in the eye before pinching both of her rosy, rounded cheeks. Elise struggled. “But you already look so cute, and what would I do if I didn’t have my cute, wonderful, beautiful, amazing, perfect little sister?”

Sakura chose that time to knock on the door. Elise asked who it was and Sakura answered, immediately being let in. She settled on the bed next to Camilla while Elise straightened herself.
“So, are you ready for tonight’s ball, Sakura?” Camilla asked, laying back against the plush pillows again. She fished around for where she left her file, finding it after a couple seconds of patting the mattress around her.

Sakura rubbed her sweaty palms on her dress. “To be honest...?” she paused, thinking over her response. She did not want to be disrespectful and act like she was having a bad time at the parties, which she was. “... I’m worried about being too tired to stay up the whole night.”

Camilla pouted and touched Sakura’s arm, her fingers ghosting over her skin. “If you’re tired, you can always rest your head on my lap,” she offered. “I used to do it all the time with Elise, and Leo, and Corrin, Beruka, Flora, Scarlet... You wouldn’t believe how calming it is to have your head on someone’s lap while they play with your hair.”

Sakura tried to protest, not used to that level of intimacy, but Camilla was already guiding her body to lay flat on the bed, the back of her head resting against Camilla’s thighs. She stared wide-eyed at Elise’s ceiling, then at Camilla, then at Elise, before she finally decided to close her eyes. Camilla ran her fingers slowly through Sakura’s short hair, combing and brushing it patiently. Her nails against Sakura’s scalp felt divine, and after her initial awkwardness, began to relax completely against Camilla’s body.

“Yes,” Camilla purred, feeling Sakura begin to slip. “Just like that.”

Elise pouted, looking from Sakura to Camilla with an expression of jealousy.

“You know,” Elise said, crossing her legs on her bed. “Sakura has been getting better at doing the waltz. I think she’ll be just fine tonight if she doesn’t trip again.”

Camilla began scratching the sides of Sakura’s head in circular movements with her newly manicured nails. Sakura, jaw slowly going slack, was too blissed out to say anything. “Oh good, she’s ready to dance with Leo,” she smiled. “I can’t wait to see them dance in the middle of everyone. What a lovely pair they’ll make.”

Elise faltered a bit. “Yeah, with Leo.” She cleared her throat. “I just keep remembering all the times she tripped and stumbled. She made so much progress this past week, I’m so proud!”

Sakura didn’t have anything to say. Her mind was too numb to respond.
“I remember when I was teaching you how to dance when you were just a little girl,” Camilla sighed wistfully, leaning back against the fluffy pillows and looking up at the ceiling. Her hands never stopped, her strokes steady and experienced. “You also stumbled and fell a lot. Then you would cry because you didn’t think you would be any good at it. But then you got better, and you were so happy to show everyone how well you were doing that you would grab Leo by the arms and force him to dance with you at public parties. It was so adorable, but he had bruises because you were holding his arm so tight.”

Elise huffed and leaned her cheek on her palm. “He was the only one close enough to my height for it not to be awkward back then. It’s not my fault he hit puberty so late.”

“If I remember correctly, you were actually quite an early bloomer yourself.”

“And everyone was telling me I was going to have great boobs from a young age. Guess what didn’t happen?!”

Before Camilla could get another word in, someone knocked on the door. Elise asked who it was and Hinoka’s voice answered. “The maid I asked said that you were here,” Hinoka told Camilla. “I need to ask you something...”

Camilla smiled warmly, patting the bed next to her with her left hand. “Of course you can ask me anything. What is it, dear?” she cooed in her usual tone.

Hinoka looked from Elise to Sakura, who was still laying down on Camilla’s thighs with her eyes shut. Clicking her tongue, Hinoka slowly pressed, “... Alone. I need to ask you the question in private.”

Sighing, Camilla gently tapped Sakura on her shoulder to arouse her into reality. As she stirred, Sakura mumbled something along the lines of, “I don’t want to move.” Elise stood and offered a hand to Sakura, which she tiredly took and slipped off the bed.

“Is it alright if you two wait outside for a bit?” Camilla asked Elise.

“But it’s my room!” Elise whined.

Camilla pressed her lips together tightly. Hinoka shifted anxiously near the door waiting for her little
sister to leave. Camilla knew that whatever she had to say, she didn’t want the possibility of servants overhearing. “Just for a bit,” she repeated.

Elise groaned and lead the way out the door. Sakura eyed her sister, wondering what she could possibly want to know that was so private, she wouldn’t want her own family knowing. But she let it slide and never pressed, mostly because she did not know how.

“Hey Sakura,” Elise said once they were in the hall. “Now that we’re alone, I have a question for you.”

Sakura tilted her head to the side and folded her hands over her abdomen. “What is it?”

Elise gingerly took Sakura’s hands into her own and held them in a soft grip. Her thumb ran over Sakura’s knuckles, the faintest trace of sweat left behind. Sakura instinctively squeezed her hands, feeling the light, fast drum of Elise’s pulse in her palm. Elise squeezed back.

“Tonight, can you save a dance for me?” Elise asked as if it was the hardest question in the world for her. “After you’re done with Leo.”

Sakura didn’t need to think twice about it. “Of course,” she promised. Elise smiled widely. The heavy breath she exhaled immediately after did not go unnoticed.

It was four hours before the ball started that Leo happened to find Takumi and Sakura together in one of the guest rooms. Takumi sat cross-legged on the bed, scrolls and texts scattered before him as he scanned them all for some sort of correlation. Behind him, Sakura sat on her knees with a pair of shears in one hand. Takumi’s long hair was free from his old, tattered red ribbon and she patiently snipped at the very ends, cutting off the dead bits. Judging by the amount of silver hair that fell onto her lap, Takumi was in desperate need of a trim.

As Leo approached, he saw the small, half-empty bag of hard candy near Sakura’s foot. Upon closer inspection, Sakura was making quiet crunching sounds, suggesting she had eaten the bag by herself.
Leo tutted at her. “You’ll spoil your appetite like that,” he reprimanded, crossing his arms and leaning against the desk by the door.

He had made a slight miscalculation. Takumi looked up at him, a pristine cherry candy rattling against his teeth. “Ever heard of knocking?” he asked, completely dodging Leo’s point.

Sakura swallowed and grabbed the bag of sweets, holding them out to Leo. “Want one?” she offered. Leo shook his head and she put them down again, but not before taking another one for herself and getting back to work.

Leo glanced over all of the texts that Takumi was inspecting. Some of them, Leo had never seen before in any of Castle Krakenburg’s libraries. He must have brought them with him from Hoshido for whatever reason.

“Mother used to cut my hair for me when she was alive,” Takumi confessed to Leo. “Ever since, I have been asking Sakura to cut my hair since she actually knows how to use scissors.”

“Your other siblings don’t?”

“To put it in perspective: Ryoma decided he was mature enough to cut his own hair one day and ended up with... whatever you would call his hairstyle now.”

“You don’t like his hair?”

“That thing is not hair, it’s a mane. I swear that thing is alive sometimes.”

Leo turned back to Takumi’s books. “What is it that you are reading?” he asked, pushing off the desk and sitting next to Takumi on the bed. His hand fell next to Takumi’s, and he instinctively gripped it tight in his own, the gesture soon returned.

Takumi sighed. “Ryoma assigned me a whole lot of reading to do for when we went back to Hoshido,” he said. “I don’t know how he expects me to balance the festival with this much work, but I was only able to read two of the things he gave me. Since I don’t want to spend my entire vacation reading, I’m just hoping that I can absorb a little bit from each just in case he asks me about it.”
Leo made a sour face, his nose scrunching up in pity. “Such is the life of a royal advisor. I hate it when Xander does that to me,” he admitted. He skimmed across some of the texts that Takumi had open, trying to make sense of them all. Some were written in the vernacular, others were written in an archaic Hoshidan language that Leo did not understand. He pushed his head into the nook of Takumi’s shoulder, if only for a clearer view of the texts he could read, earning him a soft, chaste kiss on his temple.

It felt nice having someone there to witness them, something akin to euphoria. Sakura was too timid to tease and was only one of three people entrusted with their little secret. Having to hide their relationship from every prying eye was exhausting, and this charade has been going on for long enough. It felt like they were breaking their own unspoken rules, causing a headrush just by simple action. But showing affection with someone else in the room still felt unnatural. It was as if Sakura, as shy and quiet as she was, had a piece of blackmail looming over their heads. She wouldn’t dare tell the truth if she was asked not to, but how long would it be until she got angry at them and let their secret slip as an act of petty revenge?

No. Sakura was too kind.

It was this kindness that made Leo so upset every time he was with Takumi. It was her patience and acceptance of their actions that put Leo on edge. Here was a woman who was more than deserving of a loving partner and father to her child, and chooses not to make demands on fate because she thinks she already has enough. Part of Leo wished he could give her what she so very deserved, perhaps not as the ideal husband but as a guardian or brother. It was possible to enlist a concubine to take his role, but the idea of a concubine roaming the castle, waiting for the day one of them died to take their place in the royal family made Leo sick. He had promised to take care of her for Takumi’s and Hoshido’s sake, and that involved keeping her happy. To himself, Leo wondered just what would make her happy if Sakura had already resigned herself to being content with what she already has.

“Sakura, I’ve been meaning to show you something.” Leo turned to Sakura, who jumped at her name. The shears that had been in her hand was now set to the side and the dead clippings of Takumi’s hair was gathered into a ball in her palm. She seemed to be looking for a trash bin to dispose of them. “I should have shown you it before, but now is as good a time as any.”

She spotted a bin under the desk and quickly maneuvered off the bed towards it. “Oh? What is it?” she asked.

Leo smiled knowingly. “You’ll see,” he dismissed. “It’s a place only we as royals can get to.”
Takumi grabbed his red ribbon and worked on tying his hair up in its usual fashion. “Is it a place I can get to as well?” he asked, his eyes glowing with intrigue.

“Yes,” Leo answered. “ Personally, it’s one of my favorite features of this castle. It’s very handy, too.”

“B-but why are you showing me now?” Sakura asked.

“Because now is the perfect time.” Leo hopped off the bed and placed his hand on the door frame. “Meet me in ten minutes outside my study and I’ll show it to you both. Oh, and by the way, Takumi...” He pointed to the many books scattered in front of him. “I see that you are reading up on Nakashima’s philosophy about civilization and society’s connection to its government. I just wanted to say that I have read about him before and he has been long since disproven by several more modern philosophers from around the continent. If you would like, you could borrow a book from our library detailing and deconstructing Nakashima’s argument. I’m sure Ryoma would understand.”

Takumi stared wide-eyed at Leo, at Nakashima’s book, and again at Leo again. Then his eyes narrowed. “... No, I don’t believe that is necessary.” He slowly closed the book. “Ryoma wants me to know about him.”

“But he’s wrong,” Leo pressed.

“His philosophy is something that has been taught in Hoshido for generations,” Takumi said. “Why would I trust another philosopher over him?” A Nohrian one, he almost said, but he bit his lip instead.

Leo quirked a brow at his reasoning. “If you would just look at what everyone had to say about him, you would probably start to see the holes in his philosophy,” he said. “Nohr is a much bigger country than Hoshido, and likewise, we have more diverse philosophers and opinions that have not been idolized for centuries, even when times change. Hoshido really needs to become more open to cultural exchange, to modernize their belief system. A country cannot thrive if it still acts like the center of the world with no input or output from outside information.”

A bold statement coming from someone whose country is constantly going through drought and famine. To stop his tongue from lashing, Takumi bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t need to take the insult in silence, if Leo even intended to sound condescending, but hearing those derogatory remarks about his kingdom made his body quiver with effort to stay still. Did Leo mean this as a challenge of wits? Was he expecting Takumi to fight back like they used to? Or was he being sincere? Takumi didn’t know which would feel more like a slap to the cheek.
“... I’ll go with you,” Takumi mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Leo asked.

“I’m going with you to whatever place you’re taking Sakura.” Takumi began stacking his texts and rolling up his scrolls. Sakura helped him pack up, the bag of candy forgotten.

Leo sighed. “Very well. I’ll see you both in ten minutes,” he dismissed, and was gone.

Sakura asked Takumi why he was acting so strange. Takumi answered that, while he loved Leo and would gladly sacrifice his life for him, Leo was also the pain in his ass whenever he decided to open his mouth about a subject he thought he knew well. Takumi spent the next five minutes cursing Leo out and the next five minutes learning to forgive, not because he couldn’t hold grudges, but because he did not want to spend his precious vacation time on a sour note.

Outside of Leo’s study, the two waited until Leo came out, procuring a simple fire tome from his bookshelf. The tome was very basic and used mainly by beginner mages as it did not require a lot of magic to use. Leo’s bookshelf had a copy of just about every different tome Nohr had to offer, plus a few spirits from Hoshidan diviners that he collected from the army. He liked using fire spells in daily life since they were so handy, but even common spells rarely were of use when matches would do just fine.

“Follow me,” Leo commanded, leading the two down the hallway to a common wing that Sakura had passed countless times during her stay. Leo looked suspiciously from side to side as if they were being watched. After confirming they were, indeed, alone, he took a deep breath and placed his hand on the cold stone wall. At first, nothing happened. But after a few seconds passed, a warm yellow glow radiated from under the stone. As if by an unseen force, the stones began pulling away towards each side of what appeared to be an archway into dark a tunnel.

Takumi and Sakura found their jaws dropped with awe. Leo stepped inside and grabbed their wrists, pulling the two inside before the entrance could close. He quickly lit the fire tome, his powerful
magic filling the dark tunnel with a gentle light. The tunnel was humid and reeked of something foul. Sakura gulped.

“You used a dragon vein to get in here,” Takumi pointed out. “Now I see what you meant. Only us royals, those with the blood of a dragon, can open the exits.” He brushed the pads of his fingertips over the stone at the sides of the tunnel. The walls were pulsing with pure, raw Dusk energy that made Takumi’s blood burn and ears ring. Even Sakura stirred, shifting foot to foot. It was as if, even though they were powerful enough to enter, the descendants of Dawn were still not wanted there.

Leo turned back to them after walking a certain distance into the tunnel’s bowels. “This is a secret passageway my forefathers built in case of an invasion,” he said. “This was the only sure method of protection since there is no chance that criminals would be able to sneak around and use them unless a royal was helping them out by giving them access.”

“But what about us?” Takumi asked. “We’d be able to use it. Wouldn’t that put your family at risk?”

“Not unless you or your family went through the trouble of breaking in with a group of bandits,” Leo answered. “And I can’t imagine any royal going through all that.”

“Castle Shirasagi would never be able to have passageways like this,” Takumi continued. “Our walls are made of wood and paper. Any secret room would be found in an instant.”

“I would have expected a castle to have more security,” Leo scoffed.

“It’s not that we don’t have security...” Takumi’s eyes flashed knowingly. “We just have different methods.”

There were chalk markings on some of the stones pointing to different directions. Most of the signs were faded and rewritten over in Xander’s flourished, elegant hand. There were arrows for the west garden, the east garden, outside the throne room, the roof, a sitting room in the northern hall, the castle’s private chapel, and the wing they had just entered from. Takumi and Sakura suspected the tunnel was an entire network, possibly a labyrinth, that took up just as much space as the actual castle did, all hidden behind the castle’s thick walls.

“How often do you use this place?” Takumi asked. The tunnel looked as if it hadn’t been used in many decades, though he supposed since only four people use it on occasion, it wouldn’t look very lively no matter how many times they walk through it.
Leo shrugged. “I mainly use it during the spring,” he answered. “It provides a very direct path from my study to the east garden without me having to run into the staff. I have to check my tomato plants at least twice a week during the season.”

Sakura huffed, a sort-of half-laugh escaping her. “Y-you garden?” she asked.

Again, Leo shrugged, this time with a smug smile. “I dabble in it.”

Takumi scoffed. “Modesty doesn’t suit you,” he said. “Is the east garden closer to here than the west garden?”

“No, not really,” Leo answered. He began turning his back to them in order to lead them forward, but Takumi and Sakura both seemed reluctant to go any further. “In fact, I think the west garden is closer.”

“Then why did you choose the east garden?”

“Because the west garden is haunted.”

Sakura’s eyes widened and she let out a shrill scream. “Y-you don’t actually m-mean that! W-why didn’t you tell me?!” she begged Leo. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. “I knew this c-castle was scary!”

Torn between telling her the truth and having his own fun, Leo smirked and leered down at her, the fire cupped in his hand held under his chin for added effect. “That garden is said to be haunted by the ghosts of deceased children whose bodies have been dropped there and left to rot,” he said melodramatically. “Their bodies have long since become fertilizer for Nohr’s telltale black roses. But whatever you do, you can’t go there at night. If you do, one of the ghosts will follow you back to your room, and when you go to sleep, you’ll... disappear!”

Sakura screamed again, covering her ears and shaking her head side to side. “Stop! Stop!” she begged.

Leo turned to Takumi, who stood stiff and frozen in place. “And don’t even think about taking one
of the roses. If you take one, one of the child spirits will haunt you for the rest of your life, and when you die, your spirit will be dragged back to this very garden and trap you for all eternity.”

Takumi gulped.

Leo huffed and finally started trekking down the hall. “Now, if you two babies are done squabbling over superstitions, I’m going to show you how to get to the throne room from here. Come on, let’s stop wasting time.”

Takumi turned to Sakura, who was still shivering from fright. He offered his arm, which she gladly clunged to as if her life depended on it. Even Takumi was silently quivering from Leo’s tale, and this fact made Sakura feel less like a child even if Leo turned around every so often just to call them cowards. They stayed together like that until they had reached their destination, the light of the dragon vein making Sakura weep tears of absolute joy.

“Since this exit is the closest to the ballroom, you should be able to escape through it if you want to leave the party earlier than expected. I know I will,” Leo said. He handed Sakura his fire tome. “I entrust this to you since your brother has no magical capabilities whatsoever.”

“Hey!” Takumi barked.

“What about you?” Sakura asked, hugging the thin tome to her chest. “Don’t you need it to get through?”

Leo waved her off. “Where there’s one of those, there’s fifty more. My... ex-retainer Odin’s old room has a collection of them, each with a different name etched onto them. Probably because they were always in stock and he liked practicing his naming skills.”

“... Ex... retainer...?” Sakura repeated, clutching the book tighter.

Leo didn’t answer. Instead, he began walking towards the east wing where they could find a free sitting room and have tea, expecting the other two to follow.

“Who is Odin?” Sakura whispered to Takumi as they walked behind Leo some paces away.
“I don’t know,” Takumi murmured back. “It must be a sensitive subject. He won’t tell me anything about him when I ask...”

During the night’s peak, Niles had been more anxious than usual. Everyone was dressed in their party clothes; even the royal guard, with their hidden weapons embedded into their tailored coats and shawls, truly looked the part of nobility. Hinoka was already itching to get out of her red gown, her discomfort obvious to everyone around her. Xander was running on twenty-minute naps and five cups of coffee, yet despite his occasional slight of mind, everyone knew better than to comment on the ever-darkening bags under his eyes or occasional twitch of his eye. Camilla had to reschedule her massage and Elise dreaded having to face her fiance again, so naturally they were snappier than usual. The tension at the table had Ryoma in a silent panic as he tried to lift everyone’s spirits and enjoy the festivities, but his efforts fell on deaf ears. Even Leo had to down three drinks just to take stress of the party off his shoulders.

“What are you looking at?” Leo asked, approaching his retainer from behind with two goblets of wine. Niles stood among the guests, trying his best to control the crowd and keep the drunks from fighting with each other. Hana, at the other side of the room, was pulling apart two sharp-nailed women who tried to claw at each other over some asinine affair. Niles seemed all too wary of his surroundings, a byproduct of his past with people in general. Leo couldn’t help but pity him.

When his lord came up to him, Niles visibly relaxed. “Oh, nothing you need to concern yourself with, Milord,” he said, his deep voice hardly audible amid the din. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Leo practically forced one of his goblets into Niles’ hand. “I can’t stand to see you so tense. We’re at a party, after all. It’s quite unlike you to be like this.”

Niles stared at the goblet in his hand, the red-tinted wine sloshing against its edges. Normally, he would not hesitate to drink a little—it wasn’t as if he would drink into incapacitation like some of the guests—but he just shook his head and flashed his superior a smile. “I’m sorry, Milord. I can’t stomach alcohol today.”

Knitting his brow, Leo looked his retainer up and down. “Are you sure you’re the real Niles?” he asked, nudging his servant’s shoulder. “If you aren’t, I’ll have you tried for impersonation of a royal
Niles chuckled. His prince was much more interesting when tipsy. “I assure you that I am the real thing, Milord,” he promised, rolling his cup of wine in his hand but never taking a drink.

Leo took a swing from his half-empty goblet. “Prove it,” he commanded.

Niles paused, wondering just how much he could get away with in terms of public decency. It was definitely a challenge, albeit a drunk one, but he knew Leo lived for these moments of “what would you do?”

He leaned in close to Leo’s ear, as close as he could without attracting the attention of someone else, and whispered just loud enough for only Leo to hear, “If I may be so bold... You sleep without your socks on, your record in bed is two minutes and forty-seven seconds, and your favorite position is the wolfssenger.”

Leo coughed and sputtered into his hand, his wine thankfully landing on the floor and not his vest. Guests faced him with scalding looks, mentally berating him for being so unbecoming. With a shaking hand, he wiped his chin and took another sip from his goblet.

“Noted,” Leo wheezed, his face red from an odd mixture of alcohol and shame. He sauntered briskly away from Niles, who counted that interaction as a win before pouring his goblet of wine into a potted plant at the edge of the room.

The band finally picked up and it was time for noble couples to show off to others how perfect their relationships were with their spouses, even when they were truly miserable with their marriage. Charlotte gently took Xander’s hand and guided him to the dance floor where all eyes could see them, followed by a few noble couples that took the hint. Camilla sighed and stood with her wife, then Elise and her fiance. Takumi, Hinoka, and Ryoma stayed in their seats and oversaw the growing crowd from the dais.

Sakura watched the congregation with growing dread. She wasn’t ready to dance in front of so many people. She didn’t want to dance. But Leo, as promised, stood before her offering his hand. She took it, just as they had rehearsed, and Takumi watched her be whisked away to the dance floor. Even though he had three and a half drinks inside of him, Leo stood his ground gracefully, relying mainly on muscle memory to place one hand on Sakura’s waist and the other to hold her hand. Sakura gulped and put her free hand on Leo’s shoulder. Her ankles throbbed, the swelling never quite going down. Already she felt unsteady on her feet and, quite frankly, lightheaded.
The music started up again and Sakura was a little late. She was too busy looking at Charlotte over Leo’s shoulder, entranced by her elegant blue ballgown. The pace of the music was slower than what they had practiced to, but this gave Sakura more time to think. Couples swirled around them wide circles, all in complete sync. The more Sakura spun, the more she felt sick, and the tighter Leo had to hold her waist to keep her from falling.

About halfway through the song, Sakura stumbled. She tripped on her own foot and blundered into Leo’s chest. In her attempt at recovery, she stepped on his foot, making him flinch. His hand gripped hers painfully hard and she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming out in distress. Their momentum was lost, their rhythm gone. They paused to regain their composure, though Sakura wasn’t exactly sure how they could just jump back in at this point. Once they were ready and their hands had resettled on each other’s bodies, a couple that had not been paying attention bumped into them, nearly throwing the two royals to the ground. Leo snapped at them, but it was all for naught. The song was already ending.

When Leo turned to his wife, he saw tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry, I really messed that up,” Sakura hiccuped. She could feel the pressure of thousands of eyes watching her. Inside, she knew she had ruined the image of the Nohrian family by being such an ungraceful brute. She should have just not danced at all.

Leo quickly surveyed the people around them. There were people who were waiting for him to do something about his wife’s tears. There were people scrutinizing his every move, looking for a reason to suspect they had married for reasons other than love. There were people sneering at Sakura because of her lineage, mocking him for marrying Hoshidan filth. In any case, Leo would not stand for that kind of judgement.

He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and bent his knees slightly to meet eye-to-eye. “You have done nothing wrong,” he said as she wiped away her tears. “People make mistakes all the time. It is a fact of life and it is best not to focus too much on them. You did your best, that is all that matters.”

Even though he was just reiterating phrases that Camilla and Xander have told him in the past, it seemed to work. Sakura smiled a shaky smile up at him, her cheeks dry.

“Kiss her!” a drunk man called out to them. “Why don’t you kiss her, you dog fucker?! Did you already get rabies from fucking her like a whore last night?!”

Leo decided that enough was enough and began leading the way back to the dais, but not before Elise caught a hold of Sakura’s wrist. “Dance with me!” Elise pleaded despite Sakura’s crestfallen expression and sore ankles. “Please? You promised me a dance...”
Sakura sighed, remembering the fire tome she hid beneath her chair cushion. “...Alright, I’ll dance with you,” she complied. “B-but only for a little, okay?”

When Leo reached the table, Takumi had his napkin to his mouth. “That was quite the show you two put on,” he coughed, followed by a few shallow breaths.

Leo looked him up and down. Takumi had hardly touched his dinner. “Are you feeling alright?” Leo asked. Now that he noticed it, Takumi did look quite feverish. “You’ve been coughing all day. Do you want to see a healer?”

Takumi waved him off, dropping his napkin to the table. “No, I’m fine,” he promised. “You don’t need to go through the effort for me. It should pass.” Just as he said that, Takumi had a coughing fit that alarmed the rest of the table. His lungs shuddered and shook, his throat cracking. Again, he held his napkin to his mouth.

“I’m going to find a healer,” Leo said. But before he could move, Takumi grabbed his arm, halting him in place.

“You don’t need to,” Takumi repeated. “I assure you, I’ll be fine.”

The song ended and Elise broke away from Sakura with a curtsy. The two began moving back towards the dais, but Sakura had been cut off by a couple of drunk women stumbling in front of her. She tried to get back on track, but by the time Elise realized Sakura was nowhere to be seen, it was too late.

Time seemed to stand still as Sakura emerged from a crowd of people only to be partially knocked over by someone she knew all too well. Said person grunted in pain, clutching his abdomen with one hand and a throwing dagger in the other.

“Assassin!” Niles hissed, drawing the attention of everyone. Up on the ballroom’s balcony, a shrouded figure ran for cover. He threw his knife with deadly precision, lodging it in the assassin’s shoulder and dramatically slowing its escape. Ten guards fought their way to the silhouette, trapping it in a corner. The assassin never stood a chance. But just as it had been caught, several more bandits revealed themselves amongst the dancers. The guests gasped and backed against walls with their hands up in surrender. Twenty more guards chased them down until they were all brought before Xander, who stood tall and grim on the dais.
The guards ripped off the bandits’ masks and hoods, revealing them to everyone. Xander narrowed his eyes and scrutinized their facial features. They did not look familiar. “Attempting to kill a princess, putting Nohr’s royalty in danger, not to mention putting all of our guests in potential danger... I should have you executed on the spot!” he spat.

Half of the guests cheered and hollered, throwing their hands in the air in favor for bloodshed. The other half screamed in horror for what they thought was to come. “Let their heads roll!” they barked. “Show them who the true king is! Have no mercy! For the glory of Nohr!”

Before Xander could process a single thought, the guests broke out into a single, unanimous chant that filled the ballroom and ricochet of the walls.

“For the glory of Nohr!”

“For the glory of Nohr!”

“For the glory of Nohr!”

“For the glory of Nohr!”

“SILENCE!” Xander commanded above everyone, which was no small feat. Everyone hushed in fear of their king. The assassins, pushed to their knees before the dais, struggled and squirmed in the grip of two or three guards each. “Have them stripped and sent to the dungeon. No food or water for three days.”

The guests booed and scoffed at his decision to spare them, but they eventually backed off. The soldiers began dragging the bandits off to the doors at each side of the throne, but not before one of them wailed at the top of her lungs like a banshee, drawing the attention of everyone in the hall.

“A curse! A curse! I curse everyone!” she screeched, her hair falling over her eyes as more guards tried to drag her away. “Ever since the old king has died, all we have done is suffer! We have lost our homes and our children to the projects! Now you expect us to change our minds and forget everything our neighbors have done to make us suffer so much?! The resistance is alive and will stop your reign once and for all! I put a curse on everyone here! I put a curse on the king! I put a curse on those near him! I put a curse on the first prince and the pregnant one! I put a curse on their firstborn! For as long as they live together, pestilence, great famine, and death will plague Nohr! Nohr will
Finally, a guard stepped in and bashed her head with the butt of his sword, knocking her out cold. She was dragged off to the dungeon where nobody could hear her. The entire hall held their breaths, looking to their king for guidance.

Xander cleared his throat. “I am very sorry for the intrusion,” he said. “I promise that her and the others will be taken care of efficiently. Her threats to the crown and to you mean nothing, pay them no heed. Please, do not let this interruption ruin your night. Have fun and be merry for the remainder of the festival.” He turned to one of the nearest butlers and ordered him to fetch another five cases of wine.

Sakura’s siblings rushed to her side in a panic, asking if she was okay, if she was hurt, what happened, why she was alone, and what was she thinking going by herself somewhere. Even Hinoka was distressed beyond belief when she pulled her into a gentle hug in front of everyone.

“I couldn’t live with myself if you got hurt,” she sobbed. Ryoma had to gingerly pry her off of their little sister, a cold sweat on his brow. Takumi gave her a brief lecture before he started coughing again and decided to leave it at that. Everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

Leo ran over to Niles, who hobbled over to him hunched over with both hands clutching at his stomach. “Let me see,” he demanded. After some compliance, Niles took his bloodied hands off of his abdomen to reveal a long gash where the assassin’s dagger had lodged itself. His blood dripped and stained his clothes in a wide, growing circle around the wound. It looked very deep. Leo clenched his teeth at the sight.

“No worries, Milord,” Niles huffed, his face pale from blood loss. “‘Tis but a flesh wound. I’ve gotten worse.”

Leo didn’t hesitate to support Niles with his arm, a familiar position for them to be in after all the times Niles had saved his life. “Healer!” Leo called. “I need a healer! Right now!”

Two maids rushed to them and supported Niles on both sides, carrying him away to the infirmary. All the while, the party tried to resume itself, but the events of that night was enough to ruin even the slightest bit of joy for most of the guests.
When Leo was finally able to escape with Takumi an hour later, they had mutually decided to check on Niles’ condition.

“He took a knife for my sister, the least I can do is thank him on behalf of my family,” Takumi murmured, clearly offput by the memory.

Niles laid on the infirmary bed, his upper-half exposed to the cold air. Where there was once a wound was now a thin, fresh scar amid many, many older ones. He was mostly awake, the numb, sleepy effect the healing rods produce beginning to wear off. At least he was no longer bleeding, much to Leo’s relief. His eyepatch was on the bedside table with a pitcher of ice water and a glass. His eye flicked around the room restlessly, but his pained body refused to move.

“Are you going to come over here or does the sight of my half-naked body turn you on so much that you can’t think correctly?” Niles slurred, his eye finally landing on Leo. Leo and Takumi slowly walked over to his bedside, catching glimpses of more and more old scars littering his body.

