A Warrior's Heart

by donguris

Summary

The story of a lost boy, and the heir of an empire.

Notes

The Dragon Rider/Fantasy AU that’s been a labor of love on Tumblr for too long.

~The section of the story where Rin and Sousuke meet each other I’ve already drawn into a comic here: http://donguris.tumblr.com/post/147597901963/dragon-riderfantasy-au-this-was-going-to-just-so

See the end of the work for more notes.
Sousuke was alone on the hillside when alarm bells rang out from the watchtowers. Their resounding clang could reach you anywhere in the mountains' cradle—and you never quite knew if it was the sound itself you felt in your bones, or the fear of what followed.

Death already gathered heavy in the salt air—blown up from tarry waves, sinking into the streets of Tokitsu. Sousuke tore down the path from the empty practice yard with his father's wakizashi gripped tight in one hand, the sweat on his back still warm. All around, people were scuttling inside, fastening their door latches, pulling covers over their windows. He wove through them, carving against the tide with purpose.

“Yamazaki!”

The jewelry maker flung open his door when Sousuke raced past the storefront. “Sousuke, over here! Get inside!”

“I'm going to the beach to help. My parents are already down there.”

“The beach?! You're twelve, you little rascal, and I doubt the general wants his boy out there in the surf with sirens. Now hurry in here!”

“I can handle them.” Sousuke spun his weapon, and dipped into a confident bow. Then he sped off grinning and hollered over his shoulder, “Thank you anyway, Mister Nanase!”

The jewelry maker was trying to shout sense at him still, but there was no time to waste; none at all. 

Sightless warriors were gathering below beside the Iwatobi ship, raising the whale shark on indigo banners, their blades and spears glinting in torchlight like serpents' fangs. Sousuke might not be allowed to join them yet, but he was tall for his age, and as long as no one saw him slip in amongst the company, he was certain they'd appreciate his help. He could hardly be expected to hole up in his house while his parents defended the bay. If Iwatobi made good on their contract, this could be one of the last times the sirens attacked. He was ready for this; he could prove it. The excitement of an approaching fight surged through him, lightning hot.

Though tonight something felt different.

Sousuke halted, holding his breath to listen for the wretched screeching that sirens made as they breached the water. Their cries were like icicles under your skin, and his spine shivered in anticipation of them. But there were no screams. Only misty stillness, and the rolling, distant assault of waves against the cliffs.

Then a low thrumming.

It was a full sound like sails catching the wind—only rhythmic, staggered, repeating, getting louder.

The noise did not hail from the sea, though it was filling the bay, drumming off the mountains—everywhere, but nowhere. Sousuke squinted into the gloom to search the water again, and trace up the black rocky peaks. All of Tokitsu was suspended in waiting, murmurs swirling into the street from behind every window.

And then he saw it: A shape soared over the star field through a silvery gap in the clouds. Then a rumbling, vibrating, blood-curdling roar split the air, and it was like no cry of any creature he knew.
"DRAGONS!"

"The Emperor attacks!"

Watchmen pummeled the warning bells.

The sheer improbability of the idea stalled Sousuke’s awareness. He had time to take one more step before a flying mass dipped overhead, and the street was engulfed by fire. The force of it tore the avenue apart, stone and wood warping, snapping, crumbling. A sweltering blast of pure heat bowled him over.

Two more shadowy shapes swooped low, and the sound of their inferno bellowed from all around. Smoldering streets illuminated the monsters as they swerved overhead: winged horrors with coats of gleaming scales. Sousuke was rooted in place, his body refusing to move until a cry nearby wrenched his focus back. He shook himself and kept running.

Whale Bay was devoured. Smoke smothered the foothills, billowing up in thick black columns, suffocating and blinding. Sousuke shielded his eyes from the embers as he stumbled through the murk. Stone was melting, the air itself burning away, and every short breath came out a raw cough. His parents were at the harbor. If he could find the seawall, he could slide down the shallow side, and the ocean would keep them safe. But finding his bearings in the chaos was near impossible. Citizens panicked into the streets, but there was no cover from this assault. Tokitsu was built to defend itself from the water, and it buckled beneath blazing breath and the merciless fan of leathery wings. Wails of the dying fused with throaty roars in the hellish dark.

Smoke thinned for a moment, and Sousuke saw his parents with a small company of soldiers on the beach below. They were hurrying up the shore, toward the city. He recognized his father's silhouette towering at the frontline, and a flash of happiness sang through the madness. There was no fight to be won here. The glory he'd chased down the slope was long forgotten. He was terrified, desperate, and the sight of his parents choked him with a sob.

A roar sounded from above, and the largest of the dragons soared over the harbor. Sousuke blinked once and nearly missed it, but this one had a rider. There was a saddle on its back, and in it, a human. With a dip of its horned head, it laid a scalding stripe of flames across the length of the beach, leaving nothing in its path unburnt. Sousuke couldn’t scrape together enough of himself to scream.

Fighting a daze, even though he knew what awaited there, he sprinted for the waterfront. Stinging embers burned his feet over his sandals as he ran. One of the watchtowers cracked and pitched forward, blocking his path. Splinters floated up in a deadly cloud, and Sousuke's sleeve caught. It took a few seconds for him to notice before the pain scorched over his right shoulder. The fire was hungry, inescapable, and he reeled with panic. Hot. So hot, it was eating him alive. The heat stabbed through his tunic and melted the skin beneath; he could hear it, smell it. He stripped and dropped to the sand to staunch the blaze, knocking his heel and tumbling backward over the seawall.

Home blurred into an angry flicker of red and yellow— and then darkness.