“Niles, I would just like to say...” Takumi started. “... Thank you for what you did tonight. You have earned yourself a good standing with Hoshido, one I hope you will maintain.”

Niles grunted, the corner of his mouth turning down into a frown. “Worry not, I was just doing my job,” he said. “Protecting Lady Sakura from danger was what I was ordered to do.”

Leo sat on the edge of Niles’ bed, careful not to sit on him. “You did well today,” he said to his servant. “I’m sure Sakura appreciates it too.”

Niles scoffed, feeling more like himself. “I care not if she appreciates what I do, as long as I can continue to serve you. The least she could have done is drop by if she cared so much.”

He began the process of rising to a sitting position, but Leo pressed down on the center of his chest, lowering him back to his pillow. “Careful,” Leo said. “You aren’t ready to get up yet or you’ll pass out.”
“I’m not so frail as to faint from a simple healing,” Niles attested, but Leo wouldn’t listen.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I lost Odin, and I’m not losing you too.”

Leo turned his back to his retainer and motioned for Takumi to follow. Takumi glanced once more at Niles before trailing behind, back to gods-know-where. Once they were gone, Niles laughed to himself, grabbing his eyepatch and fixing it back on his right eye where it belonged.

“My Lord Leo... you’re too kind for your own good,” he said to the walls of the empty infirmary. “Even though you don’t like showing that side of you... it’s going to get you killed one day.”

Sakura made her rounds on foot since pacing the vast halls of Castle Krakenburg helped calm her nerves. It was past midnight, the party had long since ended, and she just felt the need to get out of bed and tire herself out. She knew inside that there was no stopping more bandits from waiting at every corner, but she couldn’t help herself. Ever since she had nearly been killed, her shock had left her in a restless state of mind, her head containing a storm that pulsed and thrashed inside her skull. She didn’t know what to make of the night’s events, all she knew was that she was glad to have the fire tome on her. Navigating the tunnels by herself was horrible and daunting, but at least she never felt lost.

She found herself knocking on Camilla’s door, not exactly sure why her feet brought her here. It was as if they knew what she wanted before she knew herself. Camilla opened her chamber door and rubbed her eyes. She had just finished putting Scarlet to bed and was looking forward to much needed rest, but Sakura had denied her this.

“What is it, dear?” Camilla asked in a hushed voice, her hand landing on the hip of her silk nightgown. “You should be in bed already. Do you want me to tuck you in?”

Sakura knew that Camilla was capable of being completely serious when it came to treating her family like children, so she shook her head. “No, that’s not it. I want you to...”
And finally, the sheer reality of the night had caught up to Sakura. Tears fell down her cheeks without her uttering a sob. The tightness of her sore throat kept her from speaking clearly and her shoulders began uncontrollably shaking.

*I almost died tonight. I put so many people in danger. They could have died because of me. It’s all my fault.*

“I w-want...” she sniffed, covering her face with her hands. “C-can you...?”

Camilla, the picture of motherly grace, pulled Sakura to her chest and held her close. Running one hand through Sakura’s hair, she began shushing her cries. “What is it that you need? You can tell me...”

Sakura wiped her nose with the back of her hand and composed herself. She looked up at Camilla with red, puffy eyes. “C-can I lay in your lap...?” she croaked, her lower lip trembling. “And c-can you pet my hair until I f-fall asleep...?”

She was expecting Camilla to turn her down and call her a baby. She was expecting Camilla to say no and lock her out so that she could sleep. But instead, Camilla smiled down at her, kissed her head, and pulled her into her chambers.

“Of course, sweetie. Any time you might need me, I will always help you.”

Despite her gentle touches and grooming, Sakura did not fall asleep easily. Camilla stayed with her the entire time, jolting out of a tired trance and starting again. It wasn’t until the maids and butlers began rising from their beds that Sakura fell into a deep, dark slumber, plagued with vague nightmares of death and a country in shambles.

Chapter End Notes

Confession time: The more I think about it, the more I realize that I'm actually not a fan of Leo/Sakura. It's more like, I love Sakura, and I love reading about her, and I love reading about Leo too. I can see myself through Sakura which is why she is such an important character to me personally. I have never felt more alike to a character than when I got to know about her. It's just that she rarely has any importance in the fics she is in, as she usually is just a side-character, except for the fics where she is part of the main pairing. And when it comes to that, Leo/Sakura can hardly be called a rare pair since they have 100+ fics on AO3 (compared to Sakura/Elise), so that's a lot of material
where I can actually read about this character that I love and watch her be developed in a way that the game doesn't do to her. Her relationship with Leo would be a byproduct of that. I never hate any pairing and I would never hate someone for shipping it (I mean literally the ENTIRE reason why I wrote this fic was to say "Fuck ship wars! Every ship is great! Both are cute! Why not both?! Why not put these two unlikely ones together because every ship is so damn great?!"), but when it comes to this one, I just feel kind of... numb? Distant?

So I know that I'm focusing on Sakura's interactions outside of Leo a lot, and I know it's probably getting boring seeing her talk to Camilla and Elise and Takumi, and I know that many people are probably reading this just to see where her wacky romantic-life is leading her, but honestly, being able to flesh out Sakura's character and writing about her platonic actions with others is a huge honor to me and I really, really love writing about her outside of romance. Takumi and Leo already get so much attention anyway, I figured I didn't need to focus on them as much. I want her to become a strong, dynamic, well-rounded protagonist that will make readers proud (or at least interested) by the end. I can only hope you guys won't be completely bored by it all.

That being said, my plans for this fic WILL NOT change and there will be plenty of Leo/Sakura stuff to go around in due time. Just understand that I have my priorities and biases and I would prefer not to sacrifice characterization and plot in favor for fanservice that does not make sense in the plot's sequence.

So what do you guys think? Am I doing a good job? Do you like seeing Sakura interact with others outside of Leo? Do you just want me to get to the damn point already? Do you want to see more of other characters and see them get a more developed personality within this AU? Is there something specific you would like to see? Your thoughts inspire me to work harder on this fic, and this is turning out to be something I'm very proud of. Thank you for giving that chance to me. :)

Comments and kudos much appreciated!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Takumi the Mom Friend and Hana does a Sad Thing

Chapter Notes

So I've been telling myself to get this chapter out for about 5 weeks. Every weekend would be The Weekend I would update and every weekend I Failed. School has been kicking me in the butt ever since I double majored plus I joined my school's theatre plus I'm looking for a job plus midterms are soon. So as you can see I have been pressed. This is a short chapter, I think the 2nd shortest behind the first chapter. This chapter mostly sets up the next one or two chapters (might have to split it). The next one or two will be pivotal in both Sakura's and Leo's characterization (especially Sakura) which is why it needs to be Set Up.

Speaking of previous chapters, idk how the subscribe system works when past chapters have been edited, but I combed through every past chapter and tried to fix some things in them. There was a lot of things I didn't like in the earlier chapters since I didn't have everything planned out at the time so I needed to fix it. Most of the first and second chapters have been edited to have better flow, and later chapters have only been tweaked in one or two sentences.

Other than that, the only big change was that Camilla's wife finally has a name and her name is Flora. I chose Flora because she is a Corrinsexual and so I didn't need to look through tons of her supports to learn about her. It also makes sense for her to be living in Castle Krakenburg because the ice tribe is still less wealthy than Nohr. Flora does not have a large role in this fic and you will probably not see any more of her because her role is just to fill up that odd name space whenever Camilla awkwardly says "my wife" when it would make sense for her to say a name.

Sorry I'm always going back and fixing things! This should be the last time...

Anyways, hope you enjoy the chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Leo woke up early to say his proper goodbyes.

It wasn’t as if the Hoshidan delegation wouldn’t be leaving in the morning--in fact, Xander had ordered Leo and Sakura to escort them all to Port Dia and ensure their safety during the trip. But during those two or three weeks, Leo and Takumi would not have any alone time, so if he wanted to say goodbye properly, he needed to do it in the morning before anyone was awake.

If only Ryoma hadn’t gotten a letter the previous day warning him about urgent matters. Leo had
only caught snippets of his conversation with Xander behind closed doors, and again with his siblings, and from what he got, he assumed an underground Hoshidan drug and potion cartel was gaining power and Kagero was at her wits end trying to stop it as a regent. It had gotten so big in these recent months, especially with all of the riots and protests in Hoshido that it had lead to numerous deaths. This was Hoshido’s single greatest problem since reconstruction after the war, and it had Ryoma missing sleep.

Takumi woke up face-down lying in a pile of his own used clothes, clearly having fallen asleep during the act of packing. His scrolls and books were scattered on the floor, along with other personal items. Hanging in the open wardrobe was the outfit he had worn to the parties, having not decided if it was worth it to bring the clothes back home with him or not.

“I thought you said you were going to pack, then go to sleep,” Leo remarked as Takumi groaned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Not pack and sleep at the same time.”

Takumi muttered something along the lines of “Fuck off...” before rolling off of his pile that consumed more than half of his bed. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

Leo sat at the edge of the guest bed before Takumi ungraciously threw himself onto his lap, wrapping his arms tight around Leo’s waist and nuzzling the crane of his neck. *He must still be half asleep,* Leo thought, one arm around Takumi for balance and the other hand petting his thigh. *He would never do this fully awake.*

For a while, both of them stared into each other’s eyes with varying levels of affection and fatigue. The dark bags under Takumi’s eyes suggested that he didn’t get a lot of sleep that night. Leo pitied him. He knew that sleep was something Takumi rarely got in general and that he was practically taking away something so precious and fleeting, unless his siblings allowed him to sleep in the carriage.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Takumi mumbled, digging his face into Leo's shoulder again. "And you didn't answer my question. Why are you here?"

Leo hummed and let his hand pause. He licked his dry lips. "I thought I would say goodbye before everyone else," he whispered into the night. "Can't you be semi-lucid for a second? We aren't going to see each other for months, after all, and I would like to do this properly."

Takumi pouted, his bangs falling in front of his eyes. Leo felt the faint ghost of his breath on his cheek. “Is that all you came here for? What are your real intentions...” Takumi huffed, though the last part came out as a faint wheeze.
Leo chuckled and leaned in. “Is it so difficult to fathom that I enjoy spending time alone with you?” Without any inhibitions, he went to brush the hair of Takumi’s bangs behind his ear. But when the pads of his fingertips made contact with Takumi’s hot skin, Leo’s expression turned dark. Instead of the gentle, loving gesture, Leo pressed his palm to Takumi’s flush cheek.

“My gods, Takumi,” Leo exclaimed, eyes wide with concern. “You’re burning up!”

Not wasting any time, Leo pushed Takumi off of his lap, mumbling something about how he should have gotten a healer before. Again, like the last time, Takumi lunged out and grabbed Leo by the wrist hard.

“Please, I don’t want to be a bother,” Takumi said. Leo would think he was begging, but begging was below the prince. “Especially this late at night.”

“Why?” Leo asked, his eyes wide with confusion. “What are you hiding? Is it something private?”

Takumi shook his head. “N-no, it’s nothing like that...”

“If it’s such a big deal,” Leo said, “then why not ask your sister for help? Or Elise?”

Takumi’s lips tightened. “It doesn’t matter,” he said briskly. “I’m stronger than this. It will pass without anyone’s help.”

At this, Leo almost shouted in frustration. “Would you put your pride behind you just once in your life and accept the fact that it’s okay for people to help you?!” He yelled, forgetting that it was almost dawn and everyone else was busy sleeping. His voice carried out the door and through the halls, nearly waking his brother and sisters and all of their guests. But he couldn’t help himself. “Honestly, that’s really something I hate about you! It’s insufferable!”

Takumi stood, knowing he didn’t have to take Leo’s rage at face value. “It’s not like you’re any different!” he yelled back. “You’re always putting other people before you! Whether you like it or not, all of us put on brave faces to look strong when we are weak, that’s what we do! That’s what it means to be a prince! To grin and bear every consequence given to you and suffer in silence for the good of your kingdom!”
“You can’t be a prince if you’re dead!”

“That’s why it will pass!”

“You--!”

In the dead of the night, a shrill noise cut through the dark and quickly silenced them. The sound rang and ricocheted off the castle’s cold walls, sending chills up their spines and to the back of their skulls. Their shoulders stiffened for a brief moment before, after a single glance at each other, both bolted out of the room towards the source.

It was the sound of a baby crying.

Siegbert’s parents tried everything. They tried rocking him, cooing at him, changing his diaper, shoving a bottle of breastmilk at his face. Charlotte whispered to Xander that Siegbert might have had a nightmare. Xander murmured back that if that was the case, there was nothing they could do but wait.

Both were startled when Leo and Takumi lightly knocked on the door to the nursery. With Siegbert’s wet face cradled to her neck, Charlotte snapped at them, “Why in the gods’ names are you awake?! Did Siege really wake the entire castle?!”

But Leo quickly calmed her down. “We were both awake and nothing more,” he answered. “We were worried that Siegbert was hurt and went to check.”

“Thank you for worrying about him, but your nephew is fine,” Xander huffed, leaning his exhausted body against the edge of the crib. “We would like to believe that he just had a nightmare, nothing more.”

Outside in the hall was a light tapping sound, growing closer and closer. Sakura peeped through the ajar door after having run from her chambers, barefoot and wrapped in her dressing gown. “E-excuse
me,” she murmured, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “Is there something wrong?”

Instead of getting one answer, she was met with a collective, disgruntled sigh from those inside the room. “Go back to your room,” they dismissed. “You shouldn’t be here.” “Get back to sleep.” “You need your rest.” “This doesn’t concern you.”

Turning his back to his sister, Takumi slowly approached Charlotte and held out his hands. “May I...?” he asked softly, knowing how protective mothers can be of their young.

Charlotte stared at him skeptically, bouncing Siegbert against her side. But when Takumi did not forcibly take his son from her, she slowly relented and untangled her son’s strong grip on her arm and placed him in Takumi’s surprisingly gentle hold. Siegbert was heavy for his age. He cried and squirmed harder at the foreign body pressed against him, trying to push himself away, but his efforts were halted when Takumi tickled his sensitive feet.

“Nightmares are no small matter,” Takumi murmured. Siegbert roughly kicked his hands away, his cries dulling to a steady, stubborn whine. Takumi switched tactics and tickled his round stomach, finally earning a few huffs of laughter. “Especially for someone so young.”

Within a few minutes, Siegbert calmed down and allowed himself to be held without much of a fuss, if only because Takumi had tired him out. Charlotte sat in her rocking chair, head on a pillow, while Xander leaned most of his weight on the wall to keep from tipping over, his mind going in and out of focus. Leo smiled from where he stood near the door, never doubting Takumi’s uncanny ability to subdue the child-beast better than anyone else in the castle. Sakura’s hand grazed over the doorframe, never once moving from her spot, as she watched her brother handle the baby in a way she told him he could so long ago.

“Become an ambassador of Hoshido and stay in Nohr,” Xander commanded, approaching Takumi and his son. “I will pay you in good quality Nohrian gold. You will be given our best guest room, access to the entire castle and all of our vicinities. If you are willing to help lay Siegbert to rest each night, everything I can offer will be yours.”

Takumi scoffed at the king’s desperation. “I can’t do that, I can’t,” he tittered, bouncing Siegbert lightly at his side. Siegbert suckled on his little, chubby fingers, bright eyes glaring up at Takumi for making him tired. The toddler figured that fighting the foreigner was futile, but one wrong move and he would be back to making a fit. “As much as I would love to stay in Nohr--” his eyes flickered to Leo-- “I can’t. Somebody needs to be there to be Ryoma’s advisor, after all, and he’d have a tough time finding a replacement whom he trusted.”
Xander slowly nodded, his eyes closing for a brief moment. “I understand.”

Charlotte stretched her arms over her head, rising from her rocking chair. She yawned long and loud. “Now that that is over, can you tuck him in, Honeybear?” she asked, kissing Xander on the cheek and sauntering towards the door. Leo and Takumi snickered at the nickname. “A woman needs her beauty rest.” Sakura stepped out of her way as she passed without a single word.

Now that Siegbert had practically melted against Takumi’s side, growing used to his presence, he didn’t want to be jostled around. So when Xander went to grab his own son, Siegbert reached up and snatched a fistfull of Takumi’s hair, yanking hard.

“Ow!” Takumi yelped, twisting his head so he wasn’t being pulled. Siegbert glared up at his father, kicking Xander’s hands away while sucking on his free hand. Takumi had to scoop the toddler’s body with both hands to keep him from falling. “Oh, what a stinker!” he lightly scolded.

Xander sighed, deflated. “Yes... he is.” He tried to laugh off Siegbert’s attitude, but judging by the way his son clung so close to Takumi despite pushing him away like before, he wouldn’t be able to tuck Siegbert in tonight.

Leo came out of the shadows and made his way to his nephew, his arms crossed over his chest. “Perhaps you should go to bed, Big Brother,” he suggested. “I’m sure Takumi is capable of tucking Siege in, and I’ll make sure he falls asleep for the night. You get your rest.” Takumi reluctantly agreed.

Pursing his lips, Xander considered arguing with his little brother. But the promise of sleep won out and he bid the two a good night, knowing that his son was in trusted hands. When he passed Sakura, he mumbled something about how she should be in bed, but did not press her.

Now that they were alone, Takumi worked on tiring Siegbert out again. The toddler’s vice grip on his bangs gradually loosened as he was slowly bounced. Siegbert closed his eyes and, to the steady drum of Takumi’s heartbeat, fell into a light sleep.

“They’re always cuter when they’re asleep” Leo whispered, not wanting to wake the toddler up. He came up behind Takumi and snaked an arm around his shoulders. Takumi nodded, looking down at Siegbert’s peaceful face. He was so pale like his father, his wispy blonde angel hair curling at the back of his neck. If he wasn’t asleep, Takumi would pinch his round, blushed cheeks. Already, the child was starting to hold himself after his father, his chin up whenever he teetered across the room, his babble seemingly sophisticated. A proper prince in every aspect, spoiled rotten by his father’s siblings.
When Takumi looked up at Leo, their faces were mere inches apart. In the silence of the night, they stared longingly into each other’s eyes, tired and comfortable just being this close. Leo pressed a soft kiss to his lips, his hand tightening on Takumi’s shoulder a fraction, before Takumi sighed and lay his head on Leo’s shoulder, contented.

Wrapped in the arms of a lover, alone and quiet, with a sleeping baby in his arms. Takumi could get used to that feeling.

Sakura ogled them with a look of envy and longing, rubbing slow circles into her swollen belly as she did so. *They truly make a perfect pair...* she thought, leaning her weight on the doorframe with a small huff. The two men didn’t seem to notice as they were in their own little microcosm.

Looking at them, Sakura dreamed of a new reality with her and another, happily married and starting a family of their own. Not with Leo, not with Takumi or Siegbert. She would have nights like these where all was still and all she could hear was the sound of their breathing, and all she could feel was their shared heat. Oh, how she longed for something like this.

But for her baby, there was nobody but herself. And she only had four months left...

*One day, maybe I will find happiness like this. But until then... I will do as I must.* As Takumi finally relinquished Siegbert to his crib, Sakura pushed off the doorframe, gave her brother one last saddened look, and disappeared as quickly as she came.

“Sakura, I want to talk to you. Not as a king, but as your brother.”

During their trip to Port Dia, everyone had agreed upon stopping to rest at an inn in Windmire. Because Sakura had gotten special permission to escort her siblings out of the kingdom with the help of Leo, Arthur, Hana, Niles, and Peri, she had been excited to get out of the castle again. It wasn’t often that she was allowed out, and with her siblings by her side, she would make the most of her time seeing the sights. Even though Nataergersi had passed, the streets were still strung with multi-colored brass lanterns shining reds and blues and greens across the cobblestone streets. The sparse
evergreens were decorated up with shining tinsel and hand-blown ornaments. In each window they passed in their carriages, there was a candelabra with every wick lit, the flames dancing against the glass. To think she would have missed all of this if she hadn’t been able to travel with her siblings on this very day made Sakura feel like she was missing so much in Nohr...

Now, they were settling down for the night while the din of the outside continued to bustle. For a kingdom that was once empty and underground out of fear of bandits, its capital was now teeming with life. Separate from their retainers, who stayed watchful in their quarters below their lords, Sakura shared a room with Hinoka while Ryoma, Takumi, and Leo stayed in another. But while Hinoka was busy in the baths, Ryoma knocked on Sakura’s door, intending to spend a few private moments with his baby sister.

But his tone didn’t sound so inviting. “W-what is it, Big Brother?” Sakura asked, running her fingers through her wet hair. Hinoka had insisted Sakura bathe first while the water was only lukewarm. She had gotten ready in her nightgown thirty minutes ago, intending on falling asleep early or spending the night reading.

Ryoma shuffled inside, dressed in his jinbei. His normally wild brown hair was pulled back low and neat in a ribbon. He had probably planned on reading too before something else came up. They surveyed the modest room built for two with two twin beds, a desk, and a nightstand with an oil lamp that casted ample light in the corner of the room, looking for a place to sit. When there was none, Ryoma waited for Sakura to gesture to her bed where they sat with their backs straight and proper.

“I would like to preface this with an apology,” Ryoma started, knitting his eyebrows as he looked down at his sister. “During our stay in Castle Krakenburg, I only briefly made time for you because I had to spend most of my time forming diplomatic relations with Nohr’s courtiers. I assume you can predict how essential this is when it comes to Hoshido’s relations with other nations.”

Sakura nodded her head vigorously. “Yes, of course!” she answered, the palms of her hands digging into her knees. “You were only thinking of Hoshido’s wellbeing, and I know matters of court can be... confusing...”

Nohrian court was very different from Hoshidan court. Hoshidan court was much larger in number and hierarchy in comparison, that much Sakura had been thankful for when she moved to Nohr. However, Sakura had never truly been involved with her people, had never made public announcements or handled matters of state during the court procession. When Leo had introduced her to some members while Xander held court, Sakura had been equally lost, especially because Nohrian etiquette and deal-making were not her forte. She nearly sold most of Hoshido’s bordering farms because a courtier said he would use them to feed the poor until Elise shooed him away and explained to Sakura that he was a conman looking for land to open hot springs. Sakura decided then that she would not speak to anyone unless Elise or Leo were at her side, pointing out all of the
snakes in the grass.

“Regardless, I should have made more time in my schedule to spend with you,” Ryoma amended. “I was planning on taking you on a walk after the festival despite Nohr’s winter, but even I could not have predicted the events that have taken place as well as the urgent letter I received. If anything, I’m glad that we have moments to ourselves now.”

Sakura smiled wide. “Me too,” she said. Her palms started to sweat.

Ryoma contemplated his next words in silence, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I understand from what King Xander has told me that you have been confined completely to the inside of the castle until very recently. Is this not true?”

“It is,” Sakura said. “Leo said that I should remain inside the castle for my own safety... even he restricted himself from leaving if he could help it. Everyone, Xander, Camilla, and Elise, have my own health in mind, so I can’t really go off and make them worry.”

“Are you at least preoccupied from inside the castle?”

Sakura thought for a moment. “I take care of Charlotte’s mother most days. She is steadily getting better, but she requires a lot of attention. Her age is getting the better of her, and sometimes I dread how much strain her body is going through just by staying alive...”

“And have you spoke to Queen Charlotte about this?”

“No, I have not... I don’t think she is ready to let her mother go, plus it is against my training as a shrine maiden to ignore someone who is sick. I must heal her.”

Ryoma’s face fell to a deep frown, his faint age lines creasing around his mouth and forehead. “Such is a very personal matter. Do consider voicing your thoughts.”

“I will, thank you Big Brother.”

Waving the tense air away, Ryoma’s tone brightened again. “Now, what about future plans? I will
not see you until the next cherry blossom festival, surely you must have something planned until then.”

“Does Takumi not tell you what I’m up to in our letters?”

“It is not the same and he holds back in hope that we could speak about your adventures face-to-face.”

Sakura sighed and licked her dry lips. “I... I remember Elise talking about doing charity work after the holidays. I want to join her, but I don’t know if I will be allowed. If anything, I could help organize it from inside the castle, but I would prefer to hand out supplies with her. It’s a dream to be able to help a nation as... impoverished as Nohr, so I should take advantage of this chance.”

“Back in Hoshido, you used to live for doing charity work,” Ryoma remarked. “You would work yourself into exhaustion, not resting until everyone was taken care of. Given that Nohr needs more help with its winters, I assume it would be an even greater task. Don’t overwork yourself, especially given your... current circumstance.”

Ryoma had taken Sakura’s pregnancy the hardest of all, still having trouble coming to terms with the fact that his youngest sister was anything but pure. It made him sick to recognize that an unknown man’s child sat inside of her, but he had tried to be as accommodating as a king should. Still, he could not foresee a future with him treating the bastard like a part of the royal family, and when it was born, it would fade from his memory, and perhaps their family could go back to normal once more.

“I won’t, thank you Big Brother.”

“Would you like me to speak with Leo on the matter? I know that I am on my way out of the country, but perhaps I could convince him to loosen your leash a bit.”

“N-no, that’s fine... I’ll handle it myself.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”
Hinoka barged into the room wearing her nightclothes and her towel around her neck, going on about how little kids should not be allowed in public baths. She belly-flopped onto her bed, greeted Ryoma, and continued a conversation in a casual manner. Later, Ryoma left for his own quarters, bidding his sisters goodbye. The next morning at breakfast, Leo glared at Sakura from across the table, mumbling something about how he “didn’t need to be chewed out by her eldest brother like a little child who doesn’t know how to play nice.”

“Well, it looks like this is it,” Takumi whistled.

In the past, Takumi secretly loved leaving Nohr. He hated the cold and the barrenness that came with the land, much preferring the relative warmth of his homeland. Even if it meant leaving Leo, it was a petty sacrifice. This time, however, he wanted to stay just a bit longer. Too many things have happened during his stay, and it made him restless. Plus, to leave Sakura to a foreign country alone for a second time was heartbreaking. He still was not comfortable with the idea of her taking care of herself in a country that hated her, but he knew that for now, nothing could be done. He had to have faith in Leo’s promise to take care of her.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” Sakura sighed, looking up at her older siblings.

“Indeed,” Ryoma said, pursing his lips. “However, all good things must come to an end. I need to have a word with the ship master before we leave, so I will leave you all to say farewell.” He pulled Sakura into a loose embrace, ruffling her soft hair between his fingers. Then he turned to Leo and formally shook his hand.

“We should make plans for next winter,” Leo said. “You are always welcome in Nohr.”

“I look forward to it,” Ryoma nodded. “Now, if you would excuse me, I have requests to make...” He marched off in the direction of the ship, searching for the ship master.

Sakura looked up at Hinoka, who seemed very reluctant to go. Her sister shuffled from foot to foot, fiddling with the hem of her kimono. When Sakura asked what was wrong, Hinoka immediately
replied with “Nothing!” shortly followed by “I don’t want to go back to my husband.”

“I understand...” Sakura said, though they both knew that she did not. Even without knowing Hinoka’s husband well, she knew Leo could not compare to his arrogance. “Is he truly all that bad?”

Hinoka’s eyes flicked to Leo, who stood close between Sakura and Takumi. She grabbed Sakura’s wrist and pulled her a few feet away, just enough so she could whisper without the men hearing.

“He really wants an heir, which you know I cannot provide,” Hinoka gulped. “I tried talking to him about it, perhaps getting a mage to cast a fertility spell on us, but he refuses because he hates magic. He calls it ‘ungodly’ and ‘dishonoring what the gods already provided us.’ It is our only choice, and I know that if I could conceive naturally I would. I have nothing I can do except deal with his tantrums.”

“Did you talk to anyone else about this?” Sakura murmured.

“I talked to Camilla briefly before the festival,” Hinoka whispered. “She said that I should throw him out and get a new husband.”

“Yeah, that sounds like something Camilla would say...”

Takumi turned to Leo, gently bumping his shoulder against his. “Sorry this trip was very short,” he apologized. Despite the fact that his family would be on the ship headed to Hoshido within minutes, their departure still did not feel real. “We’ll visit Nohr again next year.”

The corners of Leo’s lips quirked and returned Takumi’s soft gesture, if only to disguise how, discreetly, their fingers linked at their sides, the petty, fleeting touch enough to ease some of their worries.

“Promise?” Leo asked.

“I promise,” Takumi answered.

Now that the salty sea breeze, still cold but not as frozen as the air near the castle, had time to settle in
Takumi’s lungs, he began to cough and wheeze again. Hinoka gently patted his back, her attention causing him to rip his hand out of Leo’s and swallow his coughs with a red face.

“I think it’s time to go,” Hinoka suggested, taking a step back to let her little brother breathe. She then took her sister into her arms one last time. “Bye, Sakura. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, Big Sister!” Sakura said, wrapping her arms loosely around Hinoka’s waist before pulling back. “See you in a few months!”

Hinoka stiffly bowed her goodbye at Leo and made her way to the ship with Ryoma. Takumi sighed, looking up at the dim, cloudy sky. He hoped it did not storm. “I ought to be leaving too... I can’t leave them waiting, can I? I’d hate to make them angry...” He looked between Leo and Sakura, not quite sure how to bid them farewell.

“I wish you could stay for longer,” Sakura said, folding her hands over her abdomen. “You should have taken Xander’s offer.”

Takumi waved her off. “I couldn’t,” he said. “Somebody needs to be there to take care of Ryoma and keep Shiro calm.” He then leaned in towards her, lowering his voice under the sound of the wailing wind. “Somebody needs to take care of Mom.”

Sakura nodded, her smile turning wistful. “That’s right... In that case, can you please do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“When you return home, can you put some flowers on her grave for me?” Sakura said. “I... feel bad since I can’t do that anymore.”

Takumi shook his head. “Don’t feel bad, I’m sure she understands. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you... Goodbye, Big Brother. I’ll see you in March,” Sakura chirped, hugging Takumi’s middle tightly. She struggled with the odd sensation of someone pressed against the swell of her stomach, now more prominent at five months and seemingly growing every day.
“Yeah,” Takumi said, running one arm around Sakura’s shoulders and his free hand through the hairs at the top of Sakura’s head. “See you in March.”

As usual, he clasped his hand to Leo’s as formalities would dictate, but with a wistful look that spoke louder than mere words. While doing so, he glanced at a blur of pink standing amid the retainers some meters away at the edge of the dock.

“Hey!” Takumi coughed, waving his hand over his head. “Hana! Come here!”

Hana immediately jumped into action, sprinting to the prince. Her mousey brown hair was tousled by the wind, frizzing at odd angles. “Want to tell me goodbye, Milord?” she panted, her back straight and at attention.

“Say goodbye to Sakura,” Takumi ordered, jutting his chin at his sister. “It’s time to leave.”

At those words, Hana’s face slowly fell as the realization of her departure settled in. “Wai--no, I...” she stammered, looking between Takumi and Sakura. She turned to her lady. “I thought I was staying with you! I told you I would stay and protect you!”

Sakura bit her lip. Her retainer had always been so dedicated and so loyal, even when they were both children and Sakura had to heal her wounds from overworking herself. Sakura knew full well that Nohr would cause Hana to experience a whirlwind of changes and emotions. For someone with a strong will and sense of devotion like her, there would be no end to her work, no time for her to relax. Just these past few weeks working in Castle Krakenburg had nearly driven Hana mad. She would run herself dry trying to prove herself, becoming a husk of her former self. Sakura couldn’t wish that for her friend. It would make her sick to see her friend be reduced to nothing like that. Hana belonged amid the cherry blossoms after all.

“What if something like what happened at the last night of the festival happened again? What if someone tried to hurt you? Don’t you want me to be there to make sure you don’t get hurt or die?!”

“Hana...” Sakura sighed, her mind made up. She looked up at her friend with a pitiful look. “I’ll see you in March.”

The color drained from Hana’s face. “Y-you can’t expect me...” she trailed off. “A retainer is supposed to make sure her lord or lady is safe at all times! You ordering me to leave goes against our oath!”
“I-I’m sorry, Hana!” Sakura muttered, backing up slightly. “I’m doing this for your own good!”

“But—!”

“Come on, Hana,” Takumi said, linking his arm with one of Hana’s and pulling her gently towards the ship. “Sakura had your things packed up before we left. It’s time to go.”

“Lord Takumi, please!” Hana pleaded. “Please, please tell your sister to let me stay!”

Takumi sighed. He felt a headache shooting through his skull. “A retainer’s orders are absolute. We can’t keep Ryoma and Hinoka waiting.”

“But—”

“Hana, the sooner we get on the ship, the sooner we will get home.”

Hana hung her head, tears stinging the corners of her eyes. “F-fine...” she relented. “I’ll see you during the cherry blossom festival.”

Sakura, Leo, and the Nohrian retainers waved at the Hoshidan delegation as the ship left the port. After they went smooth at sea, Sakura and Leo turned their backs on their loved ones and settled themselves into one of their carriages. The coachmen carefully rode the other carriages in formation around them, ever ready to defend their prince and princess from an ambush. Despite being stuck in a cramped space for so long, the two had nothing to say to each other.

Out at sea, when the sun began to set, Takumi finally collapsed. And though there were medicine bottles in stock, there were no healers to help him.
This has gone on for far too long, Sakura thought as she paced in front of Leo’s study. I need to get Leo to let me help Elise with her charity work. I know how it works after everything I have done for Hoshido, I should be one of their greatest assets. Even though I haven't really done anything for Hoshido in nearly four months. Oh my gods, it has been four months!

“You know I can hear you brooding outside my door, right?” Leo asked from inside his study. Sakura froze in her spot, gulping down her nerves. Maybe Leo just had that effect on people. “Is there something you need to talk about?”

“Y-yeah,” Sakura confessed from her side of the door.

“Would you like me to act surprised when you come in?”

What a strange question. “D-do as you will.”

Sakura quickly carded her fingers through her hair and fixed her dress before stepping into the study with her chin held high. If she wanted to convince Leo of something, she would need to make a good case for herself, and that would mean being confident in her decision to leave the castle.

“My word, what a surprise!” Leo chuckled as he placed his quill to the side, a half-copied document in front of him. “Sakura, how strange of you to visit me here. I never would have guessed.”

His playful mood (or perhaps just really deprived and bored from work) make Sakura giggle behind her hand. “Are you really that surprised to see me?” she asked.

Leo snickered. “My siblings say that I am quite the actor,” he said, interlacing his fingers in front of him.

At this, Sakura scoffed. “Do you dabble in that too?” she asked.

Leo quirked his brow, not quite catching what she meant at first. But as a couple seconds passed, his eyes brightened with realization, and he threw his head up and laughed. It was something Sakura had never quite seen before. She decided that she would like it if he laughed more.
“Yes, I suppose so,” he said after settling down. “Now tell me, what is it that you need?”

“I want the details regarding Elise’s food and clothing run, since I was told you would be handling most of it.”

Leo’s eyebrows shot up. “You know, it has only been a month since your last major assassination attempt. Are you really certain you would be safe in the city with minimal guards?”

“Yes. I want to be put on the team and I want to be there to hand out supplies.”

“There are lots of ways to help, you know.”

“Please, Leo. What sort of life would I be living if I couldn’t continue to help those in need?”

“Well, you’d be living, for starters.”

“Leo...”

“And you could continue to help from inside the castle. I have put so much time into organizing and planning this with Elise’s guidelines. I could always use an assistant.”

“P-perhaps another time.”

His face fell, drumming his fingers against his desk. He paused. “... Is there nothing I can say to sway you out of your choice to leave?” he sighed.

Sakura shook her head.

“Fine, then.”
Leo shuffled through a stack of parchment that he procured from his desk drawer, mumbling something about her “spending too much time with Elise.” He handed Sakura a flier and a few sheets of parchment with his additional notes, including shipment details and times, fractions of the cavalry for transporting the goods to and from Elise’s warehouse, orders from hundreds of seamstresses, and donation sums from a list of notable persons in Xander’s court. Sakura recalled some of their names, but she couldn’t quite pinpoint a face to them.

After quickly glancing over all of the figures, Sakura looked back up at Leo. “So, I assume we are going to divide what we have at the warehouse and hand them out?”

Leo nodded. “Precisely. We wouldn’t have so many things to offer if Elise had not asked for donations during the festival. It will be quite a lot of supplies to go through.”

“When did Elise ask for money?”

“Every night.” Leo sat back in his chair. “Why else do you think we go through the trouble of hosting it at our castle? Nohr’s court loves to show off their money, so it’s easy for Elise to swindle a few thousand gold out of their pockets.”

“Oh! That’s so nice of them.”

“Hardly. It’s just a show to see who can afford to spend the most money on the poor. It’s a game of seeing who has the most bragging rights, who has the best reputation and nothing more. They don’t really care what they do with their money, which is why it’s so easy for Elise to get inside their pockets. At least their money is going towards buying those clothes and blankets for those who need them instead of towards gambling and whores.”

Sakura’s lips thinned to a line as she went back to examining the figures. Leo’s words put a foul picture in her head. “... You’re sending out a very large cavalry for the food shipment. Do you always have that many?”

“We are getting one of our biggest shipments of food from Hoshido, so we must be prepared to handle it all.”

“Oh, that must mean Hoshido was very abundant this year,” Sakura said to herself, smiling with pride for her own country. “It’s so nice knowing my country’s excess crop is going to good use, too.”
Leo’s mouth opened like he was going to say something, but he immediately closed it and shook away his train of thought. “It... it is...” he struggled to say. Sakura was going to ask him what was wrong before he cut her off. “We take off in two days. Be ready by then. We don’t have a lot of time to waste.”

“What do you mean, ‘we?’” Sakura asked. “Are you coming with us?”

“Yes,” Leo nodded. “It would be shameful of me if you appeared in public without me. I know it has been a long time since we... wed... but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep up appearances.”

Sakura’s hands clenched tight under the desk, her nails digging hard into her palm. From the very beginning of their married life, Sakura knew she would need to act like a wife to Leo in public, and that likewise, Leo needed to play the part of a husband in order to keep the public eye on them to a minimum. With how little she left the castle, she had nearly forgotten of this unspoken promise. Her mind ran through what she possibly had to do. A kiss on the cheek, a brush of their fingers, a fleeting glance. She decided that it was a necessary evil, and even though she knew Leo would be very uncomfortable doing these things with her and not her brother, there was nothing she could do to change that.

“... I agree,” Sakura said, her knuckles turning white on her dress as she spoke, her fingernails cutting crescents into her palm. “It is... something we should get used to, at least in public together.”

Leo nodded slowly, folding his fingers near his face again. “I’m glad that, for once, we can come to a mutual consensus on something.”

Sakura pushed past her thoughts of acting along with her husband, of them deceiving their constituents for survival, of all things, and focused on making her life as a princess useful, if just a little bit.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a healthy mixture of humorous and serious, I swear.
I apologize for any mistakes as most of this was written on my phone.
Hope you guys enjoyed! Please feedback me <3
The morning was young when Sakura stirred awake. She bolted upright in a cold sweat, her mind racing, trying to remember exactly what went wrong to make her wake so suddenly. The stirring in her stomach was something she was used to, something she thought she was used to. After five months, was that supposed to change?

There were no sounds to be heard at this hour besides the howl of the wind outside and the steady crowing of sparse wildlife. So why exactly was she scared?

Sakura lurched from a sudden movement deep within her, not sure whether it made her sick or not. The feeling was akin to a single crackle of a log fire, the pop of a pig upon a roast. When she felt it again, just right of her navel, she put her palm against it in wonder and awe.

Her unborn child had just started kicking.

*~*~*~*~*

Sakura didn’t have a reason to hide the news of her progress, so when she told Elise and Camilla the following morning over tea and biscuits, the two sisters were ecstatic. Elise bounced in her seat, asking Sakura in her high pitched squeal if she could feel it kick. Sakura directed Elise’s eager hand to the one odd spot on her belly that seemed to pulse regularly with activity and laid her palm flat against it. Elise held her breath for what seemed like forever until she finally felt a light drum against
her hand. Elise retracted her hand and jumped up and down, cheering that it felt so weird and cool at the same time, just like when Camilla was pregnant with Scarlet.

As Sakura now directed Camilla’s hand, they barely heard the sound of someone fast approaching them. Leo had been searching for Elise for the past hour, looking to go over the very final details for tomorrow’s journey to Windmire. Part of him wanted to do so for his own sake, and part of him wanted to hammer the concept of leaving on time into his little sister’s head, who undoubtedly would end up making everyone late through one of her last-minute shenanigans or just plain carelessness. He came upon the group of women, who were excitedly giggling and speaking in hushed tones, and something about their excitement over something made Leo want to back away as quickly as he came before they noticed his presence. He didn’t want to get roped into whatever gossip they were talking about after all.

But he had no such luck. Just as he turned his back to them, Elise called, “Come here, Leo! You have to feel this!”

Leo could have just walked away. He could have acted like he never heard her. But a spark of curiosity kept his feet grounded and prevented him from leaving. He sighed over his shoulder. “What do you want?”

“Sakura’s baby started kicking! Wanna feel it?”

Leo mumbled to himself, searching for an answer to get him out of the situation. It wasn’t as if he didn’t care about the life inside of his wife, no, that wasn’t quite the reason—

At his hesitance, Sakura shook her head. “He doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to,” she said.

Elise puffed her cheeks like a child. “He just doesn’t want to have emotions. He doesn’t want to get attached to things.”

Ah yes. That was the reason.

But there was also another reason that kept Leo from venturing forward and, in an act of dominance, proving his sister’s assumptions wrong.

“Come now, Leo,” Camilla cooed, waving her hand at him to come forward. “Are you not interested
in what it might feel like?"

“If I remember correctly, you were pregnant not too long ago and you invited me many a time to feel Scarlet kick. I assume it feels just the same.”

“Well, this time it’s different.”

“How so?” Leo quirked a brow.

“Leo, would you come here already?”

“Y-yes, Big Sister!”

Leo approached Sakura as if she were a foreign object despite her having an expression that was nothing but inviting. She took his hand with the gentleness of a dove and slowly guided it to rest on a specific spot on her swollen stomach. Leo’s jaw set with anticipation while Elise and Camilla giggled to themselves. A moment passed and there was nothing except growing suspicion in Leo’s eyes. Sakura’s soft smile on her face never faded, even when the baby kicked and Leo flinched his hand away.

“That was, uh... nice?” Leo said, taking a few steps back. He cradled his hand as if his skin had been burned.

“Is there something wrong, Big Brother?” Elise asked, casually taking Sakura’s hand in her own and squeezing it tight.

Leo looked to the side where the end of the hall was. He trusted in his ability to book it. “Nothing is wrong... but I must be on my way.”

“Is Big Brother Dearest keeping you busy?” Camilla tsked, flipping her long hair over her shoulder. “That’s a shame. I’ll have to speak to him later.”

“Yes...” He started making his way to the end of the hall, leaving the women to themselves. “... Very busy...”
Camilla propped her elbows up on the table, her fingers interlacing together in a manner that was eerily similar to her brothers, Sakura thought. “I wonder what’s wrong with him. Usually he wouldn’t leave like that.” She turned to Elise. “Do you think we push him too hard?”

“Isn’t that what sisters are for?” Elise giggled, taking one last hearty sip of her tea.

Sakura tried to imagine the scenario with her own family instead of her extended one. What would Takumi have done if he felt his niece or nephew kick? His eyes might go wide with wonder, the way he did when Kagero was pregnant with Shiro. Maybe she and Hinoka would sit together and laugh about trivial things, like a silly rumor making its rounds in court or Ryoma’s next garment that Shiro ruined. Ryoma... Ryoma would be busy most of the time, but they would share occasional smiles and he would take her out for walks around the castle’s garden, and the paddock, and the grove where Mother was buried.

_Gods_, she missed them so much.

Even though they left not too long ago, there was still so much left unsaid, so much undone. It was as if they had only shared a fleeting moment together in the span of centuries. In the beginning, she tried so desperately to push her emotions out of her heart because she knew in the end that this was better for her, that the arrangement may not be permanent, and that she must atone for her mistakes by grinning and bearing whatever consequence came out of her choices. Elise and Camilla had therefore occupied her mind these past months with their companionship, but as she was getting used to having them by her side, as well as the castle retainers, the adventure of having a new life in a new country had quickly wore thin.

She was a princess of Hoshido through blood and birthright, and her chest would always long to return to her rightful home, at the side of her family. There wasn’t anything she could do to get closer to them now, and gods, she felt so _useless_-_  

“Sakura?” Elise called, waving her hand in front of her friend’s face. Sakura blinked, the dew in her eyes fading like her dark thoughts. “You looked like you were spacing out.”

Sakura looked down at her open palms, watching as she clenched them into fists, then unclenched them. Closed them, opened them. She watched her nails dig into her hand over and over, drawing crescent shapes across her palm before she lifted her head and smiled at Elise.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something before?”
Elise backed away with a skeptical expression coating her delicate face. “No... it was just a thought.”

“Elise,” Camilla said. “Did you finish writing that letter to the cavalry yet?”

Pressing her lips tight, Elise paused and stared wide-eyed at her sister. Then she slid off of her seat carefully and sauntered down the hall.

“Elise, where are you going?”

“I have something to do.”

“You forgot, didn’t you?”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Elise...”

Camilla and Sakura shared a worried look before Camilla decided it was time to give Flora a break and watch over Scarlet. Sakura spent the next few hours entertaining the mischievous toddler before retiring to her quarters with a slight headache.

*~*~*~*~*

He must have been around fourteen years old at the time when he could no longer perceive the world as any other human would. Leo had long lost his interest in sword fighting, a skill meant for a crown prince such as Xander. He knew that if he wanted the affections of his elders, the affections that he had been denied for so long, he would need to work harder in an area where nobody could shadow his efforts. Five years prior, he had lost himself to studying magic with the help of Nohr’s best tutors, and he had never looked back.

Leo learned after many years spent in the library how to feel the magic in the air. It was an elusive element thought to stem from Nohr’s ley lines like smoke, and, through crafted items, could be
harnessed by a skilled hand unlike Hoshidan mages who rely on divination. The Dusk Dragon itself had created those ley lines in its image and those with strong ties to the gods typically had an easier time calling upon their power through strength or magic. Leo’s Dusk blood had made him disposed to magic even before he was born, or at least this is what Camilla had said.

But magic was capricious in nature and could not always be harnessed. It took a strong mind and body to control it and make it bend, even with an apparatus such as a tome or staff. One of Leo’s tutors had taught him how to know when his magical input was too much. The symptoms of lesser magical overcharge included paleness, severe headaches, dizziness, shaking, and vomiting, while symptoms of major magical overcharge include loss of vision, loss of motor control, numbness of the limbs, internal bleeding, bloodshot eyes, and hysteria. Rarely could a mage survive major overcharge, but if they did, they suffered irreparable psychological damage. In order to not overcharge, certain tomes and staffs have limits on their magical input and output to allow a mage to practice without getting sick. The only tome Leo had not needed a limit on was Brynhildr since it was a legendary weapon passed down in Nohr for generations. Brynhildr attuned itself to its wielder's capabilities, though it could only ever be used by one person in their lifetime.

With his training, Leo became sensitive to the magic around him. At every second of every day, Leo could feel the energy press against his skin, sometimes like a balm, other times like hot smog. Mostly, he had learned to ignore these sensations. But if he focused just a little bit on his surroundings, he could easily feel a shift or surge of energy and he would know that somewhere nearby, someone is using it. And when he comes close to a mage, he could feel the air gather beside them as if waiting to be used. The stronger the aura humming around that person, the stronger the mage.

At the time, Hoshido had attacked Nohr after the fall of King Sumeragi and everyone in Nohr was preparing for high tensions to turn into a full-blown war. His father King Garon had allegedly saved a child from those nasty, shrewd Hoshidans and had Corrin locked in a tower for safety. Xander, Camilla, and Elise fell in love with the dragon child at first glance. Leo took longer to take to the child’s affections, but after some years, he found a place in his cold, cruel heart for Corrin to stay.

Leo first felt a shift in energy when spending time with Elise. He had been wanting to try meditating with someone besides his tutor. Since Xander and Camilla spent most of their time with Corrin, being able to help with studies or training, Leo had Elise free to himself. She was eleven and was being trained in most weapons, though nothing had been to her liking. Elise was too peaceful to be a fighter and, with a war now on the kingdom’s southeastern borders, this was frightening to their father who expected all of his children to fight and defend their country and honor when they are strong enough.

Leo sat Elise down in front of him and instructed her through the chant that his tutor taught him as they held hands. He told her to focus ( “On what?” Elise had asked) and Leo closed his eyes for what seemed like hours.
After some time, he started to feel a soft tingle at his fingertips. It was not as strong as when he did this with his tutor, yet Leo knew that the total energy passing through their linked hands like a circuit was much larger than just his own.

“Elise, have you ever used a tome?”

“No, Big Brother. Tomes are scary. I don’t want to fight.”

“I think... you have a natural inclination to magic.”

“Well, I’m not fighting!”

Thinking back to those days, Leo realized how pivotal that moment had been in his nature to judge people by their strengths first and foremost. It was a skill that definitely helped on the battlefield, as it allowed him to pick off the weak and send more soldiers to the strong. Now, it had little use. Unless a powerful assassin was hiding behind a corner, the everyday shifts in magic were arbitrary at best.

When Leo put his hand on Sakura’s stomach...

*~*~*~*~*

Sakura, Elise, and Leo shuffled into a single carriage just as the dawn clouds turned auburn from the shrouded light of the sun. Xander, Charlotte, Camilla, Flora, and Scarlet waved at them goodbye. Elise gestured back happily, Sakura offered a small wave, and Leo yawned long and loud into his palm as he collapsed onto the carriage seat next to Sakura, not quite registering anything beyond a meter radius of his body.

As per usual, he had read himself into the dawn (with a history book from Takumi, most likely) and fell asleep three hours earlier. This morning, Sakura had passed his chamber with its door ajar and spotted Leo being dressed by Niles while Leo spent the entirety of his morning routine staring blankly at his far wall, unblinking, only moving when Niles politely asked him to. At breakfast, Leo had been unnervingly quiet, as he usually was in mornings until his personality caught up with him a few hours later.
Judging by past experience, Sakura determined that Leo had exactly one hour until he returned to his usual snarky self.

A string of carriages filled with supplies and retainers left the castle before all three felt the jolt of their horses take off. Leo leaned heavily on the cold side of the carriage and closed his eyes even though the ride was bumpy and he would likely wake up with a bruise on half of his face. Elise and Sakura stared out the window on their side of the carriage and watched as their scenery changed from the familiar network of Krakenburg’s cobblestone streets to the barren outskirts.

Elise smiled widely, her eyes aglow with excitement. “Are you excited for some field work, Sakura?”

Sakura immediately answered, “Yes!” before glancing at Leo who struggled to find a comfortable position to nap. Pressed into the corner, he looked quite small.

As if sensing her hesitance, Leo cracked open his eyes and sighed. “I’m used to it,” he mumbled before returning to his nap.

“I can’t wait to help your people,” Sakura said. “I really want to get intimate with them. As a princess of Hoshido, perhaps I can provide insight to your people that Hoshidans are capable of helping them and spreading peace between our countries. Even if it puts me in a vulnerable spot... I have to show that I trust them first before they can come to trust me.”

Elise’s smile softened to something Sakura did not recognize, but it was no less vibrant or full of emotion. “I think that’s a wonderful goal.”

At Sakura’s side, Leo snorted deliberately. Without opening his eyes, Leo mumbled, “Too idealistic.”

“What did you say?” Elise huffed.

Leo glanced at Sakura from the corner of his squinting eyes. His voice cracked. “You and your family have been traveling to Nohr for years and nothing has changed. I’m convinced it’s a futile mission.”
“But none of us have ever directly helped with humanitarian efforts in Nohr,” Sakura recalled. “I think it would make all the difference to show my face to your masses and to show that I mean no harm.”

Leo sighed, shifting his weight to lean forward. The bumps in the road were leaving him sore anyway. “I wouldn’t be surprised if rumors have spread through word of mouth of some evil Hoshidan princess marrying this country’s prince so that the greedy Hoshido can take Nohr’s land for its mines and add to its own wealth."

Elise pushed Leo back into his corner. “Go back to sleep, Big Brother,” she said.

“I’m just saying!” Leo hissed, rubbing his hurt elbow which suffered from impact. “It isn’t impossible to assume that, if there are gangs of bandits and criminals from the slums who have heard of Sakura, the average citizen will have heard of her too. And what they might have heard may not necessarily be true and they may have a very negative opinion of her without meeting her first.”

Sakura’s brow set with a look of determination. She clenched her gloved fist on her thigh. “All the more reason for me to clear my name.”

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*_

The carriage came to a full stop several towns away from their destination at the warehouse’s entrance. Around them, the royal guard stood at attention, loading the last few carts with crates of materials. Leo, Elise, and Sakura exited the carriage to greet the cavalry. Leo and Elise knew most of the soldiers by name and position, but Sakura was left clueless. That was until she found one familiar face.

“Princess Sakura?!” the soldier said, kneeling down on one knee respectfully and inclining his upper body. “How long it has been! If I had known you would come, I would have prepared a finer horse.”

Sakura’s eyes widened as she looked down at the knight. “Silas, is that really you?”

Silas rose to stand and Sakura saw the same goofy smile from when they were at war. In the span of four years, Silas had finally grown out of his boyish skin; his cheekbones were more defined, he stood a bit taller, and his green eyes were more hardened with work. Even though Silas had not been young when they met—in fact, Sakura thought Silas was slightly older than Corrin—there had been
room for him to mature. He was still a very distinct person as his gray hair was still just as untameable as before and stuck up from his head like a bird nest. Sakura wondered if it would ever lay flat.

“Wow, you’ve really changed,” Sakura laughed.

Silas chuckled, his dimples cutting creases along his skin. His eyes flicked over Sakura’s body, his eyes landing on her stomach a bit longer than natural. When he did, his smile faded into an awkward, lopsided look. “You... really did too, I see.” Then he noticed the error in his manner and righted his posture to stand at attention. “I mean—naturally, I have heard the good news of your union with Prince Leo, as well as the rest of my fleet. It is the only news I have heard of you since the war, so I was surprised to recognize your name. However, because we have been out to different parts of Nohr to carry out our duties, it had not crossed my mind that you...” his composure started to crack. He gulped. “… That you...”

Sakura folded her hands over her abdomen as her expression fell completely. Of course, her pregnancy would be the one and only thing that an old friend would focus on. It was as if their former established friendship meant nothing, that her pregnancy was Sakura’s only personality trait. She guessed she couldn’t blame him after so long, after all, Sakura had been a child during the war. It was natural to forget the passage of time and that Sakura was now, in fact, an adult. An adult that still cared about her old friends.

“I know. Leo doesn’t seem like the kind of person to want a family,” Sakura said, trying to play off the awkwardness between them. “B-but you must understand that it is his duty, our duty, to be fruitful in case of crisis to the throne.”

“Yes, of course, my lady,” Silas said, seemingly relieved. “I had just not been expecting it to happen so quickly. Congratulations.”

Sakura nodded. “Thank you.”

“I just have trouble wrapping my head around the fact that you’ve come a long way from being a timid girl who mistakenly thought my head was cursed because Corrin didn’t recognize me,” Silas continued. “It sounds weird when I say it, but seeing you get on with life over the years makes me feel quite old.”

Sakura’s ears perked up at the mention of Corrin. “Speaking of whom, do you still write to Corrin?” she asked. “You were good friends, after all. I’m quite surprised that you stayed in Nohr instead of going to Valla to serve the New Reign.”
Silas rubbed the back of his neck which was wrapped by a thick wool scarf under heavy armor. “We did I initially, but the letters began to get slower and slower. It isn’t easy to build a kingdom from the ground up, so I guess Corrin was under too much stress to write back one day. I know if I were king, that would happen to me all the time.”

Leo and Elise approached Silas, knowing the Nohrian knight better than Sakura ever would. Elise took a running start and bounded at Silas, landing in his strong arms a giggling mess. “Silas! How are you? It must be awfully tiring to travel all of Nohr! You hardly stop by the castle anymore!” she pouted as Silas set her feet down.

“Easy, Elise,” Leo sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Remember where we are. You will have lots of time to chat when we are moving the supplies.”

Sakura glanced at the narrow carts which had tight canvas stretched over the tops to shield the boxes and barrels from the elements. She had not thought much of them before or questioned why they had met the cavalry here instead of at their destination. But now, she was beginning to wonder why they had taken a sudden detour when the people of Nohr were patiently waiting for their supplies.

“I know, I know,” Elise shushed him. “I can’t wait! Especially now that it’s after noontime, so it’s warm enough to ride over there.”

Sakura interjected. “W-what do you m-mean, ride over there?” she asked.

Silas cleared his throat. “Milady, the streets we are headed through are not suited for carriages. They are much too narrow and winding, hence why we had these caravans made so they could fit on the pass. We must travel on horseback despite the cold.”

“The carriage wasn’t a pyre to begin with, anyways,” Leo said with a hint of spite.

As if on cue, Arthur and Niles tugged on the reins of three snorting horses to present them to their lords. The beasts’ breaths puffed out of their black nostrils like smoke. They had already been saddled and were ready to take off like the rest of the army. Elise took a black and white pinto stallion from Arthur, climbing on top with ease despite her many layers of furs. Leo followed suit with a speckled mare from Niles, already missing his black stallion. He looked back at Sakura and offered his hand to help her onto the mare, but instead, Sakura shook her head and took the reins of Niles’ other horse, a tawny mare with black hair. She helped herself onto the horse with some help from Niles and Arthur, Arthur pulling on her arm to get herself on the saddle and Niles placing a
Sakura was grateful to Leo for their horse riding lessons. While they had tapered off in the winter, she had learned enough to get on and ride slowly by herself. As a precaution, Sakura sat sidesaddle to take more weight off of her pelvis, as if she was sitting on a chair, since the stress to her baby from riding had been one of her main concerns during her lessons. She gripped the reins like Leo taught her and dug her heels into the mare’s underbelly as the cavalry, the caravans, the retainers, and the royals headed up the narrow dirt path.

They passed many dilapidated buildings on their way. Thick blankets of snow sat on thatched rooftops, occasionally falling inside the house through holes if the roof was weak. Outside their houses and buried in the snow, people hid their meat and cheese from bandits. The marketplace was nearly abandoned since food was so scarce. The only shops that were open were ones that sold clothing or candles. The Nohrian people shivered as they passed slowly and silently around the royal entourage, their thin black cloaks billowing in the wind like specters. Sakura noticed that some of them had faces smeared with black, a sign that they worked in one of Nohr’s many mines. Some of the peasants stopped to bow, others were so caught up in shielding themselves from the wind that the royals went mostly unnoticed.

Some of the peasants (Sakura thought they looked like shadow-people) huddled in close groups for warmth. She saw what she assumed to be a mother hugging two children close, signified by one tall shadow guiding two smaller shadows through the snow. Shockingly, sometimes there would be one tiny shadow all alone on the street, one that Sakura could only assume was a child who lost their parents. Instead of crying out for help, they ran to one of these clusters and huddled against them in an attempt to stay warm and the family accepted the child as one of their own. Sakura saw this happen a few times over the course of their long trek that the phenomenon could not have been a coincidence.

How guilty Sakura felt seeing these people shivering under their thin cloaks while she and the entourage layered themselves in thick fur coats and shawls. Their homes must have had fire pits that burned endlessly. Part of her felt shameful that she should be warm and bundled while these people froze. But judging by the looks on Elise’s and Leo’s faces, this was normal and she should not dwell too hard on their misfortune. After all, they were here to help.

After passing through the outer village and forest, they came upon a large city based around a recently opened ruby mine. The road was lined with many tall stone buildings that served as lodgings for upwards of 100 people each. They were shabby at best with many holes in the walls, chilly drafts pouring into each room like a flood. Some were covered by cloth, others were boarded up by wood or were used as filters for a fire’s smoke. Yet, as they drowned themselves in ale, the people made due with what they had.

Slowly, she guided her horse to walk beside Leo’s. Staring back at the Nohrian peasants, she gulped
Leo finally looked down to his people as if he had just noticed their eyes on him. “We are in the middle of the Benesenza Projects, five miles southwest of Windmire,” he answered. “I myself have not been here in person since it was first being built. At the time of the war, this place was unused land. However, because of the destruction of multiple villages, many villagers have been temporarily rehoused here and promised work until their villages are rebuilt.”

Sakura looked up at the poor condition of the buildings. “This doesn’t look very safe... especially for winter,” she said.

“They were built impromptu to house as many people as possible. It’s better than nothing, and it’s all we could do on short notice.”

She held her tongue for a long time until her racing mind got the better of her. “Surely, there must have been a better option than this...”

Leo turned to Sakura with a tired glance. “If you have any better ideas after the fact, I’m all ears,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. Sakura didn’t answer.

She saw more clusters of people, now thicker due to the city’s growing population. They watched the royal entourage enviously, though their voices did not raise above a soft murmur despite the large amount of people there. Families, extended families, friends, and strangers huddled together, pressing into each other’s bodies, making sure the children were safe and warm. When one person bowed low, the rest followed suit. Sakura felt like she had entered another dimension, one that was far beyond her imagination.

Sakura neared Elise this time. “Hey, is this a cultural thing? To be so close like they are?”

Elise surveyed her people with the same hint of anxiety. “I don’t know,” she said. “Perhaps that’s just something they do here?”

Once they settled into the city’s heart and began unloading their materials behind an empty building, Silas announced their presence and purpose, addressing each royal by title as these peasants likely never saw the faces of their own kingdom’s royalty before. Quickly, the peasants gathered around them with hungry looks on their gaunt faces. The cavalry ordered the people to compose themselves into a makeshift line before helping Elise, Leo, and Sakura dole out food, blankets, and clothes.
The situation was as Leo suspected. When nearing the crates, some peasants kept their eyes warily on Sakura while favoring packages from Elise and Leo. When small children ran up to Sakura expecting some food, she heard hushed shouts of “No!” from who she assumed were the parents, but nobody came forward to drag the child away. Their reluctance to even get close to her hurt her pride and she hoped that this was not showing on her face.