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Sousuke lurched awake in the back of a drawn cart. Iron chains clinked at his wrists, and a collar
was sewn closed around his neck. The stiff leather had chafed his skin, and his back stung where a
tattoo had been inked just below his hairline. Groaning, he hooked his surroundings on hazy
memories of the night before. His shoulder was bandaged—hardened blood staining the gauze, and
midwinter chill clawed under his clothes. The stink of burned hair and flesh coated the air inside the
wagon. From the looks of this trail, they were somewhere along the mountain pass. Home was miles
behind.

Sousuke cast around. Other survivors from the city shared his confines—slumped against the sides,
strewn about the floor, and he saw how lucky he had been. One man was dabbing cloth over the
scorched back of another, though the skin was swollen beyond hope with infection. Sousuke blinked
away thick sleep in his vision to search for anyone familiar. There, in the corner, he thought he saw
the village errand man doubled over, rocking into himself. The man raised his head to reveal a face
half melted like candle wax, and Sousuke could not place him either way.

Dragons glided over the caravan, stark against a murky midday sky. They were no less fearsome
revealed in full light than they had been swimming in shadow. The largest of the three flew at the
head of them: a rich red, horned creature with ravenous ruby eyes, and power radiating from a
smoldering core. Silent, it dipped low, nearly skimming the treetops with its clawed feet. The stink of
smoke curled in its wake. Atop its back sat the Emperor of Samezuka, surveying the prisoners with
calculating indifference. He snarled, revealing a mouth full of lizardlike razor-sharp teeth. Red and
black banners of Samezuka and the Matsuoka family swayed high on the breeze. Generations of
honored soldiers amounted to nothing more than sticks of dry tinder in the face of one man, one family.

Sousuke’s reality converged on the chains shifting, clinking with every bump in the road. Whale Bay
was likely little more than a basin of ash behind them. Breathing hurt. Cold air scraped down his raw
windpipe, and he couldn’t seem to pull enough of it. He could almost see his mother behind his eyes,
seated at the porch, tending to her orchids in the morning. His father’s thunderous laugh echoed
between his ears. He’d never hear it again. They’re gone. They're gone.

Grief condensed in the pit of him, boiling into the purest hatred.

_The Matsuokas should die for what they did._

Sousuke’s shoulder healed into an ugly, ropy scar. And again, he counted himself lucky. The sea
voyage to the capital through winter’s gut had whittled Tokitsu’s survivors down to barely fifty. The
rest had perished on the ship, succumbing to festering wounds, and ash-choked airways. The
shadows of a proud state stumbled onto foreign soil, barely more than ghosts.

There was little the Emperor could do with a bitter gaggle of prisoners—traitors, no less. Except put
them to use.

Slaves in Samezuka were not sold. They were war-won spoils, and their lives belonged to the
nation’s ruler alone. Sousuke was given a blanket, three sets of plain linen clothes, and a bunk in a
room with seven other boys in one of the concrete barracks clustered in the northeast sector of the
city.
He hunched at the edge of his cot on his first night, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed at the moon-rimmed windowsill. His leather collar was wearing softer around the edges already, but it still felt alien, and he couldn't go ten minutes without itching to tear it off. The thing was a permanent reminder that whoever he'd wanted to be once, his future would never amount to more than this.

Peak summer baked the capital in thick heat, and hauling supplies from the quarry to the new bathhouse foundation was onerous work. Though in moving between sites, Sousuke caught carved-out glimpses of the empire’s capital. Even this much of it was more than enough to demand an utter overhaul of his perception of scale. Buildings were stacked three floors up, a few even higher. Their walls were bright with coral hues, roofs tiled in different styles, depending on which sector you were walking in. Flags and symbols were hung up along the busier roads to help travelers orient themselves in the sprawl, though Sousuke always managed to jumble them up regardless. He lost his way almost every time he tried to venture out after work, and begrudgingly decided it was not worth the trouble.

Most of his peers were young men and teenage boys several years his senior. None of them paid him much heed. And if any did, it was to leer at his snobbish attitude. Whether due to circumstances, or his own aloofness, Sousuke made few friends. Workers were rotated, distributed to other territories as needs arose, so any connections he might forge with other boys during the day were short-lived and shallow.

Sousuke took poorly to his new station. He was cocky, with an insolent spark in his glare, and section overseers punished him routinely for it. They were cruel men, drunk on the scrap of power they wielded, determined stamp out any traces of rebellion like weeds in their crop fields. Still, Sousuke refused to break for them. They did not deserve the satisfaction.

One dusty afternoon found Sousuke on his knees, a stiff leather whip clawing at his back. He’d taken a wrong turn or three, towing granite to the building site, and wound up along some road he’d never seen before. One of the supervisors found him wandering around outside the unoccupied tanning house.

“Clever weasel, thought he could slip out, did he?” The man sneered, angry with a sick swell of joy. He had gangly limbs, a sloppy beard, and a smile like jagged eggshells. “There’s no escaping from this hawk’s eyes.”

To which Sousuke’s answered, naturally, “What kind of idiot would try to run with a wagon of bricks?”

Seven lashes had been promised, though he’d lost count at eleven. The bite of each blow grew progressively duller, bleeding into one needling mass of pain across his back. It wasn’t the first time this had happened to him, and he was certain it would not be the last. He tensed, and greyed out his mind for another strike.

“Stop! That’s enough!”

Air stilled, hot and clouded. The supervisor's gravelly growl became a squeal when he snapped around. He dropped the whip and fell to his knees, where Sousuke heard his forehead scrape the dirt.