Sakura crouched down—harder than she expected given her extra weight—to get eye level with a little boy. He was about shoulder height and had shaggy brown hair which poked out of his hood. Upon closer inspection, he had a pink birthmark covering the entire left side of his face. “Hello, I am Princess Sakura,” she said, smiling. “What is your name?”

The little boy didn’t answer.

“Would you like something to eat?”

He nodded, sticking his fingers into his mouth, careful of his crooked teeth.

She retreated to the stacks of materials and brought out a sack of rice, a container of preserved peaches, beef jerky, and a daikon radish. She wrapped them in a large, soft wool blanket with fresh pairs of gloves and socks. “Be sure to give this to your parents, okay?” she said, handing the package to the boy, who stared at it with wide eyes and hungrily took it from her. He ran off into the crowd of people in a frantic search for his family.

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They fell into a routine, working hard with the cavalry to package and disperse the goods to different families. When one crate was empty, there was another waiting to be opened by the cavalry. Sakura greeted the Nohrian people until her voice became monotone and she was repeating the same lines over and over. But no matter how much she tried to show she was no threat to the Nohrian people, the adults still gave her skeptical glances and easily favored receiving food from Elise and Leo. Seeing as there were hundreds of families littering these streets, they worked tirelessly through lunch until dinner when they decided that, with night fast approaching, they could continue in the morning when the sky was a little brighter.

Towards the end of their shift, Sakura was ready to sit and eat with everyone until she saw what looked like a moving pile of snow. Believing her eyes to be deceiving her, she squinted. It moved on four legs slowly through the streets, sniffing for leftover food. Some villagers shooed it away when it
came too close, and it ran cowardly in the other direction. She determined that it was actually a large gray dog with heavily matted fur covered in snow. The matts that clung to its fur around its haunches were red and raw, suggesting it was wounded in some way.

Sakura knew that the food was reserved for the locals, however, she did not have it in her heart to see the dog suffer. As Leo, Elise, and half of the cavalry piled into a nearby tavern while the other half stood guard over their supplies, Sakura slipped some of the beef jerky into her sleeve and cautiously neared the stray, careful of icy puddles.

She whistled for its attention and it lifted its gaunt head up. Its eyes were moist and its pink nose was perfectly dry. Upon closer inspection, it walked with a limp on its right forepaw. Sakura whistled again and threw a bit of jerky in its direction, landing in the snow. The dog watched it fall before limping over to it to give it a sniff. It ate the jerky with thick drool dripping from the sides of its large jowls. Sakura stepped closer and threw more jerky in its direction and the stray lapped at it hungrily. When she was near enough, she let it eat out of her open palm and she carefully pet the top of its head.

“Sakura!” she heard Elise call from across the street. “Where are you? What are you doing?”

Sakura shouted back, “I’ll be there soon! Don’t worry!”

The dog sniffed at her sleeve where the remaining jerky was hidden. Sakura used this as a distraction for her to inspect the stray’s wounds. She carefully moved its matted fur out of the way of the redness on its haunches and found a huge patch of bloody skin where no hair was growing.

I don’t really know anything about dogs, Sakura thought, biting her bottom lip. I mean, Ryoma has little Tatsuya at home, but I don’t think Tatsuya ever had this before... She wished she could just pull off all of its fur to get a better look. She thought to herself, patting the dog’s back where she felt each poke of its spine jut out of its skin. Something had to be done.

I don’t know if staffs can be used on animals, she thought. I suppose it’s time to find out. I swear I saw one or two in storage...

Leading the dog through the promise of jerky, Sakura guided the stray behind the building where most of the excess storage was. It was mostly empty crates and boxes now, stacked high above Sakura’s head. A shiny metal handle of a heal staff glinted in the sunset high on one of these stacks, jutting out haphazardly. Sakura fed the dog another small piece before clicking her tongue at the challenge. She was being weighed down by many layers of furs, but that wouldn’t stop her from trying her best.
Sakura positioned herself on top of one empty crate under the staff and reached up as far as she could, balancing on her toes. Her short stature kept it just centimeters from her fingertips. She pushed herself further, licking her lips in anticipation. Maybe if she jumped a little, she would--

“Oof!”

Sakura groaned, quickly stumbling off the crate and pressing one hand to her back. That activity alone was too much strain on her back and she winced in pain as she lowered herself to sit on the floor. She hissed through her teeth, wincing at the ache. The stray sniffed at her hair and when she lightly scratched its chin, it sneezed.

“I’m so sorry,” she apologized. “I tried my best. Maybe there are vulneraries somewhere instead.”

“You know, it’s rude to ignore someone who is concerned about you.”

Sakura whipped her head around and saw Leo leaning against the building near the path to the front. He had a stern look on his face. She wondered how long he had been there, waiting, and watching her struggle.

Leo continued. “Why didn’t you answer Elise when she called for you? We all waited for you to join us for dinner and you never came.”

Sakura knew that trying to heal an injured dog would probably not be an acceptable answer to Leo. Her gaze fell to the ground. “I-I did answer! I guess s-she just didn’t hear me...” she said.

Leo sighed and walked over to where Sakura sat on the snowy ground, offering her a hand to help her up. She took it gratefully.

“Well, come on,” Leo said. “Everyone is waiting.”

Sakura looked back at the stray. “Wait,” she said. “I-I need to help it.”
Leo’s brow quirked at the dog, which sniffed through one of the few boxes that still had food. Its tail wagged, but because all of the food was wrapped up in cloth or in glass containers, it could not manage to get a hold of any of it.

“And why should we waste one of our staffs for a mangy mutt that is trying to steal our food?” Leo asked.

“B-because all life is worth helping, even a dog’s,” Sakura said, determined.

“That sounds very cliche.”

“But it’s true...” Sakura’s eyes brightened. “I don’t suppose you have a dagger on you, do you?”

Leo paused, the corners of his mouth turning down. “By gods, I asked you why we should help it, not to end the poor thing’s miserable existence.”

Sakura took a few steps back. “N-no!” she stammered, horrified. “I-I wanted to cut off the fur so I could see the wound better.”

Leo opened his mouth, then closed it. He patted at his belt before procuring a silver dagger engraved with thorny vines and inlaid with an amber at the hilt. He handed it to Sakura, mumbling about how it was a gift and that she should be careful. Sakura fed the dog one last piece of jerky before going to work on shaving its fur. The stray made it difficult for her; it shook its body, it tried to back away, it wouldn’t sit still. She had to corner it against the building before it would stand still and she could continue cutting away the thick matts.

She managed to get through most of them. With the fur out of the way, she discovered that the dog was in fact female and that, judging by her engorged teats, the bitch either recently gave birth or was pregnant.

Sakura gulped. She never imagined that time might be of the essence. “Would you please get me one of the staffs up there?” she asked Leo, handing back his dagger.

Leo sighed, blowing out a cloudy breath. He plucked the staff from the crate with ease and handed it silently to Sakura. Sakura turned her back to him and held the staff in front of the dog, which wagged her tail in preparation to fetch.
As Sakura concentrated, a ethereal green light glowed from the wound. The dog noticed the change and shrieked in surprise, frantically lapping at the raw flesh of her haunches. After ten minutes, the bitch’s mange subsided and what was left was bare skin, now a healthier shade of pink. Her limp on her forepaw was gone.

When Leo came curiously closer, she turned to sniff his outstretched hand. Leo stiffened before gingerly patting her head.

Sakura giggled at his hesitance. “Not a dog person, I assume?” she asked.

“Not very, no,” Leo answered. “I much prefer the company of cats, but as long as dogs are quiet and tame, they’re tolerable.”

Sakura dug into one of the filled crates for more jerky, but she heard a faint, high pitched whimper that sounded far away. The bitch bounded past Leo to a corner of the building where a large hole had been dug underneath its foundation. The dog climbed into the hole, covered by shadow. When Leo and Sakura peeked inside, they saw her curled up against five yapping puppies, hardly old enough to see. The hungry puppies snorted and groaned before finding the strength in their little limbs to climb over to their mother and feed.

*I hope her puppies didn’t catch what the mother had,* Sakura thought, pressing a hand to her own abdomen in solidarity.

“This hole won’t be of use when the rainy season comes,” Leo said. “When the snow melts, it will flood.”

“Hopefully, the puppies will be old enough by then,” Sakura shuddered. She left pieces of jerky just inside the hole and carefully reached inside to scratch at the mother’s ears and snout. The dog leaned into her touch as if saying thanks, then went for the jerky.

Leo impatiently cleared his throat. “Now that that is settled, can we *please* move on to get dinner? I hope Elise and the rest started without us.”

As they walked side by side to the tavern on the far side of the city, the two chatted about the day’s accomplishments. “I’m surprised that we had so much food to give away,” Sakura smiled. “I’m glad that Hoshido had a bountiful year so my country could share so much with Nohr.”
Leo wrung his hands behind his back. “About that...” he trailed off. Sakura looked up at him quizzically. Usually when Leo acted like this, there was bad news to be shared. “I assume that you never read our wedding agreement, did you?”

*Why is he bringing that up now?* Sakura wondered. “I never got a chance to, since so many things were happening at once during that time. Why?”

“Well, to put it plainly,” Leo huffed, “most of our imports from Hoshido are because of your dowry.”

“My dowry?” Sakura asked. For some reason, she hadn’t really thought about what her family would be expected to give in order to convince Leo to marry her. What exactly did Ryoma pay to protect her image? She had assumed that Nohr would be given a few small pieces of land and lots of gold. Though, this appeared to not be the case.

“Agh, if we were home, I would have pulled the document out,” Leo groaned. “Do you know how much of Hoshido’s crop goes to Nohr as per our peace agreement?”

Sakura thought for a second. “... Eight percent,” she recalled.

“Now that your brother has agreed upon a dowry with Xander and I, this number has increased to twenty percent.”

Sakura’s eyes widened and she gasped. She couldn’t have heard that right. Twenty percent? No, that was impossible. Leo was lying. She knew her brother better than that. Such a high number would never pass by Ryoma.

Such a high number would bleed her people dry.

“N-no,” she stuttered, pressing a nervous hand to her chest. “T-that can’t be...”

“It is true, and when we arrive back at the castle, I will show you,” Leo concluded.
“B-but! I know that Hoshido is naturally fertile, and we always have excess, but not *that* much excess!” Sakura protested.

Leo shrugged. “It is out of our hands now. You should have asked your brother what you were signing before you signed your name at the wedding ceremony.”

“B-but Ryoma wouldn’t do that!” Sakura shouted. “I know my brother! He’s stubborn like an ox and doesn’t let anything scare him. That’s why I doubt that Ryoma would sign off on that much crop!”

Leo waved his wife off. “Relax. As per agreement, this will only last while you are in Nohr’s custody. While away, we will receive sixteen percent. At the same time, Nohr will be exporting more gems, oil, and coal to Hoshido.”

Sakura stayed silent for a long time. A million thoughts ran through her head like a tsunami. “... You used my brother,” she said. “You used Ryoma’s willingness to protect me for your own country’s benefit.”

“If one of my sisters were pregnant and had to marry one of your brothers, King Ryoma would do the same to Nohr.”

“Still! You do not need gold and pretty gemstones to *survive!*”

“Through trade, we have been managing alright for the last millennium.”

“But your country is always hungry. You even said so yourself.”

“All the more to push for more imports of agriculture.”

“So you *have* been using my brother and my country to get what you want?” Tears brimmed Sakura’s eyes and she sniffed to keep them at bay. “It didn’t matter if you married someone you didn’t love, or that you could never be with my brother anymore. Why would you push away your emotions like this and hurt people, hurt my brother, in the process? You had every opportunity to say no, and you didn’t. So why...?”
Sakura heard Leo take a sharp inhale of breath before he stood in front of her, preventing her from moving. She looked up and saw that his face was twisted with rage. His chocolate eyes were hard, colder than the thick air between them. She cowered downward, her mouth agape in shock.

Leo grit his teeth. “I love my country,” he snapped, his words seething with hatred. “And I would do anything to protect her. Even if it costs me my own happiness.”

The sky was dark. Leo stormed into the brightly lit tavern by himself, probably to sit with his sister and hope that there was food left for him. Sakura hesitated, her body shaking. She gently pushed open the tavern doors and, upon seeing the many tables filled with soldiers and familiar faces, decided it would be best for her to rest. She told Niles that she would be resting in her room and that she was not hungry.

She dressed slowly into her pajamas and when her back finally hit her mattress, she was already thinking about how to rectify the situation. She thought she could convince Xander and Leo to revoke the dowry, which would probably include a speech and a petition. Perhaps there was a way to tamper with the documents, to forge new ones that did not promise such a high amount of dowry. Or maybe she could admit to her faults, publicly announce her extramarital affairs with someone who was not her husband, and both kings would be forced to nullify their marriage, returning things to what they once were.

Sakura didn’t have many ideas.

When she heard the party in the tavern die down and people started to tuck in for the night, Elise came into their shared bedroom with a plate of food. “You should make sure you're eating enough,” she said softly. She placed the plate on Sakura’s nightstand. Sakura looked at the food, then at her friend who turned her naked back to her while she changed into her nightgown.

_I must settle this with Leo another time_, Sakura thought, spearing her spiced ham with her fork. _I won’t let Hoshido be used this way...!_

Chapter End Notes

I hope I didn't portray Leo as too mean but that's just how he is sometimes. He's sometimes an asshole and that's okay.

Original plans had a lot more content because You Know How I Am With Chapter Length but I decided to spare you.

Please let me know if there are any mistakes or stuff I can do to make it better and I will
take care of it in the morning.

Thank you for reading! Comments and kudos appreciated <3
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Look at this stuff~! Isn't it neat~? Wouldn't you think my collection's complete~?

Chapter Notes

*slowly and carefully dips my toe into naming non-canon original characters and places for the sake of continuity*

I would like to preface this chapter with the fact that at multiple points in this chapter, it may sound like the writing is getting political or trying to come to some sort of political conclusion. This is not a fic that is supposed to be a commentary or critique on something, and it is all for fun. I will let you draw your own conclusions from everything I write, but I have no strong political stance on anything. Un-beta'd as usual. Camilla may appear OOC maybe?

Hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was a little brighter that day, it would seem.

After breakfast, everyone had taken up their station again, this time with more familiarity towards the inhabitants. There were much less people today since this was a work day for the mine, however, mothers and their children were still bustling about. Leo and some of the soldiers remained skeptical that the constituents would not attempt to trick them and get multiple bundles of supplies. Elise believed that, even if they did, they probably needed those extra supplies and brushed them off. Sakura naturally sided with Elise, even if she was now all too aware of how much food they really giving away.

Normally, I would be delighted to give more and more to a country in need, Sakura rationalized, wrapping food and socks in a blanket again. I would give everything to Nohr if Hoshido could afford it. It’s true that Hoshido is naturally abundant, but it would be horrible if the people of my country began to live the lives of those in Nohr. We only have so much abundance to begin with. People living in this kind of condition, even Ryoma wants to put an end to it. We don’t need famine in our country too.

Then, as Sakura shook hands with another peasant with a face smattered in dirt, she thought, Perhaps Ryoma is not taking into account our imports from Hinoka’s marriage? It’s true that after Hinoka got married, we went back into a surplus of resources. The Republic of Melauwa has a history of being old-fashioned and pays us more than Hoshido gives to them just for Hinoka living
there, in land and in foreign resources. If those imports are not being counted towards the 20 percent, then Hoshido may be able to scrape by.

But... I need to write to Ryoma. Just to make sure I’m not getting over my head.

There were less housewives in public than yesterday. Sakura thought this was because most families were contented with what they already received and were now holed up in their homes with their children, putting them to good use. It made Sakura’s heart swell with pride to know she had been of service.

When the bustle of the town returned to normal as its inhabitants turned their backs on the royals, seeing their supplies run low and many crates empty, the soldiers cheered and praised each other for a job well done. Silas, at the other side of their building, clapped a friend’s back while another jumped on his back and tousled his hair, resulting in a round of rowdy laughter. Elise pulled Sakura into a tight hug which Sakura returned, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Then Leo approached and said his congratulations.

“What, you aren’t going to kiss your own wife?” they heard a guard chuckle from behind them. It was a teasing challenge followed by the support of many other guards who overheard. Some of them hollered and jeered while others turned away in disgust, having wanted nothing to do with the foreign princess since the beginning of this event. Sakura’s voice caught in her throat and she tensed at the idea of having to kiss Leo in public.

Luckily, it seemed that she didn’t have to. “Haha, very funny,” Leo huffed at the guards as if playing their game. He hoped that the guards hadn’t forgotten that they were not equals and that Leo had all of them under his boot. Still, he humored them, if only because he did not want his embarrassment to show. “You all seem to have a lot of time to jest, I trust that everything is put away and we can leave immediately, then?”

One of the soldiers took her headgear off as a sign of respect. “My lord, you are correct to assume that we have not finished our packing,” she said. “However, we have all been watching you and Princess Sakura since this is our first time seeing her in person, and all of us are confused as to why you two are not publicly... affectionate.” The soldier woman knew she was treading on thin ice, and some sick part of Leo took pride in seeing her struggle. “He is stating a very real concern in us all, Your Highness. You two have only been married for not even half a year. Six months into my own marriage and my husband and I were still attached at the hip. I suppose we were expecting... more from you both.”

A chorus of agreement resonated from the soldiers who nodded their approval. Even Silas seemed to partake in the act.
But Leo shut them all down. “It is none of your business what my wife and I do in public,” he retorted, his voice growing louder with every haughty word he spoke. “You are not being paid to offer relationship advice like some roadside matchmaker. Now, I suggest if you don’t want to spend your afternoon counting the grains of rice left in our own travel supply, you would mind your own business and get back to work!”

The soldiers let out a collective sigh and bustled back to work, stacking and organizing crates their caravans. Leo’s eyes narrowed when he saw a few of them begin to slow, and under his scrutiny, they picked up the pace under the heated threat of Leo’s authority.

Sakura felt Elise tug at her sleeve, tearing her from her thoughts. “Come with me, I need to show you something!” Elise exclaimed, shooting a glance at her brother who was preoccupied.

“What is it?” Sakura asked.

“I’ll show you when we get there.”

Sakura let herself be lead down the street and behind a few buildings, never once being skeptical of Elise’s decision. She knew from stories told by Corrin and Elise herself that despite her appearance as a happy-go-lucky princess, Elise could more than handle herself while adventuring into the unknown. Sakura had no idea how dangerous the streets of Nohr were back when they were at war with each other (she imagined they were filled with even more bandits and raiders than at present), but somehow Elise had managed to navigate Nohr’s bowels for years without a scratch or being caught by her siblings. And so, Sakura trusted her judgement when she was pulled into a dark corner behind a building, facing a nonchalant wooden door leading to what she assumed was a basement.

“I make sure to visit this place every year when I do charity events nearby,” Elise explained, squeezing Sakura’s hand in hers. “I don’t do charity events here every year, but ever since this city was opened, I’ve been going here when I can.”

Elise knocked on the door. The two stood in brief silence, never letting go of each other. Sakura didn’t know that she was shaking—from nerves or from the cold?—until she felt her knees weaken under her. Surely enough, before she could begin to suspect Elise of questionable intentions, the door opened to reveal a large man dressed in many layers of dark wool robes, but with leather boots and a thick leather belt holding many items and weapons. Even though he towered above Elise and Sakura, he smiled at the princesses and bowed low at his waist in respect. He must have been too tall to walk through a door without crouching.
“Well if it isn’t Her Highness Princess Elise and her special guest from Hoshido,” he said, rising back up to his natural height. Upon hearing his voice, Sakura heard that he had a distinct foreign dialect. Perhaps he was from one of Nohr’s more distant provinces near the shore or one of their island territories. He turned to Sakura. “It is a pleasure to meet you in person, Princess Sakura. Princess Elise has alerted me yesterday of your presence. You have nothing to worry about—” he accented his words by slicing a hand through the air in front of him— “I will make sure you are safe.”

Elise said her thanks as Sakura peeked behind the man and saw that they had gone to a hidden tavern area, much like the place they had stayed at the previous night. However, this one was dim, reeked more of alcohol, and was filled to the brim with posters and decor from across the continent. Sakura saw several Hoshidan scrolls hanging from the walls among Nohrian opera advertisements and news pamphlets. There was even one inscribed palm-leaf from Valla, and Sakura noted that Corrin must have uncovered some of Valla’s history to find something like that. There was even more statues and utensils from countries Sakura had never visited before but heard of through Nohrian history texts.

The man shut the door behind them and returned to his spot behind the bar table. Elise lead Sakura inside, waving hello to the other inhabitants of the cramped tavern. At first glance, Sakura thought she was in a Nohrian den. However, after some wary glances at some of the customers, three or four had distinct Hoshidan features. She wondered just what this kind of role this place served if this beacon of cultural exchange had to stay hidden.

Elise sat at the head of the bar, chatting away with the man who greeted them at the door. “Do you have any more of that sweet milk from last time?” she asked. Sakura carefully slid into the seat next to her, stripping off her outer coat and draping it over the seat next to her. The tavern was surprisingly warm.

The man smiled, the edges of his eyes wrinkling. “For you, I always have it prepared,” he said, wiping a mug with a clean cloth. He gestured to Sakura. “And you, My Princess?”

“Ah...” Sakura trailed off, glancing over at Elise. “I’ll... I guess I’ll drink what she’s having.” Though she didn’t think she could stomach it, even if it was sweet. The stench of alcohol was too much for her sensitive nose.

The man nodded and turned away, leaving behind another door.

Elise shrugged off her coat too. “Sakura, you know how Nohr houses a lot of different cultures, right?” she asked. Sakura nodded. “Well, obviously not everyone approves of how Nohr handles itself. The intermingling of cultures and ideas is something bound to happen in a kingdom where conquering land and making alliances is its only means of survival. Back during the war between Nohr and Hoshido, when decent people were displaced underground because the surface was filled with bandits and raiders, it served as a safe passage from territory to territory. People could travel
freely without being at the mercy of the Old Blood.

“I... thought things would stay the same after the war, but once people started to rise back to the surface, people stuck to their homes. It was safer after most of the bandits have been removed, but there was still rampant prejudice throughout the kingdom. Hideaway taverns like this place, however, embrace cultural diffusion and the sharing of experiences from across the continent. Nohr has some here and there across our kingdom, but they’re few and far between. I’m so happy this one sprung up in this kind of place with people from different villages. Bardroy is a very nice man and works hard to take care of his family. All he asks is that you share something from your home and he keeps it safe here.”

“Oh,” Sakura said, looking down at her folded hands in her lap. “Well, I didn’t bring anything of value. If I had known, I would have brought something from Hoshido.”

Elise brushed it off. “That’s fine. I donated one of my old ribbons. Maybe next time we do this, we can visit.”

Sakura felt like she would vomit from the overbearing smell. “Y-yeah, maybe.”

The man entered with two mugs filled with a white foaming drink with streaks of amber. “Two orders of sweet milk, coming up!” he laughed as he set the drinks in front of the princesses. Elise dug into the drink, coating her upper lip with foam. Sakura looked distastefully into her drink. The amber streaks seemed to be peach juice while the thick milk was mixed with honey. She carefully took a sip, regretted it, and hoped she didn’t look as sick as she felt. She would have to ask the castle staff to make this for her another day.

Bardroy went back to cleaning his mugs. “So, Hoshidan Princess, how was your time here?” he asked.

Sakura gulped down her bile. “I-I mean, I’m just glad that we could help out the town,” she answered. “Back when I lived in Hoshido, I dedicated my life after the war to helping my people rebuild their villages and homes, providing space and healing people who had nowhere else to go. When I came to Nohr, that’s all I wanted to do. I imagined that because Nohr is much bigger than Hoshido, more places would need assistance.”

Bardroy’s thick eyebrows furrowed as he focused on his cleaning. “You are a very kind hearted princess, much kinder than what the people here say. They fill these walls with rumors of you and the inheritance of Nohr’s throne. Our people--well, the Old Blood--are very patriotic, you see. Knowing that Nohr’s throne goes to a pure-blooded Nohrian once His Majesty King Xander, may
the Gods bless and protect him and his reign, passes is everything to them. Do not listen to them, My Princess. They will only corrupt you.”

Sakura gulped and turned to Elise. “I think you mentioned the Old Blood before,” she said. “What does that mean?”

“They’re just a term for people who live near Nohr’s heart around the castle,” Elise explained. “The vast majority of these families have lived there for centuries and take pride in their home since it is the oldest region of Nohr. It is considered an honor to not come from a conquered territory. No offence, Bardroy.”

“No harm is done, My Princess,” Bardroy said with a slight bow. He placed his mug and cloth down on the bar table and rested his palms on its surface. “My people have the same set of laws as the Old Blood, we are inside the kingdom of Nohr together, yet we are not considered Nohrian. It is not something the royal family can fix with a simple edict.”

Sakura blew out a breath. The choking feeling was slowly starting to subside. “I suppose it makes a bit of sense in regards to Hoshidans. After all, Nohr conquers out of necessity, and Hoshido refused to give in to what Nohr needed. To the Old Blood, perhaps all they see in their own country is... infertile land that needs to be saved.”

Elise stared at Sakura pensively. “You wouldn’t have let your country be conquered by us, though. Even if it would help us?”

Sakura pursed her lips. “... No. I suppose not. Truth be told, if we were not on the same side at the end of the war... I would have stopped at nothing to defend my land...”

Bardroy pursed his lips, his black and gray mustache shifting around his mouth. “I have no ill will towards Hoshidans. We are all here for a reason, after all. You will be surprised that the further you get from Nohr’s heart, the more welcoming the people will be to outsiders. That being said, we are all a little prideful of our homes.”

Elise changed their conversation topic to a much lighter one, asking how his family was doing. Sakura let her mind wander, looking over the posters nailed on the wall more closely while she sipped her lukewarm milk. She took special notice of the few Hoshidan scrolls and posters, some of which were written in traditional Hoshidan. She could easily transcribe some of them. A few of them were love poems. Others were grocery lists or slander. Some were accompanied by art made with black ink and simply brushstrokes. She wondered who the original owners were and why they came to Nohr. Perhaps to explore. Perhaps they were merchants.
Her eyes landed on a Nohrian poster for a circus act. It didn’t look too old of a poster so the circus must have happened in the past year. She squinted her eyes, trying to read the fine text underneath the drawing. Despite taking place in Nohr, the name and the art were distinctly Hoshidan.

Sakura wondered if it was the same circus that passed through Hoshido several months ago.

The conversation shared by Elise and Bardroy faded from her mind as she lost herself to her thoughts. Images of fire-breathing, sword-juggling, magic dancing performers flooded back to her. It was a dark night, and even though the town was lit bright by so many decorative lanterns, a young man had assured her that they would not get caught. She had been so stressed and exhausted by the pain of helping her nation heal, suffering migraines and sickness when she pushed herself too far in her efforts to help others (though, she guessed, her pain was for the greater good). The circus was intended to help her relax, which she supposed she did in more ways than one. In a moment of poor judgement and his reassurance, Sakura had never dropped her stockings so fast.

She rubbed circles into her belly, feeling the thrum of life from deep inside of her, and remembered.

“Where have you been? We were just about to leave,” Leo said when Elise and Sakura returned.

Elise smiled up at her brother. “Aww, did you miss us?” she giggled. “You big softie!”

Leo scoffed. “I only ask because Big Brother and Sister would kill me if I failed to bring either of you back. Plus, you left all the packing to us when you both should have been helping.”

Elise stuck out her tongue while Sakura apologized quietly.

While Leo waited for an answer, he could feel dozens of pairs of eyes stare at the back of his head. And again, he is reminded of his reality to play the part of a husband. After all, none of the soldiers would shut up about his continence, and frankly, it unnerved Leo. The more they spoke among themselves about his relationship with his wife, the more likely they were to begin suspecting foul play.
So Leo leaned down and pressed his lips to Sakura’s temple. “But I really did miss you,” he said, just loud enough for others to hear.

Sakura’s face went beet red at the close contact. Behind them, she could hear the soldiers snickering. When she caught onto his game, she took a deep breath and tugged on Leo’s soft shawl. She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek.

“I-I m-missed you t-too!” she choked.

Leo hesitantly wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. Sakura was too afraid that if she moved, their act would fail and the soldiers would suspect something, so she allowed herself to be pressed against Leo’s side for now, even if she did not want the touch.

“Elise,” Leo said. “Before we leave, isn’t there something you’d like to give to our kind friend Silas?”

“Wh–oh!” Elise exclaimed to herself, patting frantically at the insides of her coat. She found a letter that she had written prior and ran up to where Silas stood in wait near their horses. Elise shoved the letter into his hands. “Here! A gift from us for your service!”

Silas eyed the princess curiously before breaking the Nohrian wax seal and opening the envelope. He quickly scanned the contents, his aqua eyes swimming with confusion.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What does this mean?”

“It means that you can finally have a vacation,” Elise said. “I got Xander to approve your time off. You have been leading your troops around Nohr for so long that we decided it was time for you to take a break. I’m sure Sophie would appreciate having her dad around now.”

Silas’ face welled with emotion. He clutched the letter tight in his hands. “T-thank you, Princess Elise,” he said, smiling graciously. He looked like he was about to choke up. “I can’t wait to return home.”

“But there’s one condition,” Elise said, and Silas stopped. “You have to get us back to the castle
safely, and then you can take your leave.”

Silas cleared his throat. “Yes, of course, Milady.”

Finally, they mounted their horses and set off towards Castle Krakenburg. While exiting the city, they noticed a public gathering at the edge of the trees where the snow on the ground was thin, the wind was subdued, and the ice was mostly gone. Several bonfires lit the area, flooding the air with thick black ash. The ash swirled and cycloned above them, hot tendrils the scent of scorched oak kissing everyone’s nose goodbye. Kids ran around the trees with a surprising amount of energy while their parents cooked their rations over the fires. Seated warm near the fires were the elderly, the injured, and the sick, people who did not have the chance to claim rations for themselves. The city inhabitants chatted and shared among themselves, passing bowls of food from one person to the next, more lively than Leo had ever seen them.

Next to a fire, seated at the foot of his mother, was the child with the birthmark that took up the left side of his face. He sipped at the peach juice which was left in the jar while his mother made him dinner, a content smile on his wet, sticky mouth.

“What are they doing?” Sakura asked Leo and Elise as they waved goodbye to their constituents and began entering the forest.

“It looks like they’re having a bonfire to share the food that they got,” Elise answered. “They’re sharing their prosperity and making sure their loved ones have full bellies, no doubt.”

Sakura brightened at the good news. “That’s so sweet of them. It’s as if the town takes care of each other... I noticed that with the way they navigated the streets. It was as if all of the children were communally being taken care of. The elderly too.”

“It is a phenomenon documented in multiple poor areas of Nohr,” Leo spoke up from behind the girls. “It certainly is strange considering the odds of one community influencing another from halfway across a country is quite slim. However, it lies with the fact that everyone in such a town has next to nothing. Even if they make money working for the mines, everyone understands what it’s like to have a child to feed. In areas where poor intermingled with the peasantry or gentry, there were very high amounts of crime--hence the presence of bandits, raiders, and gangs. Just ask Niles--In areas where everyone has nothing, what will you steal to feed your children? A single grain of rice? One spare gold coin?