“Stand.” The high voice belonged to a child, though it was clear and unwavering—searing with authority. "Leave him."

Sputtering, the overseer scrambled to do as he was told. “Y-yes, your Highness!”
Those last two words caught in Sousuke's ear, and he tilted a glance backward.

Behind him, stance wide and commanding, stood a slight, pale-skinned boy with a heart-shaped face, a fierce frown, and neat red hair. When he opened his mouth to speak, Sousuke saw tiny sharp teeth. That aside, he was disappointingly unremarkable. Yet there could be no mistake; this kid was the Matsuoka scion—heir to all of Samezuka.

Curling around his hip as though it were shy to be seen, was a young dragon. The creature was no larger than a foal, with carmine scales snaring the sunlight like a shirt of topaz mail.

"Are you okay?" The boy leaned in, bright eyes wide with concern. "You're bleeding!"

Sousuke closed off, and coiled in. He needed the dragon prince’s pity like he needed a pin in his sandal. His back stung, and he felt the trickling of blood cooling on his shoulder blades, but he could deal with that after the end-of-day bell. Hauling granite blocks was infinitely preferable to spending another second in the company of a Matsuoka.

"We need to clean you up," the prince decided on his own. "Come with us."

"I don't need your help." Hefting the rope over his back, he resumed work. But the prince’s aid wasn’t so easily thwarted. The boy let that dismissal glance right off of him, and followed on light feet.

"MY NAME’S RIN!" He flashed a dazzling grin.

The name pricked like poison needles under Sousuke’s nerves. There was only so far one could go to tell off a member of the royal family, and he didn't feel like risking his neck on their tolerance at the moment. So he nodded with every scrap of respect he could gather, squared his shoulders, and heaved his stride in the other direction. The prince trotted to match paces, undeterred, his golden bracelets jingling with each airy step.

He’s so loud.

"It's a girly name, but I'm definitely a boy."

Everyone knows who you are.

"And this is Tora! She turned four last month." The prince smoothed a palm over the young dragon’s head, as it made happy-sounding clicks in the back of its throat. “How ‘bout you? What’s your name?"

Sousuke peered sideways into the creature’s marble-like, curious purple eyes. The way it timed its strange blinks, and the tiny swerving movements of its head were oddly deliberate—expressive, even. Regardless, it would grow into one of the ruthless, destructive beasts that had annihilated Whale Bay, and Sousuke couldn't shake the memory of them.

Rin was still waiting, and Sousuke realized with a lurch that he’d been asked a question.

“I’m Sousuke.”

“Sooousuke…” the boy drew it out, as though testing the tune on his tongue. He cracked a soft grin.
Rin led Sousuke toward the Grand Temple, pulling him through the streets by an iron grip on his wrist, as though he thought Sousuke might try to make a break for it. And to be honest, the idea was tempting. Alarms were firing in Sousuke’s head at the utter unlikelihood of this entire situation. He wondered if the prince was dragging him off somewhere dark to be killed and eaten by his dragon. Maybe he picked slaves out at random and did it for fun; maybe—

“Hey!” Rin’s face was right up close, pinched with worry. “Hang in there.”

Not waiting for a response, the boy slung Sousuke’s arm over his shoulders, and took his weight.

“Let me go,” Sousuke blurted automatically. “I can walk fine.”

“No! You keep spacing out,” Rin huffed. “It’s okay, we’re almost there.”

The temple pooled with a steady tide of worshippers paying their evening respects. It reached for the gods in brazen spires, surpassed in height by the palace alone. Up close, it was an ominous vertical presence.

Entering through the main portals would be troublesome, Rin reasoned. So they scurried around the back through the overgrown monastery herb garden. City noise was walled out in this sanctuary, and the careful quiet was soothing. Monks ushered the prince into the infirmary, and Sousuke stumbled beside him, following through tidy arched corridors that smelled of burnt vinegar and incense. He was eased down onto his stomach on a cot in one of the empty rooms.

Sousuke’s back was in worse condition than he’d thought. He bit into the pillow as the dirt was wiped away, and sour wine was poured over the cuts between his shoulder blades, pooling at the dip of his spine. The prince had stripped off his silken finery to don a plain, undyed robe and clean most of the wound himself under the monks’ careful instruction. His delicate hands massaged across Sousuke’s raw skin, rubbing honey into a paste over the lattice of lacerations. Outside, his dragon guarded the doorway, and peeked her head inside every few minutes. She fixed her penetrating gaze on Sousuke each time, unflinching when he returned it.

The treatment left him exhausted. Wounds finally cleaned and dressed, Sousuke nodded along absently as the monks instructed him to keep dirt out as well as he could, and to return for new wrappings. Rin agreed too, as if any of it was his problem. The prince was a baffling piece of work.
Sousuke was happy to let this be the end of it, but Rin wheedled the stairwell keys out of one of the keepers, and Sousuke was being tugged somewhere else before he could think to ask why.

The temple had a garden on the roof that was nested between its towers—meticulously kept for meditation and soulful contemplation. Rin used it for picnics. He had a stash of candied cherries he kept in one of the hallowed vaults, and the jar sat uncapped and half-empty between the two of them. Sousuke had never been keen on confections, but the cherries had a unique flavor that wasn’t half bad. They spat the pits into a handkerchief, and faced out at the city drenched in liquid amber and glittering golds.

“Your tongue’s all red,” Rin jabbed.

“So’s yours.”

The prince stuck his all the way out, and popped another cherry into his mouth with gusto.

A pleasant, glowing calm had settled over them, and Sousuke found it easier than usual to tamp down his pride.

“Thanks for earlier…Rin.”