“They cannot covet material things because there are no material things to own, therefore they are never jealous of their neighbors. Imagine all of the people at court, flaunting their new clothes and
jewelry, fighting over what they do not have. How frivolous, but do the things they wear make them happy?

“I suppose when everyone has it just as difficult as you, bonds are forged through experience and as a result, the people are closer and have more support. These people are very close and are happy with what they have because many do not remember having more, if they ever had. One could argue that even if they are malnourished and cold, they are still so foolishly happy because they have each other. They suffer together, starve together, and die together. Can you imagine how hardship brings one happiness? How it forged the strongest bonds one could imagine? I suppose in a romantic way, it does make sense.”

Sakura clamped her lips shut, her brain trying to make sense of what her husband was saying. She looked back towards the city through the thicket of woods, but could hardly still make out trails of smoke. “B-but, that’s so sad,” she murmured, unsure if she was being heard. “Can’t there be happiness and close bonds without suffering through hardships?”

“No, there’s a philosophical debate,” Leo chuckled to himself. He kicked the underbelly of his mare and picked up his pace, now riding ahead of the girls. “Let’s hurry, I don’t want to keep Xander waiting in my absence. The longer I’m outside the castle, the taller my stacks of revision papers grow!”

Elise tsked at her brother while Sakura fell silent. Although she wanted to be out of the cold (preferably snuggled up by a hearth with a fresh cup of tea) she had generally liked the Benesenza Projects and its people. She said a prayer to herself, hoping that she could come back. And perhaps she will bring something from Hoshido when she does.

“The baby is very active right after dinner,” Sakura explained to Elise after one of their stops. They had taken a break in the middle of the forest to feed their steeds, given a promise that it would only take them two more hours to get out. Sakura sat on a blanket to rest her swollen ankles. “It kind of annoys me because I like to take a nap after I eat a big meal, and I can’t sleep comfortably if it kicks so much.”

“Wow, can I feel?” Elise asked, already holding out her hand to her friend’s belly.
“Um, didn’t you feel already?” Sakura asked, leaning slightly away from Elise’s general direction. This did not stop Elise from gently pressing her right hand to the same area as last time.

“But it feels so cool!” Elise dismissed.

To their left, Leo leaned against a tree patiently as the cavalry went through their motions during the break. He had briefly been asked navigational advice by a soldier with a map, then he had caught up with Silas who had been in a happy dream-like state ever since he had been told he could return to his daughter’s side. Leo couldn’t relate, and was more than relieved when Silas had left to tend to other matters. That left Leo alone until it was time to ride again.

“Don’t annoy her, Elise,” Leo sighed, his eyes trained on the forest’s canopy above them.

“You’re annoying,” Elise mocked, not looking at him either.

“How am I the annoying one?”

“Because you’re Leo, therefore, you’re annoying.”

“Is it because I’m named Leo that I am annoying, or is this a case of correlation and not causation?”

“Yes!”

“So we agree that me being named Leo does not automatically determine how annoying I am?”

“No...”

“So because I am named Leo, I am annoying. Does this mean that all other Leos in the world are just as annoying as I am?”

At this point, Leo was staring at the back of Elise’s head with a bemused smirk. Elise turned her head with her jaw clenched and eyes narrow, unsure of how to rebuke. Sakura laughed at their childish play and had half a mind to step into the middle of it all.
Then a thought hit her. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Speaking of names, do either of you have any names you would suggest for the baby?”

Elise turned back to Sakura and hummed excitedly. It was as if she and her brother never engaged in conversation. “Hmm, I have always loved the name Antoinette! Or maybe Gwennivere.”

Sakura didn’t really like these names. “Leo, what about you?” she asked.

Leo hesitated, likely in thought. Then he clicked his tongue. “Leo Jr.” he answered.

“That’s a bad name!” Elise whined. “It has no thought put into it! No creativity! Don’t you want to give your children good names that actually mean something?”

“Oh, I never knew that the names Antoinette and Gwennivere were so sentimental to you.”

“I’ll have you know, I had a wet nurse named Gwennivere and a cat named Antoinette.”

“But wouldn’t naming your child after yourself be the ultimate sign of sentimentality? Nothing is better than sharing a name with a loved one.”

“But naming them Leo would make them annoying! We just talked about this!”

Leo sighed loudly, leaning heavily on his tree. He wanted to go home and hole himself in his office for a few hours, just to get away from his sister, his wife, and his life in general.

“Fine, how about...”

He opened his eyes to the canopy, the thick trees casting a net of shadows down on them. The sun was out again, peeking coyly behind Nohr’s clouds. The tall oaks that erupted from the ground reminded Leo of Brynhildr’s beautiful trees. They sprouted and grew and their branches wound around and around infinitely like a giant spider web. One day in Nohr’s summer, they might even start sprouting green leaves along their branches to bask in what little sun the kingdom had to offer.
With the sun gradually coming out, they were almost scenic. Leo had always loved the wooded areas around the castle, seeking out their solitude when matters inside the castle were too much for him. He would trip over his own feet with tears streaming down his cheeks until he realized he had gotten lost. Except he hadn’t really gotten lost, because the word “lost” comes with the emotion “fear” and Leo was not scared of what lurked inside Nohr’s woods. He was much more afraid of what was happening inside the castle, so he stayed put, carving his name into the dirt and collecting bugs until his nanny called his name and he was brought to his mother who hit him until he bruised and locked him in his closet until morning.

But despite their barren, blackened state, Nohr’s woods have always provided comfort and protection, and for that, Leo was thankful.

“... Forest,” Leo said.

Elise frowned as she sprung up to her feet. “That’s not creative at all!” she argued.

Leo paused. “Forrest... but with two R’s,” he said as if that fixed anything.

By this time, Sakura choked on her laughter, having to roll herself onto her back as she gasped for air only to laugh some more. Elise’s groaned.

“Now, you’re just being ridiculous!”

When they had arrived back at Castle Krakenburg, Camilla and Flora had stated that Xander was busy with business and that, if they had wanted, food was waiting for them in the dining hall. Sakura had felt self-conscious being the only one to accept the extra serving, however, Camilla had gladly joined her if only because she was addicted to the castle’s parfaits.

They sat around the dining table, neither Leo nor Elise eating from the full plates in front of them. Elise relayed the events of the past few days, stating how Silas was given leave and that the city was grateful for their gifts. But their bodies were sore from their physical labor and from the long ride
home, so she was mostly happy to be back.

“Oh, Elise,” Camilla said, picking at a raspberry drenched in cream. “A present from your fiance arrived. It seems to be another dress.”

Elise huffed, her nails digging into the wood of the table. “Is it too late to send it back?” she asked.

“Elise, don’t be rude,” Camilla tutted. “He really is trying to appease you. Is it so difficult to accept his affections?”

“He isn’t being affectionate, he’s just doing what his father tells him to do to keep me from breaking the engagement,” Elise sighed, sinking lower into her chair. “As time passes, it is becoming more and more obvious that he sees me as a spoiled princess that he can silence with presents. As soon as I provide him an heir, we all know he’s going to forget about me.”

“That’s not completely true,” Camilla soothed. “You hesitate to spend time with him, and as a result, you have not yet gotten a sense for his true colors. Perhaps he wishes to marry for love, just like you.”

Leo leaned his chin on his palm, tapping his fingers on the table with his other hand. “Speaking from a male perspective, it’s likely that he also wants nothing to do with you,” he said.

Camilla nuded his shin from under the table. “Leo...” she said in a tone that sent shivers down Sakura’s spine.

But Leo was used to this. “I mean, it is common sense. We are royalty, and marrying for love is a privilege that not all of us have. He is in the same predicament as you, except with him, he probably doesn’t have someone shoving ideas of love down his throat--” he glanced at Camilla, who grew more upset-- “As a prince, it is your duty first and foremost to do what is best for your kingdom. While having someone to love romantically would be nice, for royalty it is a delusion that princes like myself generally do not hold onto. I don’t see why princesses bother themselves into believing in it. Probably so they don’t run away from their husbands.”

The dining hall fell silent. The sound of Sakura’s fork hitting the edge of her ceramic plate felt deafening and she felt her face heat up.
Camilla sighed through her teeth. Her eyebrow twitched from under her fringe. “Leo, dare I remind you that Flora and I are happily, lovingly, gratefully married?”

“Not for any political advantage on our part,” Leo said. “You made that decision on your own because there would be no visible negative consequence besides friendlier relations between the crown and the Ice Tribe. There would be no rioting, no questioning the eligibility of the throne. There would be no shame or fear of being in public, nor would there be any threats on your life. No hesitation when greeted at court, no wild attempts to have you renounce your claim to the throne, no taunts thrown at you to discourage you from expressing your love for one another. Certainly, there would be no rumors of treason committed by you and your spouse. There would be nothing keeping you from living a normal life, yet if the people knew your fiance was from a hated place, your life would change dramatically. And no amount of love in the world would save you from that.”

The way Leo had phrased his words sounded like he was talking about Sakura. But Sakura knew that as he spoke, he was thinking of Takumi.

Camilla’s gaze hardened, and suddenly she was not a motherly figure to Sakura. No, in that moment, she was very different, a person that Sakura did not know.

“Xander married for love,” Camilla argued. “And he was met with protests as well. Were you not there? The entire court was abuzz because he chose a peasant woman instead of a princess or a duchess, or at least a baroness. Her wedding night was the first time the queen felt so helpless and scared.”

“But she is Nohrian,” Leo said. “So she doesn’t change anything. People eventually learned to accept her as a queen. If Sakura were in that position, they would not be so kind.”

“How do you know?”

“Stop being a dunce, Big Sister. You know--”

Camilla stood, her chair creaking behind her. Her face sang a song of fury and she looked as if she was about to hit some sense into her little brother. But Elise also stood and held out her arms between them in a calming gesture.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Take it down a bit!” Elise said, watching as Camilla sat back in her chair and Leo lost his dark expression. She waited until the tension in the air had weakened. She turned to her
brother. “Leo, are you going to your office right after you leave this room?”

Leo’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why?”

Elise giggled and said, “No reason!” but Camilla’s voice cut through hers simultaneously when she asked, “Are you still stealing clothes hangers from Leo’s wardrobe?”

Leo’s eyes widened. “So you’re the hanger thief!” he accused, pointing to his little sister. Elise wore a look of mischief as his voice rose. “I told the maids and they thought I was going crazy! Big Sister, you knew about this?!”

Camilla shrugged.

“I sometimes sneak into your room while you’re in your office to take your hangers that aren’t being used,” Elise explained. “It isn’t like you’re using them, and I need them for every new dress I get.”

_Niles has some explaining to do, Leo thought to himself. I’ve had him watch for the hanger thief for a year now!_

“Elise,” Leo said through gritted teeth. “You aren’t rummaging through things that aren’t yours, right? I have important letters and documents in my room.”

Elise shook her head. “I-I mean, I may briefly glance over some key words if the letter is open while passing your desk to the wardrobe but I don’t stay longer than I need to.”

A heavy weight lifted itself from Leo’s chest. His letters from Takumi were safe.

The door to the dining hall opened behind them and a short maid skittered over to them. She bowed deeply to the royals, then as she got closer, again as she addressed Leo. “His Majesty King Xander has asked for you and Princess Sakura to join him in your office immediately,” she said. “He said that the matter is urgent.”

Leo was already jumping out of his chair while Sakura carefully maneuvered out of hers. “Why would he ask to meet me in my office?” he asked curiously. “Why is he in my office? Does he not
want me in his?"

“I-I don’t know, Milord.”

Together, they briskly made their way to Leo’s office, disappearing at the end of the hall. Sakura could see the look of trepidation on Leo’s face, the way his brows were knitted and his jaw was set. She could see that he wanted to get there as fast as possible, but Sakura just couldn’t walk as fast as him. Silently, they wondered what could possibly be so urgent that it required Sakura’s presence.

Xander stood stiff in the middle of his room, his left hand slightly covering his mouth and nose, though he was not in shock. Leo greeted him as usual and Sakura bowed politely.

“I ask for your forgiveness,” Xander said, procuring a set of letters from his pocket. “Because of the writing on the envelope, I had assumed that the letter was addressed to me. It did not occur to me until after I opened it that it was addressed to you.” Xander handed one of the letters, one with a rip in the envelope, to Leo. Leo saw the Hoshidan wax crest glisten in the lantern light, a bold scarlet color instead of the dark green wax that Takumi always used on his letters. If Takumi did not address this letter to him, then who did?

Xander then handed the other letter to Sakura, one with green wax. “And this is for you. I considered sending these letters to you with a messenger, but I figured they would not reach you before you departed.” Sakura grazed her finger over the seal, elated that her brother had sent her a letter. Xander covered his nose and mouth again. “Now, I must leave.”

“Wait,” Leo said. “Why are you acting so strangely?”

Xander looked back at them from the doorway. “Read the letters and you will understand what I am about to do,” he said.

“What are you doing?” Leo asked with more urgency.

Xander did not answer.

They opened their letters.
To Prince Leo, First Prince of Nohr,

It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you, due to my brother Takumi’s current inability to write about his circumstance, that a plague has befallen him during our departure from Nohr. He has been quarantined outside of the castle gates while healers do their best to aid him in his recovery, but his illness has progressed quite far during our journey on sea with very little medical advise. At this moment, he is strictly bedridden and is being given the best care that Hoshido can offer. The healers have reported that they believe he may have contracted tuberculosis while in Nohr.

My people are quite scared for Takumi’s wellbeing as well as the threat of his disease spreading, and although the healers believe that he will survive with treatment, this incident did nothing for Nohr’s image in Hoshido. Tuberculosis is a disease that affects Hoshido every other decade and is deadly to peasants who cannot afford treatment. Already, there seems to be speculation that Takumi’s disease was purposefully given by the people of Nohr to spread to the rest of Hoshido.

Healers speculate he will make a full recovery by the time of the cherry blossom festival. If you and your family still decide to visit, we will more than happily ensure your safety in Hoshido. I will quell whatever rumors that talk ill of your family as well.

Signed,

His Majesty King Ryoma of Hoshido

Dear Sakura,

I’m sorry I couldn’t put flowers on Mother’s grave.

Love,
You can almost feel the chapters begin to get darker and more dramatic... oooooo.... I have the next couple chapters planned out in detail, so they will be easier to write. Maybe we'll see another chapter in a month or less? Who knows! Now that I am not in my theater group this year, that means I have more free time to write as well. :) How do you guys feel about me adding original characters and places to this universe? I quickly realized after starting this fic that it would be very difficult to contain its plot solely within the 2-dimensional world of Fates, and even though I was hesitant to start making things up on my own, this allows me more flexibility in regards to where I can go plot-wise. It also allows me to expand in areas where Fates is lacking. Let me know what you think.

Comments and kudos appreciated! :D
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

*Xander voice* That's just how it is on this bitch of an Earth.

Alternate title: "Leokumi: the Soup-er Beginning"

Chapter Notes

Hello, it's me, Boo-boo the fool who has never actually completed a single run of Revelations despite the game's release like 2 years ago. This chapter has a lot of flashback recalling a lot of events from Leo's POV (actually it's mainly flashback), so I'm sorry for any inaccuracies, because again, I am Boo-boo the fool.

Also, major trigger warning for this chapter. I'm considering bumping up the rating due to violence in this chapter, because Xander and Leo have a brief but graphic conversation about violent suicide and Leo tortures someone in the dungeon. The torture itself is non-graphic, but the effects of the torture are described, as well as a graphic flashback to the dungeons when Garon was king. If you can't stomach violence and blood, I'd suggest skipping this chapter altogether, or skipping the middle bits. What can I say? Devilman Crybaby changed me. I highly recommend it to people who like sex and violence.

If you can stomach it, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Leo was sixteen and four months old when he was officially enlisted in Nohr's army as one of his father's generals.

Normally, he would have been admitted when he turned eighteen like his two older siblings and Corrin. However, because of Corrin's decision to get involved with fate and fan the flames between Nohr and Hoshido by accidentally being an accessory to Queen Mikoto’s assassination, his father had decided that now was the time to deploy Leo at the war's peak in order to lend tactical aid to his older siblings. Leo was trained at a young age for military strategy, after all, in preparation for his fateful induction. He was better at strategy than Camilla and on par with Xander, which made him an important asset to King Garon’s army. He would be one of Nohr’s youngest generals and tacticians, right behind his great-great grandmother. Now was his chance to prove himself to his family and his country, to make a name for himself, and to make his father proud.

He just didn’t think his induction would happen so soon.
Despite his worth to the army, Leo had always felt overwhelmed by the other soldiers. They were older and heftier, and even though Leo was sure that he could take most of them out with Brynhildr, this was not a simple game of chess. His chess pieces were replaced with real, living people with families and histories and emotions of their own. And for that, he lost countless hours of sleep.

But he couldn’t let anyone know, especially his older siblings, so he kept his chin high under the visage of an arrogant, aloof prince that wanted nothing to do with others off the battlefield. It was a role he played well. He played it so well, that, even as he abandoned his father’s army to join Corrin’s crusade against a vile, corrupt dragon that ruled over forgotten land, the Hoshidan side of camp scorned him for being so self-absorbed.

The Hoshidans were prudish and haughty at first glance. Leo saw the way the royal retainers eyed him whenever he passed through towards the mess hall. Odin and Niles reported to him about confrontations between them and Hoshidans just from sharing the same space. Of course, it was difficult to tell who was the aggressor as both Odin and Niles had tendencies to unnerve the people they talked to, even back at Nohr. So he let whatever happened slide, so long as the confrontations never lead to a physical fight. No matter what, they could not lash a hand at another because that would only serve to confirm the Hoshidan suspicion that Nohrians were soulless and bloodthirsty.

Then he met Prince Takumi and he wished he could retract everything he said so he could punch him in his stupid, pretty face.

Leo remembered the countless hours thinking about how love at first sight was something that happened to people in fairy tales and how, maybe, the adverse was true: nemesis at first sight. He played with the idea that Takumi certainly seemed to hate him too, especially since Leo had tried to extend the olive branch and put royal tensions aside. But, no, that lead to Takumi spitting in his face and throwing a tantrum about how they would never be friends, regardless of how much they tried. As he stormed away, Leo wiped the spit off of his cheek and, with a twitching eye, sighed about how insufferable and childish Takumi was. Later, much later, Takumi would apologize on the account that he was still grieving over his mother, a death he still blamed on Nohrians presently.

In his opinion at the time, Takumi was not nearly mentally capable enough to lead a fleet in the Hoshidan army. The young boy was clearly guided by his heart instead of his head, and such a state would never benefit a general. Leo couldn’t understand why his family didn’t leave him to run matters of his castle instead of leaving it to the royal advisor, but perhaps it was an honor for him to put his life on the line for his country. Leo supposed Nohr was a bit similar, but what use were you if you were dead?

Then the time came for them to navigate the floating skylands of Valla and that idiot prince fell off the side. Leo didn’t think much as he jumped off his warhorse and bounded to the edge. Behind him,
he heard cacophony of surprised and shocked screams. Framed by the bright blue sky under him, Takumi had grappled a thick root that grew out of the soil, but it was hardly strong enough to support him. His long ashy hair whipped around him, his loose archer uniform billowing around his arms and waist where his fur wrap shifted. When their eyes met, Takumi’s were blown wide and wild.

“Prince Takumi! Take my hand!”

Due to the angle, Leo struggled to drag Takumi’s body back to the surface. Takumi had a vice grip on his wrists despite their gauntlets, so it was either Leo got him back to land or they both fell into nothingness together. Leo dug his heels hard into the earth and lifted with his leg muscles, strong from many years of horseback riding. His feet skid a few centimeters from where he had them planted due to the force of Takumi’s weight. As if the bottomless void was capable of echoing Takumi’s voice, Leo could barely hear his high-pitched, throaty whimpers and a soft “please” above the rush of blood in his ears. Takumi tried to scale the side of the floating plane with the bottoms of his moccasins, but all he did was send more dirt crumbling to the great unknown. His desperate attempt to gain leverage compromised Leo’s balance and Leo grit his teeth.

With a loud grunt, Leo pulled with all of the strength he had. Once he was able to drag Takumi until he was waist-level with land, Takumi swung his knees up to the grass and clawed the rest of his way to safety. Leo collapsed hard on his back, gasping for breath as his adrenaline high began to subside. Takumi did the same right beside him, heaving, balanced on all fours.

Takumi cleared his dry throat. “Thank you. You saved my life,” he said as Hinoka and Xander sprinted to their sides to see if they were okay. Leo decided it was best not to mention how much Takumi was trembling after brushing so close to death.

That was the turning point for their relationship. If it had not been Leo who saved Takumi that day, or, gods forbid, Takumi had fell to his death, Leo would never have gotten to know how much he valued Takumi as a person.

“Why have you been following me?” Leo barked, snapping his book shut. He was glad he had the foresight to strike up a friendly relationship with a maid who sent him a book from one of Nohr’s libraries every week, which Leo switched out for an old one before the messenger wyvern left. The books gave him something to do outside of battles or the war council. Camilla and Elise did not share his same taste for books and Xander rarely had time to read for joy. It had been so refreshing to find out that, out of everyone else, Takumi had the same taste in books that he had. Of course, they wouldn’t have known if they hadn’t tried to mock each other over being called “the twins” by the rest of the army in a desperate attempt to find where their tastes and hobbies differed. But it had made sense that at first they hated each other, because there was nobody they hated more than themselves.

Takumi pursed his lips, standing a meter away from the bench Leo sat on. It was positioned near a
pond which reflected the clear Vallite sky like a mirror. If they didn’t know better, the pond could have been a hole in the ground that they could easily fall into and escape the pain of war together. They would be cowards to their kingdoms, but nobody would ever know.

“I-is there anything I can do for you?” Takumi asked. When Leo gave him an incredulous look, Takumi started again. “I have to pay you back for saving my life, and I haven’t had any chance to return the favor on the battlefield yet. I fear that I may never get the chance at this rate, so is there anything else I can do?”

Leo quirked his brow, not quite believing how humble Takumi sounded. They had slowly been getting along now that they knew their interests were compatible, but Leo wouldn’t allow himself to be made a joke.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Leo said. “Well, other than helping me in battle, but that is what allied countries do.”

Takumi shook his head, eyebrows furrowed. “That isn’t good enough. I won’t be able to rest without paying back my debt to you.”

Leo sighed, leaning his back against the bench. He closed his eyes and thought to himself about how Takumi was slightly less of a pain, but a pain nonetheless.

“You want to pay back your debt to me?”

“Yes.”

“Then leave me alone.”

Takumi stiffened. He looked like he was about to really leave, but he remained grounded in front of Leo. He balled his fists at his sides and licked his lips. “I can’t do that either.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t! You would rather I left instead of having me help you with something? Some genius
you are!"

"I can handle myself just fine, I don’t need your help."

"That isn’t what you said in our last battle!"

Leo’s eyes flicked down to his chest where, under his layers of clothing and black armor, was a scar of a wound that could have killed him. He had been brought to the ground as his warhorse reared and screamed. A bolt of magic found a way past his armor and, before Leo could counter with Brynhildr, he was struck with powerful lightning on his chest. Takumi shot two, three, five arrows into the attacker, something Leo should have thought was overkill if he wasn’t trying to stop the agonizing burn. It was Takumi who had carried him to safety and, with little Sakura’s medical expertise, the burning had stopped. The result was a gray patch of skin between his pecs where the burning had been its worst and a web of raw skin trailing from his shoulder through the wound to his opposite hip. Leo was lucky he was so resistant to magic, unlike Takumi, because he wouldn’t have survived otherwise.

“What will it take for you to be sated?” Leo asked. Takumi pursed his lips and shrugged. Leo sighed again and mumbled something to himself before holding out his book for Takumi to take. “Here.”


“Read this book for me and report back to me what happened,” Leo said, silently wishing he didn’t have to hand it over. “You said you like philosophy, correct? I hope you don’t mind reading up on Nohrian philosophy.”

Takumi tentatively wrapped his calloused hands around the book. It was quite thick and had a hard cover. He stared curiously up at Leo. “But, why?”

“My siblings are always berating me for reading so much in my free time instead of bonding with others, so perhaps I should spend more time away from books. That being said, I want to know what happens, so you would be doing me a great favor by reading that and telling me.”

Takumi stared down at the book, running the tips of his fingers gently along the spine. “I’m not a very good storyteller, so I doubt I’ll be able to recount every important detail.”
When Leo watched his bright eyes read the cover, then the first page, he remembered trying to read the expressions on Takumi’s round face, softly curved with baby fat no matter how hard he trained his body. In time, that same face would narrow and wisen into the one he loved so much, the one Leo saw in his dreams. His eyes would mature to have a keen twinkle whenever speaking about politics, and he would learn to smile and laugh more often after the pain in his gut from having a fractured family had eased. The boy that had stood before him was still an adolescent, a fledgling that had been forced to grow too fast and had struggled to cast its wings. Leo had felt he was the same.

Leo began walking away. He remembered that he promised to spend time with Elise. “Try your best, I believe in you.” And he left Takumi behind him, to his own devices.

The very next day in the mess hall, Takumi ran up to him, book in hand and a wide smile on his face. It was a refreshing difference from his usual scowl. “Leo! I finished the book you gave me!”

“Oh? How did you like it?” Leo asked, poking his fork at his breakfast. As much as the chef wanted to incorporate Nohrian and Hoshidan food into every meal to expose each side to a new culture, natto never really stood a chance against bread with wildberry jam.

Takumi’s eyes glowed with wonder as he sat next to Leo and the whole mess hall seemed to stare at unlikely duo. “I couldn’t put it down!”

The thing about Takumi, Leo learned that day, was that Takumi was a vibrant person. Perhaps he could get confused about what other people think of him, but his emotions always rose to the surface in one form or another. Being the young-middle child of his family, his parents’ attention was rarely ever on him, something Leo knew he could relate to. But instead of locking these emotions far away so they couldn’t get hurt, Takumi tried to embrace them and use them to his advantage while training, as confusing as they may be. Wailing for the attention of his older siblings might have worked when he was a child, but the last vestiges of his past temperament grew more and more unbefitting for his title and age.

His transition into a constant feeling of isolation came with the transition from childhood to adolescence, and with his father dead, his mother taking the throne, and his siblings retreating to train for the upcoming war, Takumi had to grow up faster than Sakura who leaned on him for support in the absence of their nanny Orochi, to learn to suppress these cold feelings and not take them out on her. That didn’t mean he was any good at it, and thus, Takumi represented all of the colors and all of the sensations and all of the feelings that Leo tried so hard to suppress throughout his life. And as odd as it was to think, Leo was beginning to thrive just by being in his presence.

Takumi gesticulated wildly as he recounted the high points of Leo’s book while Leo smiled softly and urged him on. When he shared the things that frustrated him, he patted the table angrily with his fingers, and when he shared the things that inspired him, he clapped his hands excitedly for
emphasis. It was as if all of those years he spent in isolation were now being set loose in that moment, and all of his joy, anger, sadness, and pride were being freed, now that someone unobliged to him was there to listen. And Leo hung onto every single word.

When the war ended, they were both a year older, and they mutually decided to keep in touch. After all, it was not often that they found someone to resonate so deeply with. In these letters, they began to truly open up now that neither had to look each other in the eye as they wrote. They shared tales of their insecurities and their fears, agreeing that having them was not fit for someone of their status. They shared their secrets, their thoughts, ambitions, and dreams, things that felt so wonderful to get off their chests. The same letter might contain a paragraph about how much Takumi wished Ryoma would take a break from being the new king and spend more time with him, and then a paragraph about how he planned on touring Hoshido, restoring historic buildings and landmarks that had been burned down during the war. Leo cherished these letters just as much as the time they spent together because he was able to get a true, unabashed vision of Takumi, separate from propriety and airs.

Leo wondered when exactly they had begun to fall in love. He decided that, because romantic love was something neither had been acquainted with prior to courting, they had fallen in love either during the war or right after the peace agreement. But knowing Takumi, he probably knew for much longer than Leo did, which made Leo wonder what took him so long to say anything.

It didn’t matter anyways. Time would change nothing.

Takumi’s letters have always been a source of comfort to Leo. During late nights when Leo thought of him or he felt particularly downtrodden, he would light his spare candle near his bed which the maids never touched and waited for the wax to turn to liquid. Using his letter opener, he would fish out the metal key that had been hidden within the wax, and as soon as the key had cooled down and washed, he untied the small, inconspicuous box from Takumi’s old red ribbon and unlocked it. Leo would spend the night shuffling through words of love and passion. He must have read each letter a hundred times because there were some that he could repeat word for word. But the warm feeling in his chest upon reading a letter or two kept him in a honeyed daze until morning, something that only Takumi’s presence could do better.

Tuberculosis, even when accompanied by skilled healers, was tricky to subside. It was a sickness that was persistent and if the healers took time to rest, it sometimes took a single relapse to be fatal. And Takumi had already suffered enough being on a boat—no, being in Nohr —without a healer present. Images of Takumi laying on a futon, pale and drenched in his own sweat, desperately breathing quick and shallow breaths, and unable to move or open his eyes made Leo’s gut twist into a knot.
Leo had trembled when he begged Xander to let him go to Hoshido, to visit Takumi in his time of sickness. He was surprised to find that Sakura had already approached his brother with the same intentions. Sakura cried because she couldn’t bear to lose her brother and not be there to help him. Leo watched Xander’s steely facade begin to crack as they watched Sakura break down in the middle of his study. Xander put a large hand on her narrow shoulder in an attempt to reason with her, but Sakura had dissolved into incoherent sobs and babbles, so Leo had picked up where she left off.

“Let me go to him!” Leo pleaded, leaning heavily on Xander’s desk in front of his brother. “Please! It’s my fault that he didn’t receive the care that he needed. I need to be with him!”

“You do not need to go to Hoshido,” Xander said, gently patting Sakura’s arm. “I understand your concerns, but it is unnecessary. In addition, if either of you two had caught what he had and spread it to our people, I would never be able to forgive myself. I almost sent Camilla to bring you both home from the projects because I did not know if you two had caught tuberculosis and it would be disastrous if the workers caught a wave of it as well. You two are not going anywhere where I cannot watch over your conditions.”

“What madness are you going on about, Big Brother?”

“I already have an estate being set up twelve miles north of here. You and Sakura, being at the highest risk of contagion, will be monitored for up to three weeks in case you exhibit any symptoms—“ Leo and Sakura protested loudly—“You will have a staff take care of you and Niles will be our messenger. I will send you whatever work I expect from you. This is all for your own good to protect the inhabitants of this castle. None of us can afford to get sick.”

“But Big Brother, neither of us have any symptoms—!”

“They may manifest in time, therefore we can take no risk!”

“You can’t force us to go.”

“I can, if I must.”

“What... what about Takumi? What if his condition gets updated?”
Leo inhaled through his teeth. Raising his voice at his brother would get him nowhere. "This is about that... that assassin woman that attacked Sakura, isn’t it? I thought we agreed that she posed no real threat and that she was full of lies. Are you giving into her now because you believe a wave of tuberculosis could be Nohr’s downfall?"

"This has nothing to do with her or her cult."