The prince didn’t respond, and Sousuke thought perhaps he hadn’t heard. Just as he was about to try again, Rin flashed a wide, candy-colored grin in his direction. “You’re welcome.”

“It’s not that big a deal. All in what we do.” The prince sat back in pensive silence, admiring the view. His casual attitude nearly made Sousuke crack into giggles, remembering how frantic the boy had been to get him help. “Tora and I are gonna be the fastest, strongest pair ever, and we’ll protect anyone who needs us. They’ll write stories about us, and cheer for us when we fly over the city.”

Sousuke wondered if there was any filter at all between the prince's free-flying thoughts and what left his mouth. Something about him was just unusual, in a way that made Sousuke think the boy didn’t have a firm handle on human interaction. Not that Sousuke was any expert himself. Still, Rin’s embarrassed flush was amusing, and it felt good to really laugh for the first time since last winter.

Samezuka was steeped in twilight when they left the temple. Rin insisted he accompany Sousuke to
the slave barracks to make sure he found his way. He chattered animatedly as they passed by hollowed stone lanterns lining the street. Tora followed with her wings tucked, and tail swishing over the ground in a continuous “S.”

This boy was so different from the hateful, vicious image of the royal family that Sousuke clung to. And Tora was friendlier than most dogs he’d met in his life. Sousuke hated to be wrong. Rin was still an enemy. He would always be an enemy, and he was ready to be through with this strange evening.

“You don’t have to walk me back.” Sousuke lengthened his stride, leaving Rin and his dragon behind.

The prince made a hurt noise, and ran to catch up. “I want to, though! After…you know…today. I guess.” Rin’s eyes rested on the bandages peeking out of Sousuke’s shirt.

“I can get there on my own.” Irked, Sousuke shot Rin a scowl and kept walking. He didn’t know what to make of this boy, and the confusion was souring his mood.

“I’m taking you back.” Rin said with authority. “It’s my family’s duty to look out for people, and that’s what I’m gonna do.”

“I said I don’t need it.”

“Too bad!”

Tendrils of ice crawled up Sousuke’s chest. He knew Rin meant nothing by it—the prince was just a guileless dreamer. But his hatred had been festering for too long.

“You didn’t protect us.”

Sousuke paused just outside the nearest lantern’s bloom of firelight. “Monsters attacked our beaches over and over, and where were you? Your family and your dragons did nothing. When Iwatobi came to offer us help, we were ready to take it. And only then, did you think us worth an effort. Because you’d rather have us dead than belonging to someone else.”

This was beyond bold; it was downright insolent. Just because the prince seemed like a nice boy didn't mean he wouldn't snap and have Sousuke killed for speaking like this. Rin hadn't been there, hadn't done anything. His dragon could barely carry his weight. But he was a Matsuoka, and he deserved to hear it.

“You can say you’ll protect me or whatever, but I wouldn’t be here in the first place if it wasn’t for you.” Jerking his shirt open, Sousuke bared the darkened skin on his scarred shoulder. “I wouldn’t have this.” He swallowed hard, not daring to face the prince behind him. “I could be home.”

Rin audibly shrunk backward.

“You family's done enough.” Sousuke squared up to sever this tie for good. “So thanks again, Rin. Please leave me alone.”

After a moment of no answer, he glanced backward.

Rin had stopped walking beside the stone lantern. Light was dripping down his hair, and his eyes were glistening, brimming with tears. The boy’s face was tight, and trembling on the edge of a sob. Sousuke’s ire was replaced with a biting, twisting bolt of regret that shot clean through his gut.
Rin rubbed at his eye with the heel of his palm. “Sousuke, I didn't know you were from, I—”

The prince hiccuped, then broke down. His dragon clicked, and curled around him, pressing her face into his thigh.

Sousuke wished he could ram his head through a wall, dig a hole, and bury himself with the earthworms. He was in the right; he had to be. If anyone had reason to be angry, it was him. Yet here he was, inwardly wringing himself in the middle of the empty street as tears puddled in Rin's hands.

"Hey," he clipped. "What are you crying for?"

"M'm not!" Rin forced a sob back down his throat. "M’m not crying!"

Sousuke coiled into his guilt. Rin’s tears were honest, compassionate, and all his fault. He was spurred into doing something, anything, to make the boy stop. Fumbling with the tie around his waist and already hating himself for it, Sousuke shrugged off his shirt, and pushed it out at arm’s length.

Rin’s wet eyes spun wide.

Stupid. So stupid. What the hell is he supposed to do with a whole shirt? But it was too late to retract it, and Sousuke didn’t have a towel. He didn’t have anything to give Rin but this, and an apology.

Rin took the shirt, and buried his face in the folds. If he wiped his eyes while it covered him, Sousuke pretended not to notice. They walked the rest of the way together in silence.

Stars were peeking through dusky curls of cloud by the time they reached the slave quarters. A young sakura tree marked the end of the road offshoot, nested in a patch of short grass. Its limbs hung down like a willow’s. The ground was a mess of cherries fallen from its branches, dried in the summer heat. This was where they parted, likely never to see each other again in this life. Sousuke would return to the drudge of work, and the prince to his towering palace. He turned to say goodbye, but Rin was too quick.

“Want to meet up again?”

“...Huh?”

Sousuke edged against the tree, but Rin pushed in, refusing to surrender any of Sousuke’s personal space.

“The candied cherries were good, right? You want to try garlic beef tomorrow? It’s my favorite. I’ll tell the cooks to make it.”

“Uh—”

“We can meet here, under this tree. Come after the end-of-day bell; I’ll run over right after my lessons.”