"What even happened to her anyways? With everything going on, I hardly had a chance to interrogate her or her dogs."

Xander looked apologetically at Sakura, who had calmed with the change of subject. She sat up straighter after she wiped the snot from her face. But there was determination set into her eyes and he knew that she would never surrender until she got what she wanted.

"Princess Sakura, can you please wait outside?"

"Huh?"

"I wish to speak about this privately to my brother. It is not something worthy of gracing your ears."

Sakura eyed him skeptically, though she said nothing because she knew that whatever Xander told Leo, Leo would tell her eventually. So she sighed and resigned to the king, picking herself up and, after a short bow of her neck, leaving the study without a word uttered. Leo braced himself in her wake. Whatever Xander has to say couldn’t be good if he had Sakura leave.

"Many of the mercenaries are dead," Xander confessed. "Some were able to asphyxiate themselves with their chains, others crushed their skulls between their knees. This is something I predicted would happen, as many of the dead ones seem to be of a lower rank in their cult."

Leo’s eyes widened and he took a step back. "That’s... gruesome."

"Their leader, the woman who spoke out, had to have her mouth sewn shut and given her daily
meal through a funnel in order to ensure she would not give orders or try to chew her foot off to get out of her shackles. She needs to be bounded as such because she seems to be a powerful sorcerer. The guards found tomes on her person, and no ordinary ones at that. They were tomes that we’re unlike any that our sorcerers have seen and are undoubtedly filled with malefic powers. As she is, she is in no state for negotiations.”

“She cannot use magic without a tome, Brother. If there was a way, I would know.”

“There have been rumors.”

“Rumors are just that—rumors. In any case, I have no reason to stay. I will be going to Hoshido. I will be ready by tomorrow.”

“You will be going upstate like I told you and I will not accept any other answer.”

“Brother, you’re letting a hysterical traitor control you. You cannot—“

“Indulge me, Little Brother. I have always had your best interests in mind. Do as I say or I will have to order you as your king.”

“Either way, you are forcing Sakura and I into quarantine and isolation! It helps nobody and makes your mind weak!”

“Need I remind you that I have a small child who will not be able to fight tuberculosis if he caught it? If Siegbert became sick, I could never forgive you.”

Leo flinched. He hadn’t thought of his nephew. “That’s why I’m leaving for Hoshido.”

“Are the people of Hoshido less worthy of health than us?”

“Stop putting words into my mouth, Big Brother!”

“Then we are agreed that you will attend the estate?”
“Absolutely not! I allowed you to convince me into marriage with Takumi’s approval, but I will not allow you to convince me to remove myself from Takumi when he is in need! You have become mad with suspicion and I will not give into the same whims. Even if you are my brother and even if you are my king, I will not allow you to control me when there are more pressing matters—“

Leo was cut off by a sharp strike to his cheek that had enough force to make him stumble. It had knocked him off balance, the harsh sting spreading to the entire left side of his face. Leo cupped his hand over his face to ease the pain. When he opened his eyes at Xander, he briefly saw red.

Xander sighed and pulled his hand away. “I will not compromise on this matter. You must understand that I will do what is best for my castle and my family.”

Leo gritted his teeth and lowered his hand from his stinging cheek. “Which one?” he spat before turning to the door.

“Leo, do not act like this. You are not a child anymore.”

In his bedchamber, Leo’s eyes flicked calmly through another one of Takumi’s letters. He let the soothing words of love wash over him like a balm as he read about promises made to one another, about always returning to each other’s side. He read words of longing and words of regret. Oh, how he regretted not being at Takumi’s side this instant. He could hardly shake the sick feeling in his stomach that something could go wrong. It wasn’t like him to fret over someone so much, but he supposed Takumi had always been his one exception.

He didn’t know how long he had spent drowning himself in these love letters, but when he heard a knock on his chamber door, the candle on his desk was nearly burned out completely. Leo hastily gathered up the letters in an attempt to hide them, but Sakura peeked at him warily from where the door was pushed ajar, and Leo relaxed.

“Your brother asked me to deliver you some books,” she mumbled, her feet stuck just outside his bedroom. “I can come back later, if you want.”

“No, no, come in,” Leo said, turning in his desk chair. His room was dark, save for the one candle. With Sakura visiting, he thought he should light some more. “Just put them here. I hope they aren’t too heavy. You’re supposed to be asleep.”
Sakura skittishly stepped inside, balancing three tomes in her hands. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been inside Leo’s bedroom, though it was probably to deliver materials when he was sick or overworked (something that happened a lot more than he wanted to admit). The tomes hit his desk with a loud thud and Leo was careful that the letters didn’t get caught under their weight. They must be the tomes Xander had warned him about.

“I’ll retire after I leave. King Xander says that he wants you to decode the tomes during our absence,” Sakura said.

“He can shove them right up His Royal Arsehole, I’m not in the mood,” Leo snapped. He rested his chin in his palm, squinting at the books in the dim light. They looked plain and discreet. None would suspect that they held insurmountable power within their bindings.

Sakura’s eyes wandered to Leo’s open wardrobe. “Did you finish packing?”

“I hadn’t started. Part of me wants to ignore him and his orders, but at the same time, I fear that I would seem childish in doing so.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Sakura gracefully sit down at the corner of his bed. The men’s bedrooms were so much smaller than the women’s since they did not have to accommodate ladies in waiting. They only needed to be big enough for themselves and their wives on special nights.

“I understand. I fear that too,” she admitted. “Surely, he would find out one way or another. I don’t think your illusion magic would work.”

“I could warp us there easily. I have a few warp spells with just enough power for a round trip, but they are limited and difficult to find.”

Sakura brightened. “That’s great! We could use that to visit Takumi!”

“There is one little detail you missed,” Leo said. “The estate we are being sent to will be staffed. Unless we have them sworn to secrecy, they will surely let Big Brother know that we are missing.”

“O-oh...” Sakura said, wilting like a starved flower. “I understand. But what if we left now? Before we leave, maybe we can just see him for a few minutes before coming back?”
“The further the spell takes us, the longer it takes to charge. We would have to traverse from one country to another whose castles are located deep in their hearts. Even if it is just the two of us going, I would estimate I would need four hours to charge the spell, and four hours to get back. By then, we would need to already be on our way north in a carriage surrounded by Xander’s surveillance.”

Sakura sighed, leaning back to face his ceiling. Her lower lip trembled. “So I can’t see my brother?”

Leo drummed his fingers on his desk. Then he said in the softest voice Sakura had ever heard him use, “I would do anything to see him right now. You are not alone... Though, if I were honest with myself, he would probably be embarrassed if we saw him in such a weak state.”

With wet tears pricking the edges of her eyes, Sakura asked, “What makes you think that?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? He only wants to be viewed by others as strong and dependable. To be seen as weak would stress him out even more, even if it was by family and loved ones. Though, perhaps you wouldn’t understand since you never paid attention to that side of him.”

Sakura fell into a short pause, staring at her palms, clenching and unclenching her hands in her lap. Slowly, she raised her dark eyes to watch Leo again. “What makes you think you know Takumi more than I do? I’m his sister, how could you say that?”

From across the small chamber, Sakura heard Leo huff and cross his legs where he sat, the way he did when he was intrigued by something or pissed off. “Xander likes to think that you and your family are closer to each other than our family because you Hoshidans are more casual. However, if what Takumi tells me means anything, this is not the case, and he still suffers from feelings of isolation from the rest of your siblings. Time is supposed to heal all wounds, but I don’t believe the connection you have to him is comparable to mine with him because of everything that happened with your father, your mother, separate training regimens and being in different age groups--”

“I did not give you permission to speak of my parents in that way,” Sakura barked, her little fists shaking in her lap. Leo looked her up and down with an expression of disbelief before she seemed to calm down and the gravity of her words finally hit. “O-oh, I’m s-so sorry! I d-didn’t mean--I shouldn’t have...”

Instead of being insulted, a lopsided smirk grew on the corners of Leo’s lips. “I believe my personality may be rubbing off on you. For someone with a reputation such as yours, perhaps it is for the better.”
“W-what do you mean?”

“Sakura, I’m telling you to grow a backbone. My entire family admires you for your independence and quiet support of others, but Nohr will continue eating you alive if you don’t adapt.”

“I hardly attend court anyway.”

“Once you give birth, you will be expected to.”

“Camilla doesn’t.”

“Because she doesn’t have to care about her reputation. Her beauty will carry her far until her death. You, as someone who represents Hoshido inside Nohr, do.”

Sakura couldn’t argue with him.

“I’m going to bed,” she said, sliding off of Leo’s bed and straightening her dress. “I’ll see you in five hours.”

“Wait, did Xander happen to say anything about the assassins in the dungeon?”

Sakura paused at his door. “The dungeon...? He didn’t say anything to me personally, but I think I heard him talk about how they wouldn’t last much longer in captivity. He was p-planning to take away their food and water until...” She gulped.

“And when was he planning on doing this?”

“S-soon... When Elise is preoccupied with her fiance and I am at the estate.”

Leo sprang to his feet and sprinted past her out of the room. “Shit! I’m running out of time!” He managed to stop himself at the end of the hall and he yelled, “I’ll see you later!” before barrelling
towards the dungeon.

“Don’t stay up too late!” Sakura yelled back in her astonishment. Then she blushed at how loud her voice was in the middle of the night. She shut his door and left for her own chamber where she tossed and turned until she managed to accomplish a light sleep.

The Nohrian dungeons smelled of mold and sewage, the air heavy enough to asphyxiate anyone who wasn’t prepared. When Leo’s father was in control, the dungeons instead smelled strongly of piss and excrement, and sometimes death when a body had not been disposed properly. There were so many alleged traitors at the time that, as adolescents, Leo and Camilla could walk the halls to interrogate someone and every cell would be lined with too many people, too many half-humans and used-to-be-men whose bodies hung on the damp walls, their pained, excruciating wails floating from across their cell, barely clinging to life. The fresh ones would reach out to them with the black necrotic tissue of their used-to-be-hands, catch their ankles, and beg for mercy. Camilla would stomp on their hands until they lost some of their fingers, and Leo would try to be like her until they reached their suspect. Cold, cruel, and uncaring, much like their father.

Leo looked around the cold cells and found them mostly empty. An odd wave of ease comforted him.

He ordered a guard to lead him to the crazy woman. She lay on her emaciated side, huddled in fetal position in a dry corner of her cell for warmth. Her muscles had atrophied quite a bit since he had last saw her, having her hands and ankles bound tight. Her matted gray hair covered her eyes and face, rendering her nearly unrecognizable from the other corpses that littered King Xander’s dungeons. The sound of the rusty cell door clunking open startled her awake and Leo noticed she began to tremble more violently than she did when she shivered from the cold.

The last time Leo had tried to interrogate her, she was bound naked to a chair. Leo chopped off most of her long hair so she could not use it to hide, but apparently it had not been enough, even when he suffocated her with wet towels and pulled out her back teeth one by one. When he decided brute strength was below him, he had the guard beat her until she was covered in huge, ugly bruises, fresh blood spilling from her mouth. He had left her with the promise of breaking a few bones next time she decided not to cooperate.

Leo cut her mouth free from the thread. Her lips had darkened significantly, and he assumed infection had begun to spread. He wondered how this would affect her ability to confess.
“Have you had enough?” he asked before he tugged her shoulders and forced her to sit up. She coughed, the air ripping at her dry throat. She stared deep into Leo with her own bloodshot eyes, and though her expression was confident, her body betrayed her. She dug her heels into the brick floor and pushed her body away from him. She was scared. As she should be.

She grit her remaining teeth. “You will never get me to talk,” she wheezed.

Leo let his face fall into a false look of sadness. “How rude,” he remarked. “You didn’t even tell anyone your name yet.”

“Names have power! I will not give you that power!”

Without her name or any significant identifier, Niles will have trouble finding out the exact cult and how powerful they might be. To break through the castle guard, they would need to be organized and professional, which narrowed the names down significantly, but she did not react to any of the names he proposed in the past. So Leo would just keep trying until he got something.

\[I'm \textit{running out of time},\] Leo thought, thinking about what Sakura had told him. \textit{But she \textit{won’t last too much longer}, so it's understandable. I just need a little more time. If only Xander wasn’t sending me away.}\n
“You won’t?”

She hissed at him. “Kill me, because you will never get me to say anything. Just kill me and get it \textit{fucking over with}.”

“Fine then,” Leo sighed, rising from his crouch. “Let’s see if I can convince you otherwise today.”

There was horror in her wide, bright eyes. He wanted nothing more to crush the life out of her for ever daring to pose a threat to his family and his country. But this was not an option at the moment, so he settled for this torture as an outlet for his frustration. Leo pulled her by her matted, dirt-caked hair (she had lost a lot of weight) across the cell and into the hall leading to the interrogation chamber. The guard closed the door behind him and, with a loud exhale, made the Sign of the Dragon with his hand across his chest and mumbled a prayer to the Dusk Dragon for mercy.
Leo didn’t care if he got blood on his hands. Nobody could hear her screams from down there.

He achieved nothing, and for that, he was ashamed.

The guard threw her back into the cell, sans her toenails, and her mouth was sewn shut once again. Leo stormed off to his bedroom to get some last couple hours of sleep before leaving the castle, wondering if Xander would follow through with the idea of letting the assassins rot away. He almost felt as if he was getting somewhere. He just needed time.

Leo wasn’t sure if he wanted a bath at this ungodly hour. A bath would soothe his nerves and clean off whatever blood might have gotten onto him, but perhaps he could take a bath at the estate first thing after his arrival. If that was the case, a simple change of clothes would do until then. None would be the wiser.

In one of the windows he passed on his way to his bedroom, he saw the dark sky begin to brighten slightly, the sun poking through the very edges of Nohr’s thick clouds. Dawn had officially broke over the horizon, and the woman’s interrogation had lasted far longer than Leo had intended for it to be. How unprofessional.

At least he had gotten his anger for Xander out of his system under the guise of asking questions. For much of his life, he had looked up to Xander, and even now, he still does. Xander had been his role model when his own father had lacked anything noble or honorable. Xander, who had been around the longest before their father had turned corrupt, who had the most experience when it came to being a good prince and a good person, could not be faulted for not wanting to take risks, especially when there was so much to risk. Leo had come to that conclusion a little too late, and that made him feel a little worse.

Perhaps he should take that bath. Camilla could lend him herbal essence to help him relax, and he could return it to her when saying their goodbyes.

Leo let his thoughts run while he pushed into his room, weighing the pros and cons again and again. But they were brought to a sudden halt when he saw someone sitting at his desk.
Elise sat with her back straight and stiff in his desk chair, her brow knit tight on her forehead. Her violet eyes were wide with many emotions: curiosity, trepidation, confusion, disbelief. Her mouth moved with the words she read as if reading them with her eyes wasn’t enough to convince her of what was on the parchment. But her hands still trembled slightly as she held one of Takumi’s letters in her grasp, and Leo knew she understood too much. In her lap sat multiple unused coathangers.

She slowly turned to face Leo. “What... are these...?”

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't keep the Leokumi a secret any longer, I am sorry lol. Feel free to scream at me.

I didn't mention this before but I'm on spring break right now so hopefully I can update/post more things this week. I told you guys I wanted to get this chapter out in a month and it has been about 5 weeks so like, not bad. And with midterms mostly over (it's a long story involving a stupid snowstorm) I'll have more time to myself.

I'm considering doing some art/alternate chapter/spinoff to celebrate how far we have come in this fic. Like, seriously, 4k views is insane and I'm so glad you guys have an interest in this. Do you have any ideas what you would like to see? If so, drop me some prompts and we'll see about it. :)

Hope you enjoyed! Comments and kudos very appreciated! <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Cat.

Chapter Notes

I said I would illustrate something to celebrate and I finally decided that I would illustrate this chapter instead of a scrapped scene. That being said, these cats were drawn by someone who has maybe only seen one (1) cat out of the corner of her eye this entire year, so I can't say I am proud of how the cats turned out.

This chapter is pretty background and character heavy.

It's been a while. Hope you enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“ELISE!”

Leo’s voice was so much louder than how he wanted it to be, but he couldn’t help himself. It was strained, tired, and cracked under the weight of sleep deprivation. Yet the horror of his little sister finding his illicit love letters had ignited something deep within him, a burst of heat, a spike of anxiety, a burning white rage. It stoked a fire deep within his belly, filling his chest with smog and his head with hot air.

At the tone of his voice, the letter dropped from Elise’s hands to the ground and she pushed the chair back with a screeching creak of wood on stone, but her knees locked, so she tripped over the seat. She grabbed the edge of Leo’s desk to haul herself back to her feet. The unused clothes hangers slipped from her lap and clattered on the floor below them.

In his blind rage, Leo reached for Elise. He shoved the heavy chair out of his way, knocking it over with a loud thud that carried throughout the hall. Elise steeled herself and flinched when Leo slapped her hard against her cheek. Her head hit against his back wall, and when she raised her hands to shield herself from further blows and hide her pain, Leo grabbed both of her thin wrists and yanked her closer.

“What were you reading those letters?!” he barked, snapping his teeth. When he did not receive an immediate answer, he shook Elise’s wrists and she seized, her body stiff. “Why?! You said you
“I-I...” Elise gulped. Cold sweat dribbled down the back of her neck under her plaits. Her eyes were blown wide and she didn’t realize she was crying until she felt the wetness of her tears drip from her chin down to her throat. Her diaphragm tightened and spasmed. She choked on her own spit trying to get an answer out, but her throat was dry and she couldn’t breathe with her brother leering over her, looking so much like their father.

“You promised me, Elise! Look at what you’ve done!”

Elise tried to make out words between her involuntary gasps for air. “I-I’m... so... sorry...” she sobbed. Her knees threatened to give out on her. Her head felt light with everything that was happening. Everything was happening so fast and her brother hated her and her best friend was being lied to and she didn’t know what to think but she couldn’t stop thinking of their father and she was scared, oh so scared.

“Swear that you will never tell anyone about what you saw!” Leo commanded, shaking her again.

Elise could hardly hear him over the rushing of blood in her ears.

“Swear it to me!” Leo growled, his fists constricting her wrists tighter, his nails digging hard into her skin. He saw her wince, and this must have snapped her out of it.

“I-I swear!” Elise whimpered.
Leo threw Elise’s wrists to the side and she stumbled towards the door from its force. She held onto the side of Leo’s desk, leaning on it like life support, as she held one hand to her chest to help her breathe. A wave of nausea phased through her and she felt herself pale. She wouldn’t vomit in her brother’s bedroom because that would make him more angry.

Behind her, Leo took a deep breath. In it was the smoke of his anger leaving his body, and when it fully subsided, he straightened his chair and gathered the hangers. He dumped them onto his desk
next to the tomes Sakura had brought him earlier. Next, he picked up the letter from the floor, inspected it for damage, and upon deeming it clean, tucked it away into the little box with the rest.

“Go to sleep,” Leo said, tying it with Takumi’s red ribbon. Elise couldn’t hold back a single loud sob while her shoulders shook with fear. “I have to pack. You had better not tell anyone while I’m gone.”

Oh, but of course she will, because Elise is horrible at keeping promises. Leo felt the ground begin to crack underneath him. The act that he had kept for all of these years, the act where he expressed zero interest in men or women, the act where he was dedicated to his country body and soul, and would remain unloved until his dying day, had faltered. His mask had chipped. Now he would pay the consequence. He would have to answer questions about why he felt the need to hide his relationship, then why he continued it after getting married, then why he was married without love, ultimately outing Sakura’s crimes to the public and bringing ultimate shame to both Nohr and Hoshido.

It wasn’t as if Leo would never tell Elise. He was hoping his chance would come on his deathbed when they were old and had nothing to lose. That was cowardly, but he couldn’t think of another appropriate time.

Elise slowly turned to face Leo. Her face was red and swollen, her eyes puffy and irritated, her cheeks wet. “W-why...?” she asked softly. “Why have you...? All this time...”

“I told you to go to sleep,” Leo said with another sharp edge to his voice. This sent Elise running straight out of his door, crying her heart out.

Outside, Niles peered into the room, having stood guard since the first loud noise. He wore a pitiful expression, his arms crossed at his chest. Leo wanted to tell him to shut up, but Niles refused to say anything, and that was the most infuriating thing of all.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Leo scolded. He fell onto his chair, facing his ceiling, pinching his nose. He took a deep breath. The redness in his face subsided.

Niles looked down at his lord with a deadpan expression. “Would you like me to leave, Milord?”

Leo bit the inside of his cheek as he knitted his brow at Niles. “You...” he growled, “have been disobedient this entire time.”
“Would Milord care to explain?”

“Don’t play dumb with me! Why the hell did you let Elise into my room? You were supposed to be guarding it all night!”

“…”

“No answer?”

Niles pursed his lips, his one eye on the ground. He didn’t often get so sheepish—his very nature had little room for shame—but being in Leo’s presence changed everything. He had seen everything his lord was capable of, and every day brings a new surprise from his abilities. Was this fear? Niles did not fear magic, or beatings, or whippings. Leo would not use magic on him, but he was certainly a master at other ways of subjugation.

There was nothing Leo could do to scare or intimidate Niles. He could only be disappointed. This disappointment hurt Niles more than any whip could.

“Princess Elise,” Niles said, “is a kind princess. You should put more faith in her—”

“That’s enough.” Leo leaned his head heavily into his palms, hiding his face from Niles. He dismissed his retainer with a flick of his wrist. “I’ve had enough of you thinking you can intervene with fate.”

Niles bowed his head and left, resuming his place outside Leo’s chamber. Leo sighed, stretched his back, and carded his hands nervously through his hair. When he touched his face again, his eyes were wet.

*~*~*~*

The ride north was a long and dreadful one. Camilla and Flora sent them off, hugging Leo and Sakura and saying their farewells.
“Make sure Queen Charlotte’s mother receives half a cup of miracle morn and houseleek concoction every day three times a day,” Sakura instructed. “I made enough in advance to last ten days, which will give Elise enough time to harvest the herbs and make more, you’ll find the jar under her nightstand. Make sure Elise checks her brain map in the morning and at night. She must have half a citron with every meal and walnuts are strictly forbidden until further notice.”

With their belongings safely stored away in a separate carriage, they settled into opposite seats. Leo wasted no time nestling into the corner to sleep through the ride. The darkness under his eyes told Sakura that he needed it, so she folded her hands in her lap, leaned into her seat, and succumbed to her thoughts in silence.

Before she was scheduled to leave, Elise had asked Sakura to see her in private. Arthur guarded her room as Sakura approached and immediately was pulled in by her friend.

“I’m not worried about what other people might think,” Elise said, shaking her head. Her voice was different from when Sakura usually spoke to her. Whenever Elise was serious, her voice dropped into a mature tone, similar to her sister’s. She fiddled with her thumbs in her lap. “I really need to tell you something before you leave. Something important.”

Sakura stiffened with apprehension. Despite the chilly draft, sweat had formed at her neck.

“What is it?” she asked.

Elise bit her lip.

“I’ve been... thinking hard about whether or not I should tell you, and if this is a good time,” she confessed. “I made a promise to my brother not to tell anyone, but I just couldn’t keep it a secret from you. Because you’re involved in a matter far bigger than just your marriage, and if this could potentially ruin your image, you need to know before anyone else.”

Sakura pressed her hand to her chest subconsciously, feeling the thumping of her heart under her ribcage. Her mouth felt dry at the suspense. “What did you learn?”

Elise looked at her with sharp violet eyes, their subliminal cunningness so familiar a trait to Sakura after spending so much time in Nohr. Elise was just like the rest of her family. She was coy and wise, always knowing more than she let on, always knew how to find out what she wanted. The cutthroat court of Nohr had changed her.
“My brother is having an affair with your brother Prince Takumi,” she said. “I found letters between them that shared the details of their relationship. I don’t know how long this was happening or how far back those letters are dated, but I know that they were sharing correspondence for a long time. I... I know that you do not love my brother and that the marriage is purely political. But I thought it best for you to know, especially with you and your family involved.”

Sakura felt her nerves slowly melt away. Her shoulders drooped with the lack of tension. She sputtered for a few seconds, hiding her face, trying to find the best explanation for this, before she settled with a calm, “I know.”

Elise paused, pressing her lips tight. “Why? Why does my brother want to hide something like this?”

“When this all started, he was worried about you and Camilla convincing him to marry my brother because of tension between our countries. He didn’t want to marry a Hoshidan and have to face all of the consequences that came with the union... And now look at us. You see what other people say and do in court to make me look bad. If my brother were in this position, I’m not sure what would happen.”

Sakura looked back to Elise and saw how devastated that explanation made her. Elise looked as if she was on the verge of an existential crisis: her eyes were blown wide, her brow closely knit, her mouth agape. But her eyes despaired. They were rimmed with shock and wet with hurt. Elise could do little else but be hurt.

“You... you are probably correct in assuming that I would try to convince him to marry Prince Takumi,” Elise seethed to herself. “But that's only because I worry about my brother. I care about him and I would want him happy, just like I always want you happy. It doesn’t matter what they would face, I’m sure they would have pulled through.”

Sakura let her hands rest on her belly, her fingers brushing against a particular spot that thrummed with life. It didn’t take her a long time to get used to the quickening or anticipate when the life was most active. Feeling the familiar activity inside her, Sakura wondered what would have happened if Leo was married or engaged at the time she realized she was pregnant. That was why they got married, after all. To cover up Sakura’s mistake. If Leo was not available, what would have happened to her? Nobody but those who wanted to exploit her family would agree to marry a pregnant princess and keep it a secret. Would she really have been married off to an abusive prince far away that only wanted her kingdom’s money and land? A less-than-trustworthy noble who wanted her power? She wouldn’t have time to say no, because the more time she stayed single, the less chance she could cover up her scandal. Because she had chosen to keep the baby.
In an instant, Sakura remembered how fortunate she was.

“It’s too late for that now. At least I am here in Nohr and am able to try subsiding the tension between our kingdoms. With your help.”

Elise’s mouth slowly curved up into a bright, closed-lip smile. She took Sakura’s hands into hers and intertwined their fingers in a loose hold.

“I would do anything for you, Sakura,” Elise said. “Even go against the wishes of my siblings. I care about you, after all.”

Sakura looked out the window from her side of the carriage, watching barren, blackened trees pass. About halfway through the ride, Leo had woken up, unable to fall into a deep sleep with the constant jolt of the cobblestone path, so he settled for lightly napping in ten minute intervals, always checking to see how far they had gone before closing his tired eyes again.

After her daydreams were long forgotten, Sakura leaned against her own corner and slept.

*~*~*~*~*

When they arrived, they were greeted by an attentive staff that seemed too perky for Leo’s liking. Each maid and butler bowed their heads and introduced themselves, which was all well and nice, but Leo decided that pleasantries could wait and instead stormed past them with a quick, “I’ll be in my room, sleeping. Wake me only when dinner is ready.”

“Oh!” Sakura exclaimed in the middle of shaking hands with a maid. “Didn’t you say you wanted a bath when we arrived?”

Leo cursed Sakura’s attentiveness midstep and sighed, feelings of humiliation rising to his cheeks. “Fine, I’ll be sleeping in the bath.”

One kind butler even offered to help him bathe after preparing the hot water. The bathwater was scented with oil fragrance and scattered with black rose petals drifting across the surface. “So you can sleep soundly without having to worry about falling below the water,” Aldo reasoned under his neatly trimmed gray mustache.
Too nice, Leo thought as he dipped his chin below the steaming water like a child.

He didn’t often call for assistance when bathing privately. In the Hoshidan bathhouses he frequented during and after the war, bathing was a communal thing for family and friends. It was certainly something that he had to adjust to since he knew he could bathe himself. Why were the retainers so ardent on keeping their masters clean? It wasn’t until Leo awkwardly found himself bathing at the same time as Ryoma and Takumi that the brothers explained that skinship and health was important to their culture, and that they felt bad for Nohrians who isolate themselves so far away from human touch.

“Must be lonely,” he remembered Takumi whistling while washing his own hair.

Even in the new Nohrian bathhouses that sprung up after the war due to popular demand, Leo kept his distance if he could. He only ever asked for assistance if he was truly exhausted because, even though Niles knew to be quiet and calm when helping his lord bathe, Leo knew he was capable by himself.

Peeling off his white gloves, Aldo lathered his hands with chamomile-infused shampoo and gently ran his fingers through Leo’s hair. He didn’t exactly have the same long, well-kept hair as that of Hoshidan men and women. When he was a child, his mother instructed him that keeping his hair short would keep it from being pulled, so she would hold him down and chop it off with her scissors. After she died, he tried growing it below his shoulders, but found that maintaining it like Camilla did was difficult. Still, he did not trust anyone else to cut his hair, to hold a sharp blade to the back of his neck, so he cut it himself despite the uneven result. At least it was easy to wash.

“I am very proud of what you have done,” Aldo began slowly. “I wanted to thank you personally for your efforts in binding Nohr and Hoshido together peacefully. I’m sure you are the first of many to take Hoshidan spouses.”

Leo tried to relax, hardly listening to him speak. He hugged his knees to his chest, trying hard not to pull away from the butler’s hands. Aldo soon pulled away and dipped his hands into the water to wash the suds off. Then he took his bucket that laid beside him and filled it with the bathwater. Leo closed his eyes as Aldo slowly poured it over his head.

“My daughter was especially relieved to hear the news of your union. She had been living near the border for the past few years. She sends me letters every other month telling me about her Hoshidan sweetheart that she met during the war. They met under a fig tree and bonded over their mutual disdain over the war. They started living in a remote cottage due to fear that others would judge them for being together. When I told them about you and Princess Sakura, she says that she wept for an
hour and that your story inspired them to get married. She and her wife were wed under the same fig tree. I couldn’t be happier for her…”

Leo wiped the water from his eyes. “Rallegramenti.”

“Molto grazie, Milord. I only wish that I could have been present for their vows.”
“I am sure they wanted you to be there as well.”

Aldo paused. “When you suddenly came back married to a Hoshidan, well, I’m sure you don’t need me to explain that people had mixed opinions and ideas as to why it happened without explanation. The news seemed to come out of nowhere.”

Leo pressed his back into the side of the bath, the porcelain no longer warm from the quickly cooling water. “Sakura and I have been sending each other letters for a long time. Since I would not be returning to Hoshido for a long time, and we wanted a wedding in Hoshido, we decided it was the best time to get married.” Leo had told the same story so many times, he didn’t even hesitate.

“I understand.” Aldo lathered the herb-encrusted soap and massaged it along Leo’s shoulders. “I am glad that it happened so quick, such that it could not be met with opposition from Nohrian court. But whether the marriage was purely political or not means nothing to me. I would support it either way if it means my daughter can be safe and happy.”

Turning to face the wise butler, Leo grabbed the rim of the bath and narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think my marriage was purely political?”

Aldo gave him a sad smile behind his thick mustache. “I have been in the service of nobility for most of my life,” he said. “I know the stories many will come up with to try to convince everyone that their marriage was perfectly selfless and without ulterior motives. Your explanation may fool many heart stricken nobles and peasants that don’t know any better. You may even fool those closest in station to yourself. But it will never fool everyone, much less the staff.”

Leo pursed his lip. “I never expected it to...”