“Um—”

“See you tomorrow, Sousuke!” The prince spun on his heel and skipped down the street with his dragon.

“...Bye.” Sousuke slumped backward, oddly winded.
Rin had seemed excited at the promise to meet again, but Sousuke knew better than to expect a royal to go through with it. Whatever. If he happened to walk by the weeping sakura tree on an afternoon stroll, he supposed he could spare a look.

The next day, Rin was waiting exactly where he said he’d be, by himself this time, and cradling an ornate lacquered lunchbox full of sizzling beef. Bouncing on his toes, the prince told Sousuke to sit—which he did, awkwardly—and they ate it together.

Rin was easy to talk with. He told Sousuke about his sister, and his lessons, and wanted to know about Sousuke’s day. There wasn’t much to tell him on that subject, and Sousuke tried to keep the conversation in Rin’s hands as much as possible. If Rin had something to say, it could never wait until he was done chewing, and Sousuke had never known anyone to laugh so often. They sat back to let their food settle, lazily tracing branches that hung like droopy trails of pink raindrops. It was a young tree still—but Rin said it would grow taller than the buildings, and reach over the road one day. Something about it just relaxed them both.

Bouncing to life again, Rin changed Sousuke's bandages—commanding him to *turn like this, lift your arms*. He was efficient, and aggressively gentle. Sousuke had to remind himself to breathe when honeyed fingers slicked over the exposed wound for the second time. Satisfied with his own dressing work, Rin extracted a set of carving tools from his satchel and sat himself at Sousuke’s back. Humming quietly, he took Sousuke's collar between two fingers, and began to etch into the dark leather.

“What are you writing, Rin?’

“Something.”

“Better not be stupid. I can’t take this off.”

“It’s not!” Rin snapped. His responses were louder than they needed to be. “It’s…a thing to make sure yesterday doesn't happen again.”

The prince’s hand slipped for a second after he said that, but his grip recovered. “With your big mouth, you’re bound to need it.”

Sousuke didn’t know what to say to that. So he chewed on his confusion, and tugged the grass between his fingers.

Rin refused to tell him what was written, but he found out eventually. Overseers along his routes left him alone thereafter.

Rin was boisterous, bubbly, and refused to let Sousuke resent him in peace. Apparently two days of companionship meant Sousuke had signed his afternoons away for the foreseeable future. The prince would come as soon as Sousuke finished work, bursting with things to say. Such open presumption grated on Sousuke’s tolerance a little, but the boy was a prince, so what could he expect? He considered turning his back on the whole ordeal—not showing up at the sakura tree. The prince had never commanded him to be there. Would Rin wait for him? Search for him? Be angry that he left?

Sousuke was loath to admit that he actually cared a bit what Rin would do. Though there was no reason to believe this was anything more than a passing distraction for a bored royal.

Every day, the prince brought a new dish from the palace that he was eager to share. He liked beef and pork more than fish, though he’d eat that too if it was spicy enough for him. Rin taught Sousuke
to finish all of the meat before the vegetables; it mattered most that you ate quick before it cooled. Samezuka cuisine was oft coated in spicy sauces, sharp herbs, ginger, and chili powders. Sousuke supposed it shouldn’t come as a shock that a nation ruled by fire ate the stuff, too. A lifetime of salted seafood and rice hadn’t prepared him for such heat, but if Rin could take this food, so would he.

They had footraces, jumping contests, and competitions to see who could throw Tora’s leather-skinned cork ball the farthest. She exalted in chasing after the toys and flying them back like a prize, though it didn’t take her long to reduce them to shreds. They stopped to watch glazed bread rolls bake at a street stand Rin liked, just so they could be there first to eat the rolls fresh from the oven (Rin was right; they really did smell like heaven). Then they ran to the park to feed ducks and black swans with the baker's stale leftovers—though the birds scattered when Tora crept too close.

A few days in, Sousuke began to join Rin and Tora on their “patrols” of the city, breaking up scuffles outside the taverns, and guarding shops from thieves. The young dragon possessed a particularly keen nose for the scent of blood, and could lead them to conflicts anywhere nearby. She had been the one to find Sousuke on that first day. Rin’s grand words on the temple rooftop were not without substance.

One week edged into another. Sousuke’s wounds had healed over, and Rin stopped treating his back like finespun lace. Sousuke teased, and Rin returned it as good as he got; they were oddly similar in little ways.

The prince loved to watch sunsets, and had made it a goal to see every single one. Especially on days when the clouds were just so—arranged to catch the last murmurs of light, swimming in hot orange, violet, their edges dipped in gold. They shared candied cherries, when they could get them. Rin stretched an arm out while they lounged in the boughs of a park tree one evening, cupping his hand so it seemed the sun was resting in his open palm.

Each night when they parted, Sousuke’s guilt settled in his stomach like silt in deep water. His family was dead, his home lay in ruins, and here he was, making friends with the enemy. It felt like betrayal strung with disrespect. But Rin was a beam of joy in a lightless place—his energy infectious, electric. Sousuke’s reservations were no match for him. When the sun tipped west in the afternoon, and the bell tolled, he knew where he’d be headed.

A barrage of rain ushered in the first breath of autumn, and drenched Samezuka for a week straight. Work had been a trudge through mud and hellish torrents, but Sousuke appreciated the relief from a recent heat spell. When clouds had wrung themselves dry and retreated over the ocean at last, sunlight found the city painted green. Black star-shaped wildflowers sprung up beside street markets, and lush moss colored the spaces between bricks, and along the gutters. Winds had stripped most of the remaining berries from the sakura tree near Sousuke’s barracks, and the grass around it was littered with freshly sodden leaves when he arrived.