After rinsing off Leo’s back, Aldo wiped his hands dry with a cloth. “It is a tough life, being so obliged to one’s country. Such unions are so commonplace that none will bat an eye. Luckily, you have an heir on the way, so your civil duty is nearly done. But rest assured, you are safe here, regardless of politics. I only wanted you to know this.”

“Is that why you offered to give me a bath?”

“Haha, perhaps. Are you still in need of service, Milord?”
Leo let his hands fall beneath the water, his body sinking low until blonde tendrils of hair grazed the surface. “No. I want to be left alone.”

“Then may I be dismissed?”

“You are dismissed.”

Aldo bowed before pulling on his gloves and leaving Leo in peace. Leo continued sliding down, his mouth was covered by the tepid water. He pulled his knees tight against his body again, tighter and tighter until he felt his chest constrict with pressure. Resting his head on his knees, Leo sighed. His nails dug hard into his skin, the blunt moon shapes going unnoticed by him. In pure silence, he watched droplets of water drip from his wet fringe to the soap-infused bathwater below.

Taking a deep breath, Leo plunged his head beneath the water.

*_*_*_*_*_*_*_*

Sakura spent her afternoon rearranging her bedroom. It wasn’t as if the servants did a poor job unpacking her things or that the room itself was furnished poorly, or even that it was unclean. She thought she was being productive by setting the room to her liking, especially because she would be sleeping there for three weeks, but after two hours passed and she relocated her pillows five times across the entire spanse of the room, the maids that passed through the hallway began teasing her about her nesting instincts. So instead of redecorating until dinnertime, Sakura took a nap while hiding her face in shame.

When the time came for her to eat, she made her way to the dining hall with the help of a maid. Count Salvatore and his wife Letizia sat at the head of the table, greeting Sakura with open arms. Salvatore was a short, stocky man with deep laugh lines on his red face and Letizia was tall and slim with small eyes and a hooked nose. Sakura sat near the fireplace with her plate of food, and upon realizing that Leo had not appeared for dinner, decided not to remark on it.

“I’m terribly sorry for not greeting you at the door,” Salvatore apologized. “My wife had arrived from her parent’s manor earlier today, so I was busy preparing everything for her arrival as well as yours.”

Letizia tsked and patted Salvatore’s arm. “Don’t make it sound like I’m the one who delayed
“introductions,” she scoffed. “I would have met her on time if there weren’t complications with transportation.”

“So would I if the staff had completed their chores on time.”

“N-no, really, it’s fine,” Sakura chimed in.

“I thought they did? You must not be strict enough on them.”

“Strict? They already do so much, I can’t oversee an entire staff. That’s the steward’s job.”

“They did a good job cleaning, honestly,” Sakura said to no one.

“Then fire the steward,” Letizia said. “If he isn’t getting the job done properly, then we need a new one.”

“Sure, you say fire the steward, but you never follow up on it,” Salvatore sighed. “It’s a long process looking for competent stewards. You say that now but you’re too nice to do it.”

“P-please don’t fire the steward! Really, it’s fine.”

Letizia pressed her thin lips tight. “Now, now. Let’s not get into this in front of our guest.”

“Yes, I agree,” Salvatore mumbled, wiping the spit from his mouth with his napkin.
Sakura spooned a small mouthful of roasted partridge, only slightly amused at their banter. She supposed that their argument was better than being interrogated about royal matters without Leo to buffer the conversation. Not that she couldn’t speak to them at all without Leo’s presence, but if they asked about topics such as her assassination attempt at the Nataergersi festival or Xander’s secrets, Sakura wouldn’t be sure how to respond.

“I have a question,” Sakura started timidly, poking her fork at her food. “You are aware why my
husband and I are residing here, correct?”

“Yes,” Salvatore said, digging into his own meal. “It is a shame that you two have been exposed to illness on top of this weather. We have maids and butlers trained to heal you if the king’s suspicion proves true.”

Sakura sunk lower in her seat, the crackling fire searing the back of her neck. “T-then, why even host dinner with Leo and me? If we really caught the disease, we could pass it to you.”

Salvatore frowned and set down his fork. “My wife and I have no children to worry about nor are we afraid of spreading it to others. All of our children are married and live on their own land and neither of us leave this estate too often. Letizia made sure to see her parents before your arrival because she only meets them once a month. And being able to talk to you and Prince Leo is far more a precious opportunity than it is a fearful one.”

“Surely a man of your wealth and title has people coming in and out the doors all the time, right?” Sakura asked.

“My husband suffered an injury a long time ago, so his meetings with others are limited--” Letizia said, but was cut off by the sound of her husband pushing away from the table, the legs scraping across the brick floor. Salvatore took his cane and leaned heavily on it to stand. Sakura watched him as he limped over to her with clunky, uneven steps.

“Please forgive me for my indecent display, Princess,” he apologized before he pulled up one pant leg revealing a metal rod attached to his left leg, directly under the knee. Sakura winced and gulped. It looked very similar to the amputations she had to do during the war.

“I wish I could say that I lost my leg in a noble cause,” Salvatore continued. “However, the thing that took my leg was a misplaced bear trap. One of my guests had set it without my knowledge, and during my time hunting in the nearby woods, I was pursuing a fox when I was separated from the rest of my team. It was only a matter of time when I was caught in a trap. The teeth clamped all the way to my bone. It seemed as if everyone else was too far away to hear my calls, so my horse had to drag me thirty minutes back to safety. If I was closer to another person, perhaps my leg could have been saved.”

Letizia pounded her fist on the table. “It was on purpose! Baron Silvano always wanted our land! He wanted to kill you and take your power! I’m telling you, it was Silvano!”
Sakura had only ever saw hunting traps when she went into the woods with Takumi and Hinoka. Takumi had taught her about different types of traps and what they were used for. She remembered him setting a snare one time near a rabbit hole and hardly an hour later, a large male rabbit was caught in its cable, hanging by its broken neck. Hinoka had to pull Sakura away from the horror while Takumi stuffed its corpse into a burlap sack. Sakura refused to talk about the “poor little bunny” for an entire day until she confessed that seeing small dead animals made her uneasy. Despite that, Sakura followed Takumi on other hunting trips since she knew hunting was something she needed to get used to eventually. She didn’t have to like it, though.

She saw what damage bear traps could do. Salvatore was lucky his bone was still intact afterwards.

“I... don’t think your leg would have been saved,” Sakura confessed. “I’m sorry this happened.”

Salvatore paused and huffed, letting his pant hem graze the floor again. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Taking care of a prosthesis is difficult in itself,” Letizia sighed. “Always having to check for infection, cleaning the area and whatnot. If it breaks, we need a new one and he is entirely immobile until the original maker can visit, which could take months. He can’t be in too much heat or cold, as the skin around it could die. If he wasn’t surrounded by so many healers all the time, I wouldn’t know what to do...”

“I-I’m sorry,” Sakura said as Salvatore sat back down in his seat. “But I guess it does explain a lot...”

They heard the sound of running from outside the dining hall. The door opened to reveal Leo dressed in fresh clothes, his hair slightly damp from his bath. “My sincerest apologies,” he said, calmly closing the door behind him. “When I came out of the bath, I could not open the wardrobe without a key, which unfortunately was not given to me prior to my bath. Because the wardrobe was already stocked with my garments, I had no access to my clothes for the better portion of an hour when a maid came near my chamber--I was not about to scale the manor looking for help while wearing only a towel, mind you--and had to leave for a long time looking for a master key... Dear gods, I hope she wasn’t gossiping about me wearing only a towel around my waist... But I was finally able to access my clothes when--”

“I instructed the maids to leave your wardrobe key on your nightstand,” Countess Letizia said. “Did you check the nightstand, Milord?”

“Oh, of course I checked the...” Leo trailed off mid sentence. His face quickly drained of color upon the daunting realization. Letizia and Salvatore clapped their hands over their mouths to hide their
chortles, but it was not enough. Seconds passed, and the two broke into full laughter with Salvatore banging on the table and Letizia clapping her hands. Sakura also couldn’t keep the mirth to herself and chuckled sideways into her palm.

“O-oh my gods, praise be unto them!” Letizia hollered through her gasps. “This is the most amusing thing I have witnessed in such a long time!”

Leo’s cheeks turned a bright shade of pink as he peeked through the door, carefully checking the outside. “I pray that none of the staff heard that tidbit or my reputation is ruined.”

In his jolly voice, Salvatore turned to Sakura and asked, “Does he do this often?”

Sakura was about to reply “Much more than you would think” but Leo cut her off with a quick “Don’t you dare answer that!”

When the count and countess finally saw Leo give them a sharp look, their laughter died down to awkward coughs. He approached Salvatore and clasped his hand in greeting. Instead of the standard greeting for those close to each other in title, Salvatore raised the back of Leo’s hand to his lips to show his reverence to the prince.

“We are truly honored to house you and your wife in your time of need,” Salvatore said. Instead of doing the same, Letizia stood and curtsied low at Leo, as far as her tired legs would take her.

“May the gods bless your hospitality,” Leo said, pulling his hand away. “It has been so long since I last heard of you and the countess, nor did I hear that you have a manor so close to the castle. I have not seen you since you left my brother’s court.”

“Ah, yes, well…” Salvatore drummed his fingers on his stump of a leg. “I suppose I wanted to relax after my daughters were married off and my sons found their passions elsewhere. My age is getting the best of me.”

“Your retirement from court is well-deserved, then.” Leo sat next to Sakura on the opposite side of the table in front of a full dinner plate.

Now that Leo was there, conversation flowed easily, especially as he and Salvatore reminisced about the times he was in Xander’s court and what he had done after he left. Salvatore mainly spoke about
hunting, suggesting that he wouldn’t mind reuniting with the royal family if it meant he could put his old lance skills to use. Leo said that he would ask Xander to consider opening the castle hunting grounds this spring if there was enough game. Letizia gave her husband a few knowing glances, but said nothing.

The clock struck eight. Leo wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood. “I had best retire now. The king has given me important tasks to fulfil during my absence, and I must not be disturbed.”

“Of course,” Salvatore said, rising to stand despite the pain in his leg. Again, he supported himself heavily with his cane. “It is getting late. I hope you enjoyed your meal. If there is anything not to your liking, please do not hesitate to alert us or the staff. We will accommodate you to the best of our ability.”

“I am sure. Goodnight,” Leo dismissed, taking his leave. Sakura also rose, taking this chance to finally get away from her hosts. She trailed after Leo, not looking to see if they bowed or not, though as she exited the dining hall, she heard Salvatore’s voice say, “I have missed your laugh, love.”

“My bedroom is next to yours,” Sakura said, finally catching up with him. “They are both located close to the library.”

“Perfect,” Leo purred to himself, a look of determination in his eyes. “That environment is exactly what I need to tackle those tomes...”

Sakura didn’t see Leo until the next morning when she found that his bedroom was empty. She peeked into the small library and found Leo curled up in one of its leather seats, five bookmarked and dog-eared tomes stacked on the floor beneath him. The assassin’s tome was open face down on his stomach. On the table to the side, a candle had burnt out. Wondering just how long he had been awake, Sakura asked one of the maids to put a blanket over him, then left him in peace.

*~*~*~*~*

Xander was not completely thoughtless when he messaged the count about their arrival. In order to keep both of them complacent with their quarantine, he had ordered the staff to retrieve things that would fascinate them or keep them calm for the next three weeks.

For Sakura, the music room now housed a koto which was brought directly from Castle Krakenburg. The instrument went unplayed most of the time, a shame since Sakura did love to play it. With the
bustle of Nohrian court, Elise’s philanthropic plans, and Camilla teaching her everything about child rearing, Sakura never had the energy for it. Perhaps, now that she was able to breathe again, she could spare time to practice.

The estate also housed a lovely tazi spay that Sakura recognized as a Vallite breed. When Corrin began uncovering more about Valla’s lost history and culture, the Vallites found stray dogs that roamed the streets in search of food. Having been separated from other breeds, their long coats were distinctly shaped, with long ears and thin, curly tails. As a present, Corrin sent Nohr and Hoshido five puppies each. Sakura remembered playing with them when they first arrived, but they grew big quickly and Hinoka wanted them to be put to work instead of being a spoiled housepet like Tatsuya. She didn’t remember seeing any tazi spays in Castle Krakenburg, so she supposed they were put to work as well.

For Leo, the library was fully stocked with new books and, to his utter surprise, the kitchen was full of kittens.

“We really don’t know what to do with all of them!” the maid Mercede said, her tone between a hearty laugh and scared stutter. “A couple months ago, two of our female cats gave birth. We think Caliban has something to do with this.”

Leo picked up one kitten with its tail sticking straight up. Its orange and white fur was thick and soft around green eyes. “Who is Caliban?” he asked. He held the kitten to his chest, careful of its claws.

“Caliban is one of our male cats that we keep in the basement where we store our food,” Mercede explained. “We try to keep our male and female cats separate, with the female ones catching mice up here and outside, and the male ones in the basement. Generally, we’re good at keeping them apart so we don’t get kittens but, well, sometimes Caliban is able to come up here on his own. We really don’t know how he does it, but we’ll see him walking along the halls like he owns the place.”

“Interesting,” Leo said as another kitten tried to climb up his pant leg with a loud mew. He picked it up in his other hand. “I assume you have a lot to deal with when the female ones go into heat.”

Mercede sighed dramatically. “They won’t stop yowling by the basement door when that happens. Makes it really difficult to get to the food.”

Pushing open the door with her head, a shaggy orange and silver cat with dark stripes on her back strode into the kitchen, gazing warily up at Leo. Her blue eyes were crossed and she had a snaggletooth which, in Leo’s opinion, added to her charm. When she meowed, a fraction of the kittens answered her back and patted over to her for attention. Leo opened his hands and let the
squirming kittens drop where they landed safely on the ground and followed their siblings.

“Is that Caliban?” Leo asked.

“No, that’s Hope. She’s the mother to half of these kitties here.”

Hope sniffed and licked at her brood to make sure they were safe. At the sound of kittens continuously mewing, the door opened again to reveal a white and brown calico. Her short fur was much more tame than Hope’s. Her green eyes scanned the room before meowing for her kittens to come to her.

“Let me guess: if that one’s Hope, this one must be Joy or something.”

“No. Her name is Onion.”

“Splendid.”

Onion’s offspring crowded around her, tripping over themselves or climbing onto her back. She carried them by their necks and one by one licked them clean.

Leo said, “Most of these kittens are spotted black despite their mothers’ patterns not having any. Am I to assume if I see a black cat roaming the hallway, I am to return Caliban to his post?”

“You sure are quick. N-not that I had any doubt in your intelligence, Milord. But that would be lovely.”

Hope never took her eyes off of Leo. Her fluffy tail twitched and flicked around her. Two of her kittens swatted at it with their tiny claws, ultimately ignored by their mother. Leo knelt near her and held out his hand for her to sniff.

“My brother has a cat,” Leo explained. “Her name is Sycorax. She is also a black cat, but with white tips on her ears and tail. I don’t see much of her but sometimes I see her in my brother’s office sitting in a patch of sunlight by the window.”
Purring loudly, Hope nuzzled her cheek on Leo’s hand. Leo took this as an opportunity to scratch her head and down her back to the base of her tail, where she lifted her hips into his touch. Onion meowed loudly at him upon seeing Hope pampered and rubbed her chin on Leo’s hand forcefully. Hope stared at Onion for a few moments before trotting back to her kittens.

Xander knew Leo too well. Playing with the cats made Leo relaxed enough to work harder on
decoding those tomes without being too distracting. It was therapeutic, in a sense, that there were so many free-roaming cats in the manor whose friendliness matched the landowners and staff they resided with.

*~*~*~*~*

Three days into his quarantine, Leo walked through the halls on his way to find Niles and found a cat stalking towards him. The cat was black with white spots on his muzzle, brow, and paws, and had uncaring green eyes. Leo clicked his tongue to get his attention and the cat stopped, eyed him, and yawned.

“So this must be Caliban,” Leo thought. He scratched behind Caliban’s ears before picking him up. Caliban hissed and squirmed a bit, but soon settled into Leo’s arms, clearly used to being manhandled by the staff. His tail flicked as Leo tried to locate the basement.

“You look lost,” said a voice from behind Leo. Sakura curiously approached them with her head tilted sideways. She had been wishing to sneak into the pantry before having tea and playing cards with Letizia. Because Leo usually altered between his chamber, the library, and the dining hall, Sakura couldn’t fathom why he would be in this part of the manor.

“Do you by any chance know where the basement is?” Leo asked, gesturing to Caliban as if Sakura would understand. Sakura smiled down at Caliban, who gazed up at her with a cold, distant stare. The expression was shockingly familiar, though she couldn’t quite think of where she has seen it before.

Sakura shook her head. “I can help you find one of the staff though. Surely, they know.”

They maneuvered through the maze-like halls mainly in silence. Sakura asked Leo if he had found out anything about the tomes. Leo sighed and replied that he had tried comparing the runes to more well-known tomes but was unable to make much progress in deciphering it. He was too wary about trying to cast it without knowing what damage it could do, since it could very well cause unknown harm to himself or his surroundings. He didn’t even know what limitations it had, if any.

“It’s as if it’s written in a new language,” Leo muttered. “It seems like incohesive gibberish, but I can feel the magic swarming around the tomes anyway. These are clearly black market tomes that have a random system of runes to keep outsiders from using it. I’ll admit, it’s quite exciting to be challenged like this.”
“You always are good at figuring things out,” Sakura noted. “I’m sure it won’t take you too long. But don’t push yourself like you always do, it would make your brother even more worried.”

Leo frowned. Caliban’s tail flicked faster. “Like I always do? What do you mean?”

“I-I mean,” Sakura licked her lips. “You’re always overworking yourself for the good of your kingdom, sometimes to the point of illness. We have a long time to stay here, so there is no need to rush, I think.”

Leo sighed and glanced over at her with a cold, distant stare. “If I don’t decode those tomes in time, Xander will be disappointed in my abilities. Besides, it isn’t as if anyone else here will be of use to me since none of them know runes like I do.”

Sakura looked up at Leo, then back at Caliban, and giggled. They stopped in their tracks.

With a quirk in his brow, Leo asked, “What’s so funny?”

“You and that cat have a lot in common,” she explained. “I feel like... you two have very similar personalities.”

“Personality...?” Leo shifted Caliban in his arms, holding him up to meet eye-to-eye. Caliban’s pupils thinned to mere slits. “I don’t know why you would come to that conclusion.”

As Caliban turned to face Sakura, his white whiskers twitched around his tiny muzzle. Even though his green eyes followed her movements in a calculated way, they were arrogant and narcissistic. He thought he was naturally superior to her by fate of blood, as cats do towards their fellow humans. He didn’t understand that other humans were the reason he was well cared for.

“Yeah, I can definitely see it,” Sakura smiled.

Leo looked down on her and pursed his lips. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Wow, Sakura thought. They even look the same.
They found a butler who was busy washing sheets in a nearby laundry room. He lead them in the correct direction and opened the basement door to reveal three laid-back male cats hunting for their dinner. Leo lowered himself halfway down the staircase where he tossed Caliban to the basement floor. Caliban landed on his feet, gave Leo one last look, before stalking away to his post.
Niles spent most of his time outdoors. Despite the chill, the retainer was not satisfied with complacency. He always needed to be doing something, something productive: honing his archery skills, gathering intel about the surrounding state of affairs, making a map of all the escape routes. Being in a new area gave him enough incentive to not get too cozy with his surroundings.

Sakura found him outside on a rare day where the sky was clear of snow and old piles of sleet started melting overnight. Nohr would be entering its spring season soon. Sakura had never seen Nohr in spring, though the thought brought to mind images of blackened, sparse trees and small, darkly colored petals.

Leo wanted to be left alone, stating that he was on the verge of making a breakthrough. And while Aida was fun to play with, she was aloof like the rest of her breed and didn’t want anything to do with Sakura after an hour. After seeing Niles in the garden, she wanted to talk to him, but didn’t know how.

While she did thank him for saving her life at the festival, he still seemed... too distant. Sakura knew that Niles hated her, thought of her as an idiot woman with no sense of control. He always knew how to stay out of her way and avoid conversation unless summoned by name or absolutely necessary. Sakura was resolute to close the gap between them, and now was her chance.

“Um, N-Niles,” Sakura gulped. She had been watching him train for ten minutes now, kneeling on the patio behind him. She saw Niles falter, but his arrow still struck true dead center into one of the trees. “How long have you been training?”

She heard Niles sigh. “I have been out here for an hour, Milady,” he answered in a tone filled with forced politeness. He left his answer at that and continued shooting.
“H-how long have you been training as an archer?” Sakura asked. She had her legs folded, her hands resting on her belly.

Niles let another arrow fly before answering. “I knew a minimum amount before becoming Lord Leo’s trusted retainer, Milady. It is something I improved upon after joining Lord Leo’s service.”

Sakura’s shoulders tensed. “H-how did you come to join Leo’s service?”

Thunk!

“I was imprisoned for a while when I was younger. The castle was going to kill me, but Lord Leo stepped in and saved my life. Actually, he was going to execute me with his own hands on his father’s orders, but he found me too intriguing to let the sweet embrace of Death take me away.”

“What do you mean?” Sakura asked.

Thunk!

“My, my. Aren’t you a chatty little bug today, Milady,” Niles remarked, turning to face his superior. “What has gotten into you lately? It isn’t like you to take interest in a lowlife like me.”

“I-I don’t think you’re a lowlife!” Sakura said, the last word rolling off her tongue like something foreign. “I just... you avoid me a lot when we’re at the castle, and these last couple of months have been very busy. I... thought it would be good to rectify whatever tension there is between us.”

“Tension?” Niles laughed at the word. “Don’t worry your little head, Milady. I have already sworn to protect you as is proper. My personal opinions towards you will not change anything.”

Sakura paused, looking shyly off towards the trees. Niles had marked a number of them with charcoal due to the absence of proper training targets, drawing oblong circles into the bark. His arrows pierced through the black bullseye of every single one. He left to gather them, and when he pulled the arrows out, they left a tiny, deep hole to the center of the tree’s pulp.

“Why do you dislike me?” Sakura asked, sincere. She heard Niles tsk before he notched another
“Are you truly prepared to receive the truth, Milady?” Niles returned. “I cannot promise you will enjoy it.”

“I-I know. But please, I need you to tell me.”

“Very well.”

“Thunk!”

“You are a pain in the ass of every royal in Castle Krakenburg, especially Lord Leo’s,” Niles said. “Ever since your arrival, everyone began worrying not only about your safety, but the safety of everyone just to house you in Nohr. You are a threat to everything we know and care about. You create needless stress with your presence alone. Moreover, Lord Leo cannot live happily because he will be separated from your brother, all due to your personal mistake.”

Sakura tried to get a word in but Niles cut him off. “You made a bad decision, and instead of handling it on your own and facing your consequences, you dragged everyone else down with you just to cover your mistakes up. That is what I find most vile about you. You try to remain a pure and good person in the public, but when you do something that would give you a bad reputation, you brush it off because you can’t handle the responsibility that comes with it.”

Staring back at him wide-eyed, Sakura gulped. “You’re wrong!” she protested. “I have always been responsible when it comes to my actions, it’s just that this was the only way for me to continue working for my kingdom!”

“Your kingdom believes in a false you, then. They don’t want to believe you’d be so reckless as to get pregnant out of wedlock.”

“Exactly. I... need them to trust me... You will never understand what it’s like to have the weight of a kingdom on your shoulders. I made a mistake, but for the trust of my people, I cannot be honest about it.”
Niles considered her words carefully. Then, he sighed and approached Sakura, sitting beside her on the edge of the patio. “You’re right,” he said. “I wouldn’t know what it’s like to own a kingdom. I don’t understand the hedonism and greed that goes on behind closed doors, even though I have worked inside a castle for years. And frankly, I don’t want to.”

Sakura stares up at Niles’ one cold eye, the one not scarred behind his eyepatch. “What was your life like before Leo found you?” she asked.

Niles let out a long whistle. “You ask for juicy gossip and offer none in return. For shame, Princess. You know that every good story comes with a price, and I don’t know if I can trust you with it yet.”

“How do I earn your trust?”

“You can’t.”

Niles turned away from Sakura with an amused smirk. Sakura hunched her shoulders, staring down at her hands.

“Now, if we’re done, I would like to return to shooting holes into these trees.”

Before he could rise off the patio, Sakura grabbed the fabric of his shawl and pulled him down.

“I want to leave the manor,” she said. “I want you to take me somewhere. Count Salvatore and Countess Letizia wouldn’t let me leave unless I was escorted. Will you?”

Niles raised his brow and scoffed. “To where, Milady?”

“The underground,” Sakura said. “I want to go to the underground.”

At that, Niles snickered. “A lady like you is a prime target for people much bigger than you. You’ll never survive it.”
“Elise goes there all the time.”

“Lady Elise has a network of loyal people who protects her during her visits.”

“I’ll have you with me.”

“You’ll die.”

“Not with you there with me.”

“What about Lord Leo? He would never let us go.”

“Then you mustn’t tell him.”

Niles stuck his chin up, his blue eye narrow. “Is that an order, Milady?”

“I... I...”

*This is my one chance to prove myself. I shouldn't need to, but maybe...*

“Yes,” Sakura nodded. “That’s an order.”
Chapter End Notes

One time I saw someone draw Niles with a ponytail and I haven't slept since. I figured "Eh it's been years, everyone might have gotten a uniform upgrade" so I BS'd Niles' entire design. You don't have to imagine him like that while reading if you don't want to, I just like being Extra.

Also I absolutely needed to have Leo playing with kittens, they're literally his namesake.
That scene was crucial for his character, I swear! lol

Thank you for comments and kudos! <3
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Sakura: Wait, so you're not... *whispers* hella gay?
Niles: *looks into the camera like The Office*

Chapter Notes

Beta reader? Don't know that name. B)

Originally this chapter was supposed to be twice as long but I didn't do that and I'm glad I did. Literally this chapter was so hard to write because I was //that// unmotivated but I had been waiting to do this chapter for a real long time so I tried my best. Out of all the many genres I think I write decently, writing suspenseful and mysterious scenes is definitely NOT my strong suit, so I really struggled with this one. Also I downloaded Dragon Age and knitted myself a cardigan. We stan Fenris in this house.

In between the last chapter and this chapter, you can clearly see that I binge-read the entire Captive Prince series three whole times, so you might see some references if you are also a fan of that trilogy. I of course took inspiration from objectively The Best scene in the entire trilogy, so I'm sure you'll be able to spot it if you read book 3.

Hope you enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the dim candlelight of the library, Leo closed his tome in his lap with a soft thud and pressed his thumbs to the bridge of his nose to alleviate some of the head pain. His eyes strained to the point where his vision blurred, runes on the page fading into each other, the crisp charcoal notes and underlines becoming a splotchy black cloud on paper. He held his head as his head pounded, sharp pains hammering across his skull. His forehead was hot.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Leo blocked out all sensation besides the pain in his head, willing it to go away. Hyperfocusing on any of Xander’s projects had always lead to Leo disregarding his health. When he opened his eyes again, Leo looked around the room to see nearly every surface within a three meter radius covered in open books and loose parchment with notes. To the side of his sofa on the table was a disregarded tray of dinner that the maids neglected to carry away. The leftover bread that Leo had only nibbled on had garnered the attention of the cats; one cat curled lazily on Leo’s fire tome, eyeing him every other hour with half-lidded blue eyes. He had not changed out of his night clothes in two days.

Leo shoved the tome he had on his lap onto the crowded coffee table and felt a new wave of nausea
make its way to his tight chest.

The window next to him looked out to the side of the manor where a throng of leafless trees bordered the yard next to the stables. The melting snow pressed into the ground where the staff rode their horses to and from the outside town. Leo sat still, his neck craned to watch the trees sway and shudder in the wind, for what felt like hours until he felt the strain in his eyes begin to vanish.

“... Oh?”

It must have been two or three in the morning when Leo saw two figures leading a couple of horses through the yard. The shorter one was wearing a dark cloak and hood which was already pulled over to cover their head, but the taller one Leo could recognize easily by the wavy white hair and eyepatch. Niles spoke to his companion frankly as he pulled his brown horse by its reins. Once they were in the clearing, Niles disappeared briefly towards the wall of the manor where Leo could not see from his position, then came back carrying bags of supplies that must have been hidden beforehand for this trip. Niles threw his companion one of the bags and they tied them to their saddles. He offered his hand to help the other climb onto their straw-colored horse. The person declined with a wave of their hand and climbed up themselves.

Leo was too tired to try and stop them, even if he wanted to. He trusted Niles with his life and safety, so whatever his retainer must be doing, he knew it could not be so bad. Still, his gut was tight with doubt, so Leo made his way to the library door, leaving behind his research as the two left in the night.

At the door stood two of the night guards, a precaution set up by Xander to keep Leo and Sakura from escaping during the night. The guards, straight-backed and attentive against the wall, startled when Leo pushed the library door open. When their eyes met, the guards saluted.

“Alarm me in five hours exactly,” Leo ordered. “Then I need your service.”

Both of them bowed their heads low to their prince, unquestioningly resuming their station. Leo sighed and returned to the bowels of the library where he glanced over his mess. As he passed the relaxed cat, he scratched its head without looking back at it. Then he sighed and planted himself on his sofa again, book in hand. He opened it to where he left off.

It would be a long night.
The underground of Nohr consisted of many dark passages sinking deeper and deeper under the kingdom’s surface. Much of it started inside Nohr’s old irrigation system, which had long been abandoned since the old conquerors, the royal family’s ancestors, realized that Nohr’s main problem was the lack of sunlight, and the construction of the system across Nohr would not have changed that. There were large pockets of space spanning a half-dozen miles where former cities resided, safe from ruffians. Where there was once lively storefronts and colorfully decorated vendors, most of them were abandoned as the people came out of hiding and reclaimed Nohr’s surface.

*First the people hid from criminals. Now, criminals are hiding from the government. The government hiding from its people is the only logical conclusion,* Sakura mused.

Sakura and Niles rode into the second town over where Niles instructed her to ride under a stone bridge. Their steeds had to be lead along the muddy creek until they reached a shallow opening that allowed their horses to wade through the infested waters underneath the pass. At the base of the bridge was an inconspicuous opening that lead into an underground construction site. From there, they would need to find the right pathway so that they could get into the bowels. That is, if they were not accosted by bandits on the way.

Niles’ network stemmed far and wide, much further than what is considered normal for a royal retainer. There were people endowed to him, people he regularly made business with, and people who were all too easy to use. When Niles needed information, his trustees in the black market always had something reliable for him. And whenever they were lacking, the prostitutes had looser mouths than their other holes. It made for a large system of codependence, the constant barter of goods that were dangerous in the wrong hands, that kept one safe in the underground. As long as one was lucky enough to find someone honorable enough to keep their end of the bargain.

“I still don’t understand what you’re trying to prove,” Niles remarked on their way down a dark, narrow pass. They had abandoned their horses at the entrance and now traveled on foot since the horses refused to enter the darkness of the tunnel. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to find where we’re going. Princesses like you have no business here.”