Rin was already there, waiting, as he had been each day for the last five weeks. He was a stain of dazzling red that never quite seemed to belong in earthly palettes. Wherever he stood, whatever he did, or said, was louder, larger—demanding Sousuke’s attention. The prince spotted him approaching, and flared with a grin. He obviously had something planned.

“Sousuke!!” He waved. “Hurry up, you’re late!”
“Late for what?”

Rin poked out his tongue between sharp teeth. “For me. Tora’s got hatchling duty today, but I brought the carriage, and I know this spot along the river we can go.”

“Exciting.” Sousuke tried not to look too interested as he ducked out from under the cascading sakura branches. “What are we doing at the river?”

“I’ve got a boat there, and it’s fun to row it down. There’s this one rock you can see from the water that’s covered in turtles! Also, I bet I can catch more fish than you.”

Sousuke answered with a smirk. If he was honest, he hated fishing. But he was in no mood to lose.

Rin skipped all the way to a drawn carriage down the street. The driver was soft-spoken and courteous, doing her best to fold her presence smaller. She bowed, then pried open the door for the boys to climb through. Sousuke marveled at the luxurious compartment. It was spacious, strewn with wool-stuffed pillows to sit on, and velveteen sheets. There were curtained windows on either side, and ample room to spread out, but Rin was crowded up against him, looking out his window instead. Sousuke wondered if carriages tipped over when all the weight was lumped on one side.

A sharp but indistinct floral scent wafted about Rin’s hair, shimmering at his nape. It was nice, and Sousuke almost leaned in to chase it. Rin was so close—always touching, and present. The intensity of his engagement had been off-putting at first, but Sousuke was getting used to it.

The carriage rolled to a halt, and they were out the door before the driver could dismount. They raced up the footpath, following the bubbling sigh of running water for a while. Trees gave way to a sloped clearing with a sturdy arched limestone bridge over the river. Rin’s surprisingly modest fishing boat was stowed beneath the trees a ways up the bank.

“Aaahh, damn!” Rin moaned.

One glance at the water, and it was clear that they would not be rowing the boat in it. The river surged, flooding the channel, twisting dangerously against a bed of rocks.

“Usually it’s calm this time of year.” Rin mumbled, and shuffled the toe of his shoe in the dirt.

“Oh,” Sousuke acknowledged. “Maybe not after a storm, huh.”

They settled onto the bridge, swinging their legs over the rail as they ate an early dinner. The stone was porous, and still cool with absorbed rain. It wasn’t the most comfortable seat, but they could see both sides of the river, and watch it snake around rock ledges until it warped into a green gorge a ways off. The spot was just exciting enough to quell Rin’s dismay at the boating that wasn’t going to happen.

A passing question hooked in the net of Sousuke’s mind, not for the first time.

“What are you doing with me, Rin?”

“Mm?” Rin chewed through a mouthful. “Eating, moron.”

“I mean why are you doing all of this with me,” Sousuke pushed. “You’re the prince. Aren’t you kind of...wasting your time?”

Rin stung Sousuke with a scowl. “I’m not wasting my time. What are you asking this for?”
Sousuke could sense Rin’s glare needling the side of his face, but he kept his gaze ahead. “It’s just…. if you take me around because you still feel sorry for me or something, you don’t have to.”

“Yes that what you think?” Rin’s tone prickled with hurt. His grip twisted the bridge beam when he crowded in. He wasn’t going to let Sousuke look away from him. “I do what I want in the afternoon. It’s my free time.” Warm pink dusted over his cheeks. His fair skin made it show so well. “And I think you’re fun.”

“I’m fun.” Sousuke frowned.

“I helped you when I met you because it was my duty,” Rin conceded. “But I’m here right now because it’s where I wanna be. Okay?”

The admission hovered in the air a moment—heavy, but weightless.

Sousuke let it sink in. “S-so the second I get boring, you’re gone, huh.”

“No!” Rin snapped. “I just like you, alright? That’s all.”

A few loose rocks were piled up against the post between them. Rin took one and tossed it in a halfhearted attempt to make it skip, but it fell short and was lost to the stream. “You hate me, though.”

“I do not!” Sousuke surprised himself with how urgently he wanted Rin to know that.

“I think you do.” Rin reclined against the post, tracing the rapids with strained dispassion. “I can tell sometimes when I look at you. You don’t have to say why. I get it.”

Sousuke’s lips firmed into a hard line.

The silence stretched too long. He thought he should say something to nudge it closed, and perk the smile back on Rin’s sullen face, but every option he came up with sounded flat, and not-quite-enough. Light was fading from Rin with each second he let through his grasp.

“What are you mad for?” Sousuke kneaded the inside of his cheek.

“That answer was crap!”

“I told you no; isn’t that what you wanted to hear?!”

“Ugh!” Grumbling, Rin slumped his weight over the rail, glowering into damp stone. “You just don’t get it.”
Sousuke kept his attention pinned warily on Rin’s foothold. He couldn’t help it. “What don’t I get?”

“Anything! Everything! I’m trying to… I just—!”

Rin lost his thought, and deflated. He looked disappointed, and Sousuke hadn’t expected that to leave him so hollow. Sousuke had stamped on the boy’s feelings. Again. He liked Rin, too; why was this so hard?

Backing away with a heavy sigh, Rin moved a leg out to arch over the rail—

—and slipped. There was a moment of shared wild-eyed terror as the prince’s weight leaned into empty air.

Lunging over the rail, Sousuke made a desperate reach for him, but too late. Water swallowed the prince in a surging gulp.

“RIN!!”

The river was a churning hell below. Sousuke’s gaze raked over it. Water rushed on, cruelly uncaring. Five long seconds he watched, rooted to the rail. He spurred himself down the bridge. “Rin!”

Too long. *Rin had been under too long.*

Sousuke sprinted along the bank, scanning desperately for a trace of him. Any of several swirls of undertow, and savage jutting rocks could have easily claimed the boy for their own. A sick, wrenching fear was taking a grindstone to Sousuke’s heart.

Then the prince surfaced at last, coughing, flailing. He was trying to right himself to swim, but the current wouldn’t have it, and jerked him below again before he could pull a full breath.

“Rin, wait!” Sousuke darted ahead, tearing his shirt off as he ran. He found a neck where the river narrowed, steeled himself, and leaped.

Water funneled hard through the channel, and Sousuke thought for a manic beat that he might have overestimated his own swimming prowess. When ocean rip tides snared his feet, he knew to let them have their way, and carry him calmly out to sea. But this river was a vengeful serpent that would afford no such mercy, and he could hear the roar of steeper rapids up ahead. Rin exploded to the surface again, gasping, then choking.

With one hand firmed tight on the rock, Sousuke reached out to steal Rin back from the water. Though he’d been prepared, he still struggled from the impact as it knocked him backwards. Rin latched onto him instantly. Sousuke had who he came for, and would not let go.

They could die like this, Sousuke thought, as he stole half a breath. He aimed for the shore just ahead, but with less air and more weight, the current was winning. He shoved off the rock, hauling Rin with him. Water splashed into his eyes, and smothered his face. By now, he’d swallowed half a pool’s worth of it, he was sure. Shore was slipping away. Rin clung on hard, kicking against the force trying to bury them. And Sousuke resolved to do the same. His brain blanked, every sense and drop of focus converging into a singular goal. They fought forward.

Sousuke slogged up the shallows onto the muddy riverbank. He had Rin around the waist, hanging limply off his shoulders. Sousuke fell to his knees and lowered him to the grass, craning over him to
check his breathing. He stirred, and Sousuke pushed him onto his side. The prince’s body jerked as he emptied his lungs of river water. Sousuke retched, his nose and throat burning. His limbs felt like loose rope after the hard swim to shore.

“Rin…” he croaked. “Rin, are you…”

The prince lay curled in a soaked heap, eyes closed, still raking in breaths as deep as he could take them. One hand opened and closed on the ground in front of his face, relishing the soft soil. Sousuke crouched to watch the boy’s shivering breaths even. A flood of relief warmed him all the way through. Unsteady, he reached out to offer comfort, but hovered his hand just short of Rin’s shoulder, stalled by the realization that his touch might not be welcome. Instead, he wobbled to his feet to retrieve his clothes.

Rin drew a small gasp when the dry shirt was spread over him. For a sickening pitch, Sousuke thought the gesture might have been too much. Then the prince rolled onto his back. Dark maroon bangs clung to his forehead and cheeks, and he wore the strangest expression: gratitude laid bare by wonder, and wet around the edges.

Water still dripped from Sousuke’s jaw, and the tips of his hair. Something unsaid passed between them in that silent maelstrom of emotion, and Rin closed a hand over the shirt to hug it tighter. Sousuke settled cross-legged onto the grass beside the dragon prince, too spent to think of anything to say. He’d rescued an enemy, though the knowledge didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would have. Or at all. Truthfully, he couldn’t imagine a universe in which he didn’t jump in after Rin.

Then Rin laughed.

The sound was jarring; Sousuke didn’t know if he should be relieved, or worried that the prince had hit his head, or swallowed too much water, or—

“What the hell?” Sousuke croaked. “Something funny?”

Rin pushed himself up. “You gave me your shirt again.”

“Oh.” Sousuke was grateful that the river water still chilled him enough to keep his cheeks from heating. “Whatever, you don’t have to use it.”

Rin huffed another hoarse chuckle.

“What else am I supposed to give you?” Sousuke wished that didn’t sound so pathetic as he said it. “You could’ve drowned.”

The prince went quiet. He edged in, until they were shoulder-to-shoulder. Sousuke turned outward, afraid that too much would be bared if Rin looked at him so close.


The water’s roar was distant in defeat.

“Sure.” Sousuke relaxed in the grass next to Rin, blocking the misting breeze. He felt some fated part of himself slot into place.

They met at the sakura tree the following day, like always. They ate, like always. Petals still dotted
the ground, sticky with seeds and smears of cherry skin. It might’ve been any other day in the last month. Only it wasn’t. Rin was stealing glances when he thought they’d go unnoticed, and his searching stare had Sousuke hooking a shy finger under his collar. The mindless fidgeting was becoming a habit. Rin looked alright, and he didn’t bring up their trip to the river. But there had been a sure shift in their tectonics since.

Sousuke thought it might be a welcome change. He relaxed against the tree base. “I’ll meet you here. Every day, until you don’t want me to anymore.”

The prince snickered, but looked Sousuke straight in the eyes. “What if I want you to forever?”

Figures he would say something bratty like that.

“Nobody lives forever, stupid.” Grinning through a sigh, Sousuke wondered how long this would last.

_____________________________

Samezuka palace was its own ancient, cavernous world. Vast halls were plated with marble tiles from every reach of the empire, the larger chambers illustrated with rich mosaics, frescoes, and dripping in ornamentation. Everything in it screamed beautiful, wild, dangerous, like the Matsuoka dynasty it was raised for. Lower corridors saw a constant flow of servants, soldiers, craftsmen, and officials that stopped to move aside for the prince as he passed, though Sousuke wished they would keep their prying glances to themselves.