Sakura wringed her hands, eyes darting everywhere from under the hood of her cloak. The place reminded her of Castle Krakenburg’s hidden tunnels in the walls. “Elise always wanted to take me here, so I would have came here sooner or later,” she explained. “I’m not entirely sure why she would want to come here at all, but when she does take me, I want to be knowledgeable about the area. It’s like a huge part of Nohr that I couldn’t fathom, even if I were told of its existence...”
Niles tsked and crossed his arms. “I’m not playing babysitter.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“I still doubt you’ll be able to handle the kind of company that lurks down here.”

Sakura didn’t say anything, simply casting a determined look at Niles’ eye.

They walked through blank passages that lead to many forks and intersections. Niles, of course, knew which lead to their destination and which lead to dead ends. Sakura made a mental map of all the labyrinth-like twists and turns, though when they get to drops and inclines that lead ever deeper into the earth, Sakura was starting to doubt it.

“Now, there are a few things you must know before we arrive,” Niles said. “So listen up. Up on the surface, you make orders and I follow them. But now that we’re in my domain, you had better listen to me, or I can’t help you if you get hurt. Got it?”

Sakura gulped. “Got it.”

“Rule one: never give your name to anybody. Even those you think couldn’t hurt you. This place is filled with people who want you dead, and if they don’t want you dead, they know someone who does.”

As they neared the pocket clearing, more and more mercenaries passed them in waves. What was once one or two stragglers eyeing them from the wall turned into groups of three or five, strings of people sizing them up as they walked on by. Niles made sure to keep his voice low.

“Rule two: you don’t go around doing anything for anyone, or taking any service from anyone. These people can play nice all day, but pull a knife to your neck because you sold them one grain of rice short. Service and payment is what gives these people honor, so don’t put yourself in their debt.”

Sakura looked down again at her palms. “Understood.”
“Rule number three: when I say we’re going somewhere or we’re getting out, I don’t want to hear any objections. If I say we’re leaving, we leave. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Great.”

There weren’t as many people as Sakura imagined. She assumed that, when the underground was inhabited by its regular citizens, the pockets would be bustling about from corner to corner. Instead, even though it was day hours, the people mostly kept to their sanctuaries unless they had business to do. Sakura pulled her hood lower over her head as she trailed swiftly behind Niles. She did not look out of place.

Tucked away from the main road, behind what used to be a theatre, Niles knocked on an inconspicuous door. It had a panel that quickly slid away to reveal part of a woman’s face. She was clearly a hag judging by the deep swell of her eye bags and crows feet, and she had a mole near the right corner of her mouth.

“What business do you have here?” she asked in a hoarse voice.

“My guest and I are selling bones out here,” Niles replied. “Half price.”

“My closet is already full of skeletons.”

“Then my guest and I will take your bones, half price.”

Sakura raised a curious brow at Niles until she heard he sounds of five bolts unlocking behind the door. The woman jerked the door open and grabbed Sakura and Niles, pulling them inside. After her shock wore off and the door was bolted back up, Sakura looked around. She knew by the smell of alcohol, smoke, and sweat that this was a brothel.

The large woman seemed much less threatening in the orange candlelight. She wore a brown wool dress that covered her completely from neck to ankle, pinched at her wide torso with a belt. Gray peppered her brown, curly hair down past her shoulders. Her cheeks and fat nose held a natural blush. Her gap-toothed smile was kind.
“Niles,” the woman huffed like a mother to a child. She spoke with a heavy northern accent. “I wasn’t sure when you’d be back. I had Vale search the overground for you, but it seemed as if you disappeared.”

“No worries, I held my part of the bargain,” Niles said, then patted Sakura on the back. “My little entourage and I come bearing gifts.”

From the depths of his cloak, Niles pulled out two bags and instructed Sakura to do the same. Sakura felt for the sachet containing jewelry, pearls, and fine herbs. The woman took them eagerly, checking each sachet’s contents to find that they were acceptably wealthy.

“This is Lubov. She’s the matron of this whore house,” Niles said to Sakura. “She came here to seek refuge during a particularly harsh winter in her country.”

“I had to leave behind much of my family and life,” Lubov added. “When I came to Nohr, joining the brothel was the fastest option to save money in hopes of returning. I had not expected the snowstorm to last so long, destroying everything... Now, I save money to bring my family from Yevria to here. I can no longer go back home.”

“Yevria,” Sakura repeated, pulling her hood further over her head. Then, to Niles, “isn’t that where Eli... Princess Elise’s fiance is from? That’s further north than the ice tribe. I had no idea they’ve had such horrible weather for so long.”

“If Nohr has eternal darkness, Yevria has that and snow,” Niles said. “But at least ice fishing and bear hunting keeps the population fed.”

“Ice wyverns as well,” Lubov said with a smile. “The meat is good in stew.”

Sakura blanched. “You eat wyverns there?” she asked, horrified.

Before the two could get into a long discussion about the fine delicacies of a country that lived in the harsh tundra, Niles cut in. “Lubov, where is Vale?”

“She was with a customer earlier. She might be getting primped for her next one.” Lubov paused.
“Would you like a room with her? I’ll have to charge double for both of you.”

Sakura’s face turned red at the implication. She tried to protest, but Niles spoke over her. “Yes. Thirty minutes for both of us.”

“You stay with her less and less.” Lubov looked Niles up and down. “You aren’t getting too old, are you? Your hair is white and thin, but your face is young enough.”

The only response Niles gave her was a sweet, knowing smile.

Lubov lead them up the stairs where there were private rooms. Halfway up, the arthritis in her right leg ached and Niles offered his elbow for support. She left them at one of the doors that reeked of smoke. Niles said his thanks and blew her a kiss. She cupped her cheeks and, blushing, giggled like a young girl before she disappeared down another path.

Sakura looked around the room. The low bed pressed against the far wall, silk curtains rigged along the ceiling above it. A window with a grille allowed a limited view to the outside where people ducked in and out of labyrinthine alleyways. The colorful, mismatched sheets and pillows were in disarray and boot marks on the fur rug suggested it had been put freshly into use. At the side of the room was a well-tended fireplace, the fire glowing with warm light. Sakura did not trust any surface, so she stood against the wall while Niles leaned against one of the bedposts.

Vale entered the room in a flurry of motion. She threw the door open, shouting something about fish to a friend in another room. She paused, then broke into ugly, teeth-bared, sardonic laughter as she shoved the door closed behind her. As she calmed, Vale locked her clear blue eyes on Niles and put on her sweetest genuine smile.

Sakura’s first thought of her was that she looked vaguely like Hinoka. Her build was that of someone who regularly exerted herself while eating like a bird. She had toned limbs and exaggerated hips befitting of a woman in her particular walk of life. Her face was pretty and pale with huge, hungry eyes, framed by cropped blonde hair. Her deflated breasts, which were on display underneath a translucent white blouse, hinted at a previous time in which she didn’t look so skin-tight. Sakura’s second thought was that she would make for a great blue-eyed doppelgänger for Leo if, perhaps, she wore something more opaque.

“Niles,” Vale cooed, and opened her arms. Niles walked right into her arms like a puzzle piece and hugged her tiny waist tight, and they stood like that, silent for a long moment as they buried their faces in each other’s hair. They were nearly the same height, neither made the other look small. Sakura couldn’t see Niles’ face or what expression he was making, but by their stance alone, she
thought they looked like lovers.

When they did pull apart with great effort, standing with their hands still on each other’s bodies, Niles said, “She’s dead. They’re all dead.”

Vale did not seem at all troubled. “It was about time,” she sighed. “You couldn’t have kept them in the dungeon for too long. We’ll keep trying to find their source, right?”

“Well did you find anything?”

“They’re very short-lipped,” Vale tsked. “But you knew that, didn’t you? There were a couple of goonies that came on in telling us to keep quiet about a certain customer and asked us for our secrets.”

Niles quirked his brow. “And?”

“And... we couldn’t exactly say no. Everyone was held at sword point.”

Niles pauses for a moment, his shoulders tense. Then, in one swift motion, pulled a dagger from his belt and held it against Vale’s throat. Vale, however, paid it no mind. As if the threat of having her throat cut was no more than someone asking her for the weather.

“Who did you tell about me?” Niles hissed. “You do understand that any colluding with another force or telling others you work for me forfeits our agreement. Even if you were held at sword point.”

“I work for your prince,” Vale corrected. “You’re just as much of a hound as I am. And I didn’t tell anyone about you or the throne, that’d be fucking suicide either way.”

“You know if you did, I’d have to hunt you down and kill you myself,” Niles frowned.

Vale smiled and placed a calloused hand on the one holding the knife. “I know that. I know how loyal you are to the throne. I’ve never seen a dog so happily roll over and beg at their master’s command. It’s... honorable, I suppose.”
“You wouldn’t be saying that if you met me when I was younger.”

“I know that too.”

Niles retracted his knife.

They spoke in a circle about the “customers” that had figured out that this brothel was a front. After the last relocation, a rumor had gotten out to the people that the brothel might be something else behind closed doors. People who went there often found themselves as targets, which was nothing new in the underground. The mercenaries had been looking for vengeance, a face that had slaughtered their leader. In the end, Vale and her rent boys and girls lead them on a wild goose chase. It was a matter of time until the found out and came back with the intention of drawing blood.

“One of them had this mark,” Vale said, gesturing with her hand. “It looked like a kind of brand a farmer would use on cattle or horses. A circle with something in it. If you see someone like that, I’d stay away.”

“Is there anything else?” Niles pressed.

“Yes.” From the deep pocket of her skirt, Vale withdrew an envelope and handed it to Niles. “Someone simply asked me to give this to you. I thought it must be one of your other confidants.”

It had no writing on the outside and the wax seal had no crest. When Niles opened it, the instructions were brief. He memorized them and tossed the letter, envelope and all, into the fireplace.

While his back was turned, Vale tried again to catch a glimpse of Sakura’s face. Sakura quickly pulled her hood down further, knowing that Vale could, at most, see her nose and chin in detail. Vale crouched slightly and stepped closer, making a scrunched face as she did so. Sakura turned away. Luckily, Vale knew not to ask for her identity, at least out loud.

“If that’s all, we had best get going,” Niles sighed with a sideways glance at Vale. “The security I set up for you hasn’t been enough. You and the rest may need to relocate as soon as we find out more about the resistance.”
“I don’t want to relocate,” Vale said quickly. “Every time we do, you move us further and further from the castle. Further from you. And then you don’t visit as much.”

Niles paused. “... I don’t want you to leave either. But you’re in a high risk situation. We’re so close to smoking out the enemy, I’m sure you’ll be able to take care of yourself until then. But as soon as you’re done, prepare to lay low elsewhere.”

“I know. I go wherever you want me to go because I’m a damn fool to get caught up in your mess. In the end, I just hope you can spare more time to visit.” Vale’s eyes were dark and there was tension in her stance. When she next pressed herself into Niles’ embrace, she caught his lips in a long, languid kiss. It was soft and slow, as if they were trying to draw out the time they had together. Sakura looked away with a light blush, at first thinking that they were being obscene. Then she remembered that they were in a brothel. Then she missed being kissed like that.

Sakura and Niles left the brothel the same way they came, waving goodbye to Lubov on their way out the door. In the alleyway, trotting to match his fast pace, Sakura asked Niles what they were doing next.

“Consider yourself lucky,” Niles mumbled as he lead her to the main path. “I have a job to do.”

The tavern was warm and cozy with a large fireplace and long tables set around it, where groups of mercenaries and merchants gathered for breakfast and shared their stories. The air had an atmosphere that was lazy and thick, such that it muddled the senses and lulled everyone into a sense of security. Niles lead Sakura just out of reach from the most occupied table where they could feel the warmth from the fireplace without being accosted by strangers so much.

It was then, seated comfortably on a bench with bread and butter in front of her, that Sakura felt she could speak her mind. “... I had forgotten you liked women. Back in the castle, you went on and on about other men.”

“Everyone tends to forget that,” Niles said with his head in his palm. “I don’t mind the talk. It is quite difficult to find an infertile woman in the castle, especially since it’s not something many want to be known for.”
A tavern girl set a couple of drinks in tall mugs in front of them. Sakura raised it to her nose and gagged. It smelled too heavily of beer, so she set it down, thinking, *I'd better not.*

“In fact,” Niles continued, as if Sakura hadn’t let the subject drop already, “the last major time I had a tumble with a woman of the castle was right before the king and queen had announced their engagement. It had me wondering what kind of secrets the queen keeps from the king. I suppose people never really change after a lifetime of seducing others to do your bidding.”

Sakura’s eyes widened at the gossip. “W-what do you mean?”

“Oh? You didn’t know about Queen Charlotte?”

There was a loud crash from the kitchen, followed by a scream. Shouts in an old Nohrian tongue filled the air. By instinct, Sakura and Niles rushed over, knocking their bodies on tables and chairs as they fought their way towards the kitchen.

Inside, the cooks jeered and rioted, gathered en masse around the far corner. In the center of their circle was a young boy being held up by his wrists by the chef. The chef kept shouting and spitting in old Nohrian, her butcher knife dangerously close to the boy’s side. The cooks seemed to be encouraging the woman or chewing at the boy, because a vein popped on the chef’s forehead. Sakura pushed her way through the cooks mercilessly and found herself in the inner circle just in time for the chef to slam the boy’s thin wrists onto a nearby table and raise her knife.

“Stop!” Sakura commanded and, with one hand holding down her hood, slammed her paltry weight into the chef. She was by no means built to throw a hefty middle-aged woman to the ground, but the chef stumbled and the grip on her knife shifted. This made the cooks raise their voices higher and some grabbed for the boy, pulling him by his collar into the fray. The chef pointed her knife at Sakura and yelled again, possibly asking who she was or why she did that. Sakura felt helpless, not understanding a word of it.

But she heard Niles’ voice above everyone’s, in the same Nohrian language. He made his way with difficulty to Sakura’s side and must have been explaining everything, she reasoned. He held a protective arm in front of her, as if the chef might strike without warning. Sakura looked back and saw the boy being beaten to the ground, kicked in his face and abdomen. He shielded himself helplessly with his thin, bruised arms, and curled himself into a ball.

Sakura shook Niles’ arm. “Make them stop!” she commanded. She heard the boy cry out again. “Make them stop, please!”
She heard the urgency in Niles’ voice, though he stood still. Finally, after the second time hearing the boy scream, Sakura reached into her hidden bag and grabbed a fistful of gems, holding them out to the chef.

“Whatever it is, your debt is repaid,” Sakura managed to say without a tremble to her voice. The chef eyed the gems, then raised a hand and commanded her staff to stop. Hesitantly, they pulled away from the boy, who was left unconscious on the floor.

Niles said a few more words to the chef while Sakura approached the boy. He had a cut lip, bruises on his cheeks and forehead, and a broken nose. When she flipped him onto his back and palpitated his body, he had a broken rib and dislocated knee, but no further fractures.

“Carry him,” Sakura said to Niles. “The tavern has a lot of beds upstairs I’m guessing, we’ll need one of them.”

“I need to stay in the main room,” Niles said as the chef counted the gems. The cooks, eyeing them maliciously, took their time getting back to work around them. “I’m waiting for someone. It would be unwise for us to split up.”

“I’m sure you could spare thirty minutes,” Sakura replied. Then she repeated, “Carry him.”

Ever since the end of the war, Sakura hadn’t needed to put her skills to its best use. Healing minor scrapes and bumps on Shiro’s baby legs were different from the injuries she managed in her hospital tent. The days of setting bones and applying tourniquets were long gone, and even Leo’s fevers were no challenge. When the boy was sprawled out on his cot, Sakura felt the familiar tug of the battlefield, the same sense of urgency that she felt back then that put her into an old mindset.

Niles guarded the door as Sakura went to work. Sakura spread a salve to his open wounds, then quickly stripped him down to apply it to a deep wound at his abdomen. The bruises would heal with time and the broken nose and rib needed to be set. Sakura unstrapped the staff from her belt, held it over the boy, and focused on pouring her magic into it. It would not be a permanent fix, but it would dull the pain and protect him from further damage until he healed completely.

“The chef said that he broke some equipment,” Niles said through the door as Sakura worked. “He accidently smashed some plates and he knocked over some food from the fire. He was trying to talk to someone who worked there apparently, but he doesn’t work here and he wasn’t trying to steal.”
Sakura sighed in relief once she was done. “That’s good, then.”

There was a pause. “I don’t think you should have healed him,” Niles admitted. “Making a deal and having someone in your debt is tricky around here.”

“And leave a child in danger?” Sakura snapped back. “Besides, you have people in your debt all the time. It seems to work out well for you.”

“Because I know how to handle them, and I know who to bargain with. You could have just left him, it wasn’t your business to intervene anyway.”

“You think a young boy has bad intentions? He’s can’t be older than fourteen.”

“Didn’t stop me.”

“It is against my training as a shrine maiden to ignore people who need help. So there is no debt to be repaid.”

“Try convincing him of that.”

Several minutes passed as Sakura struggled to wake the boy. Finally, his long lashes parted, revealing innocent green eyes. Pink started returning to his cheeks underneath a mass of blemishes and acne scars. He blinked a few times at the ceiling, hazy and sluggish. Then his gaze met Sakura’s from right next to him and he jerked back in shock, only to hiss as his rib was jostled. Sakura tried to gently press him back into his cot, but then the boy realized he was mostly naked, except for his smallclothes, alone in front of a girl, so he covered himself with his arms as he laid back down.

“Who are you?” his voice cracked.

Sakura shook her head. “My name isn’t important. What’s important is that you’re okay.”

He blushed even deeper.
“What happened?” he demanded, looking about the room. “Why am I here?”

Sakura tried explaining the situation to him, but he struggled to focus, paying more attention to his dull aches and bumps. While he fussed about his clothes, Sakura noticed a mark on the back of his hand that she must have dismissed as a bruise before, but now that she wasn’t focused on healing his wounds, she could see the odd, distinct shape the mark made. It looked like an old scar of a burn, like a brand one would use on the backside of a horse or cattle. It was ugly, the flesh bumpy and dull, but the boy wasn’t self-conscious about it.

“I guess I owe you something,” the boy mumbled, then gulped. Sakura worried that he may pass out again if any more blood rushed to his head. Had she been in the army still, she might have been charmed. “So what do you need?”

“Nothing. I don’t require payment for my services.”

“Wh... you’re crazy--I mean, you just go around taking care of people for nothing?”

“Yes. And given the opportunity, I would heal even more.”

“Why?”

“Self-satisfaction, I guess.” Sakura stood and gathered the salve containers around her. “I think that makes me the selfish one here.”

The boy looked up at her in awe, his green eyes glistening. It was a look Sakura had seen many times in the past. He opened his mouth to say something, then clamped his mouth shut and shook his head.

“I have to pay you back. I won’t let you leave until I do something for you.”

Sakura sighed, thinking about young boys and their petty crushes. Her hood fell low over her head as her shoulders slumped. Then she had an idea.
“Do you perhaps have a spare set of clothes I can borrow?” she asked.

“Spare?” he repeated. “Not with me. I could run to my grandma’s place and get some... Oh, I know a guy here who does. It may not fit you, though.”

Sakura smiled. “I think I can make due with it.”

Niles had spoken to his cohort while Sakura was away. She didn’t quite catch a name or motive, just that Niles had received a signet ring for a crest that Sakura didn’t recognize. She wasn’t sure what it was supposed to mean, but Niles had seemed satisfied with the transaction.

Sakura reviewed herself in the full-length mirror. Indeed, the white cotton shirt was too loose, even around her abdomen, and she needed to roll up the hem of the brown trousers. She tucked the shirt into her pants and secured them tight with a belt, then slipped into a vest that she wore unbuttoned, a distraction from her bump. The black boots she wore were the ones from Count Salvatore’s estate. Finally, she pulled on a plain wool cap to hide most of her hair, praying to the Dawn Dragon that it did not contain head lice. In the mirror, she saw a picture of boyish youth, someone who had yet to fully grasp puberty and still held the last vestiges of a child’s face. Someone who was, by all means, doing their best impression of a man. The loose clothes didn’t help.

Deeming her appearance good enough to fool the blind, Sakura secured her cloak and satchels around her and left. Niles waited patiently outside the tavern.

“You look like something tied to a horse and dragged through the mud,” said Niles.

“Does that must mean I blend in well?” asked Sakura.

“Sounds like something Lord Leo would say.” Niles hid his smile behind a cough.
“People always say that I spend too much time with him...”

There was one more place Niles had to go. The outside of the building was plain and discreet, tall and near the outskirts. There were no signs like that of a tavern or graffiti like a gambler’s den. Sakura would have passed this place on her way to the heart of the village if she were alone. Inside was what looked like a pottery shop with fragile, intricately painted vases of all shapes and sizes lining the tables, shelves, and floor. An old man staffed the front desk, his feet propped on top of a chest. When he saw them enter, he eyed them lazily above his book and didn’t greet them.

Sakura inspected one of the vases and found a thin piece of thread running along the bottom attached to the vase beside it, which was attached to the vase beside that. The tripwire ran through every vase in the room. The entire store was a trap.

Niles carefully maneuvered to the desk and, without exchanging words, gave the man the signet ring. The man adjusted his glasses on his red nose and inspected it for a moment before handing it back. Then he reached down and lifted a floor panel by a rope, exposing a hidden staircase. Niles looked at Sakura and jutted his chin to the stairs. Sakura, by some miracle, did not trip on the pottery on her way.

The stairs lead to a wide hall that tapered into more secluded areas at the ends. There was a number of cages and glass boxes stationed on pedestals or behind curtains. Clusters of people gathered around them, inspecting them, judging them on their worth. Upon a closer look, many of these cages and boxes were filled with everything from rare, exotic creatures from far lands to dangerous magical tomes and apparati. There were not so many people as to feel suffocated, but just enough to feel lost in the dim light.

Niles said, “I’m looking for someone who goes by the name Alessio. Looks like he’s in his 30s, has long black hair, squints a lot because he always breaks his glasses. I think you’d know him if you saw him.”

Sakura nodded and carefully surveyed each person in the hall, looking for a squinting man with dark hair. However, she found herself in front of a box far from everyone else’s attention that displayed a softly glowing flower. Its six petals were predominantly white, but the stem and veins were a vivid pink. The veins pulsed with a bioluminescent light, thrumming slowly like a heart at peace. Sakura’s jaw fell open.

“Look, Niles, look!” she said, pointing to the flower. “It’s a sacred dragonhart! I’ve only read about it in books! The petals are poison, but the red inside has the antidote, and it can be used to cure almost anything! The tonics I could make with this are endless...” Her gaze darted to another display. “And that’s a whimperweed! Allegedly, overseas colonies used to use this in a lot of their medicine. I would love to conduct my own experiments, but it doesn’t grow on this side of the world...”
Stealing is wrong, Sakura berated herself, pulling herself away from the glass. Someone else is going to use them someday. I only hope it’s for good.

“Everyone, at attention!” a voice called from the far side of the hall. A man and a woman stood atop a platform, gesturing for everyone to draw near. They both wore brightly feathered masks that obscured their countenance to everyone else. “Thank you for joining us! We hope that you are finding tonight’s wares to be quite satisfactory. We will begin the bidding process in just a moment, so take this moment to get your pockets ready.”

Sakura’s eyes went back to the sacred dragonhart and put her hand on the glass. This hall was full of ill-intentioned shady people who would likely use it for its poison rather than its healing benefits. They would take these plants, over-breed them, and sell them for medicine at steep prices so the poor could never have antidotes or cures for their ailments. They would poison another as part of a bargain, hold the antidote over their head, and use it for control. That was how sly Nohrians worked, Sakura knew--

“Excuse me, young mister,” a woman said behind her. Sakura put the heavy lid back in place just in time. The woman had dark brown skin and curly hair pulled up in a tall bun. The deep purple cloth she tied around her hair was the same color as her modest dress, except her dress had black lace details on the bodice. She spoke with a Chevois accent. “I don’t remember seeing you at any of our prior events. We need a name if you’re going to partake in the bidding.”

“Oh, I’m not--” Sakura started, then stopped herself. She was without Niles, so she would probably look foolish if she were to say she was not here to bid. Instead, she said, “I have a name.”

The woman raised her brow. “Do you, now? I was about to assume otherwise. Now, what is it?”
On the tip of her tongue was the first name that came to Sakura’s mind, and she had to force it out of her throat with some force.

“Ha... Ha... Hayato.”

She thought that the name would be enough and she was prepared to begin her frantic search for Niles once the lady’s back was turned. But instead, the woman stayed and watched her skeptically.

“You’re the travelling performer Hayato of the Wind Tribe, part of the Plum Blossom Circus?”

Sakura’s heart leapt into her throat and she felt herself lose ten years off her lifespan.

“... Yes.”

“... Alright then,” the woman said in an agreeable voice. “Welcome to the Pottery Farm Market. Word of your performance spreads to many ears, even ones down here. Since you’re new here, would you like me to show you the rest of what this building has to offer?”

Sakura thought about the height of the building and how it nearly reached the top of the village pocket. She had only seen the bottom floor and now the basement. If down here hosts black market activity, surely the top floors would also be a host for more illegal acts. She swallowed down her curiosity. “No thanks, I’m just here to bid--”

“Oh, come now,” the woman said, already sauntering towards the staircase. “It’ll only be for a moment, and I promise we’ll be back before the bids start. The tour is on the house.”

“I’m waiting for someone.”

“I’ll help you find them when we come back. Come!”

Sakura quickly found herself in a situation where she couldn’t say no without causing a scene. With trembling knees, she followed.
“And here is where our weaponry is made,” Marietta said, pointing to another room that smelled of smoke. “We use refined Nohrian oil and tungsten to fashion some of the most sleek machinery. As you ought to know, as opposed to Hoshidans like yourself, Nohr has made some of the most technological advances recently since scarcity breeds necessity and all that. With some of the weapons we sell, we no longer need plenty of soldiers to load catapults or massive amounts of archers to rain a barrage of arrows on an enemy for there to be an absolutely devastating amount of damage.”

Sakura followed Marietta up and up, feeling herself get further and further from Niles with each step. At every opportunity, Sakura excused herself, and every time, Marietta refuted her or cut her off. Sakura felt for the staff at her side, its presence relieving the tension in her gait. If worse came to worst, she supposed she could use it as an impromptu weapon, though its wooden grip could snap quite easily.

“There is someone I would like to introduce you to,” Marietta confessed as they rounded one of the top floors. “I believe you and him have a lot in common, both being performers after all.”

As she was saying this, on the other side of the hall, Sakura heard a voice.

“What do you mean, someone is using my identity?! That’s absurd! Take me to them now!”

First came a guard, pulling a curtain out of the way, then two more. Sakura’s eyes glazed over them, not quite being able to focus on their accusatory glances. She felt her heart hammering in her ribcage, her breathing quick and unsteady. It was as if the floor had caved in and she was falling past all of these floors and deeper into Nohr’s crust. She knew that voice well. She wasn’t ready. Not like this.

It had been months.

“Who in hell is--”

Sakura closed her eyes, forced herself to breathe. Hold, one, two, three, four...
She heard his steps come closer. By sheer matter of will, her feet stayed planted on the floor.

... five, six, seven, eight...

He hadn’t changed a bit in these months.

“Hayato!” said Hayato.

Marietta sputtered. “Wait, you’re both named Hayato?”

“Yes. I can’t believe he found me here.”

Sakura felt her tension start to subside, the high of her adrenaline like a drug. Thank goodness he’s still on my side.

Marietta crossed her arms. “There are two Hayatos of the Wind Tribe, both of whom are performers for the Plum Blossom Circus?”

“Yes,” Hayato and Sakura said simultaneously.

“What is your relation, then?”

A brief moment passed.

“We’re twins,” said Hayato.

“We’re cousins,” said Sakura.

Hayato winced. “We’re... twin... cousins,” he clarified. “Both named after our great great grandfather, Hayato.”
Marietta looked between the two in clear disbelief. However, since he was a guest, there was little to nothing she could do with no evidence to disprove them.

“I... see...” she settled and took a step back. “Well, I am glad to reunite you both. I will be free to escort you both to the bidding area if you need. I will take my leave.”

She bowed and left quickly, followed by the three guards that had been at Hayato’s door. With them gone, Sakura felt a new kind of dread settle in her stomach.

“I never expected to see you like this,” Hayato said sheepishly. “If I had known, I would have invited you up myself. Though I’d hardly recognize you in that getup.”

Sakura felt her heart swell, her lungs suffocating with the ever-present nausea that had built up inside her. She forced it down, along with her other feelings. It was too painful to look him in the eye. She focused on her breathing again.

He paused. “I missed you. All this time, I’ve missed you. I only hope you felt the same.”

There were so many things that Sakura wanted to say, needed to say. She swallowed them all. She tried to ball her trembling hands into fists, but every muscle in her body felt weak. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she knew that her face must have been drained. Everything was too much. Not like this. Anything but this!

Gently, Hayato stepped forward and took Sakura’s hand in his. “Come on, you look tired. Let’s sit down and talk. I think... I need to explain myself.”

Sakura allowed herself to be lead to his room. She felt a vague sense of familiarity, of a room with a bed, the lips on hers too impatient to actually use it. There was bile at the back of Sakura’s throat.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” Hayato said.

“I’m going to be sick,” Sakura said.
Niles' relationship with Vale is important to me because I think a lot of people dismiss Niles to be super gay just because he is canon bi. I see it happen all the time in fandoms where the bi guy is preferred to be in a gay relationship because of this fear of being "straight-passing" and the overall dismissal of any m/f ships. If a bi character is put in a straight ship, suddenly it's "not proper LGBT representation" and "LGBT erasure." I'm just real sick and tired of seeing that happening, especially since m/f ships are important for bisexual people to relate, and no ship is automatically better than another just because it's gay or straight. I'm sick of bi people in straight relationships being told that they "aren't LGBT" and "don't face oppression" because that clearly isn't true. I know I said that everyone in this fic is bi/pan for simplicity's sake, but I felt that Niles' character, as the canon bi character here, deserved a little extra love as an f-you to people who think bi people don't belong in LGBT spaces if they are in a m/f relationship. Mic drop.

Yes, Sakura's meeting with Hayato was inspired by a scene in Captive Prince. "We're twin cousins" is the pinnacle of my odd sense of humor. I can never top that ever. You can leave now.

I have a personal headcanon about Leo that I don't think I've explained directly but I've used it a couple times in this fic. I think that Leo is always in a state of sleep deprivation and is only able to hold it together through his willpower and muscle memory. His lack of sleep explains why he can't dress himself properly, why he doesn't recognize people he should recognize (see Leo's conversation with Owain in Warriors) and why he's just not very perceptive of new things. But things he's used to, like swinging a sword, riding a horse, and casting magic, those things he can do well because he's done them so much in the past. He runs on the equivalent of two hours of sleep and a gallon of coffee each day. Combined with the fact that he probably sleeps very light because of the concubine wars, he probably doesn't get //any// quality sleep in his life, so he lives through naps. He's college-student-aged in this fic, he may as well act like one.

I'm very passionate about how Sakura is dressed. At all times.

Now that I remember to actually put my tumblr URL please go and shout at me about Fire Emblem or Captive Prince over at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/puppy-butts

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!