Rin showed him a hall filled with tusks, fangs, and the hulking skulls of giants that his ancestors had felled in one battle or another—all mounted as macabre trophies. Most of them were marred with scorch marks. Giggling, he sped them through other arched passages, swerving around servants with baskets of laundry and bushels of grain for the storehouse. It was an overwhelming vortex of unfamiliar sights, and Sousuke gripped the prince’s hand to anchor himself to something safe.

The courtyard garden was like a messily orchestrated painting, loudly saturated with brushed blooms of color. A fresh lawn sprawled over most of it, rimmed by ginkgoes, smoketree bushes, maples, bamboo, and mountain sakura. Shaded walking trails wove between the trees, and stitched over the mellow stream. Part of the grounds were left unaltered where the floor rose up with the red rock beneath.

Rin skipped them out onto the sunny grass. One of the imperial armorers materialized beside them with two bokken, as Rin had ordered. Sousuke turned his over a couple of times, trying not to appear as eager as he felt. White oak wood—light, flexible, well-made.

“You liked this, right?” Rin beamed.

Sousuke lifted with a smile, and hardened his grip on the handle. “I live for it.”

The prince bit over a grin of his own, then squared up. His stance was springier than Sousuke’s, and more narrow.

“Showdown, then! Ten hits, nothing below the hips.”

“You’re on.”
They fenced back and forth, their movements heating up with each round. Sousuke had to claw for his languishing flexibility back, while Rin, *annoyingly*, seemed to have it in spades. The boy was unusually coordinated, with reflexes like a reptile's. He was aggressive, too; better at lunging than blocking. Samezuka's elites learned a style of combat completely unlike the one Sousuke had brought with him. Fighting Rin was invigorating, like that first full breath of the outside in the morning. Sousuke lost track of how many matches they had; there was always just *one more*.

*Clack, clack, swish,* the prince was laughing between hard breaths, and Sousuke was, too. *Thwack, click.*

And Rin was putting on a show for him: jumping, twirling, thrusting the blade, his whole body wrapped up in motion. He struck out like a snake between jabs. Bruises purpled Sousuke’s knuckles, and up his arm—a soreness that made him feel exalted, alive.

He could show off, too. Sousuke faced away, leaving his back unguarded. As expected, Rin took the easy bait and rushed forward with most of his weight. The rustle of his steps in the grass painted an image of him, arm outstretched, mid-attack.

*Step. Spin. Pull.* Rin was flush against Sousuke’s front, with Sousuke’s oak sword at the back of his neck.

“Got you,” Sousuke crowed.

The prince rose and shook himself off, excitement mounting. “Shit! You really can do it, that blind thing!”

Sousuke twirled the sword and caught it, smug that he could still pull it off with ease. “Did you think I was lying?”

“No!” Rin snapped. “It’s just hard to believe until you see it, I guess.”

He could tell Rin barely believed him as it was. Sirens killed with their eyes. All they needed was one look, and they could hook their prey—steal the life from you in terrible blue. So future soldiers simply learned to fight them without looking.

Kids in the capital had no need for such skills. Sirens had not dared venture south along this coast for centuries. The monsters might as well have been a storybook fantasy to Rin, barely clinging to the fringe of his reality. Rin might live his whole life without ever sparing a worry about them.

“How can you tell where I am?”

Sousuke couldn’t vocalize this in any way that made sense. “You’re noisy as hell. Anyone could find you.”

“I’m not!” Rin leaned in *too close*, and Sousuke tripped backward over his own heels. The prince snapped forward to steady him, and curled a wry smirk. “Is that why your ears stick out? Because your hearing is so good?”

“My—!?” Sousuke clapped a hand over one automatically. “They don’t stick out that much.”

Rin’s laughter sparkled as he took off running. “Teach me!!” he called over his shoulder. “So cool, Sousuke, teach me how to do it!”

“Sure…if you’ll actually listen.” Sousuke doubted Rin had the patience for it. He huffed a sigh and sprinted to catch up, snickering as he chased the boy across the lawn.
Sousuke found that he often thought about the prince now, when he was alone. Rin’s voice colored the grey where he spent all day buried in his own head. He replayed their conversations, smiled when he remembered Rin had thought something funny. It was so easy to make the boy laugh. He took over mindlessly laying out fresh mortar, visions drifting to Rin in his lessons. What was he reading about today? Did Rin ever think about him?

Not likely.

The capital’s holidays meant nothing much to Sousuke. These gods were not his, and the hymns people sang for them were little more than lulls of sweet-sounding noise, bleeding into the din of busy avenues. Holidays did, however, grant him a few blessed days of freedom. Sleeping in after sunrise sounded nothing short of blissful, but Sousuke had promised his time off to the prince. Rin was taking him into Samezuka Valley today—ancestral nesting grounds of the dragons—and Sousuke still wasn’t sure if he was ready for it.

The yard was empty, and the sakura tree bare. Sky and city were one heathery purple before the first light cracked over the mountains. Sousuke scuffled his heel, feeling cold and cast adrift.

“Soooouusukeee!!!”

Rin was barreling down the street, hanging out of his carriage with a flourish—so far sideways Sousuke feared he might fall. He shone like daybreak on wheels, and the yard brightened with a bit more color. “Get in, get in!”

Sousuke walked, then jogged, and wasn’t even ashamed to be running through the door Rin held open for him.

The prince gave the driver his signal, and settled in next to Sousuke. “You excited?”

“Eh.”

Rin kicked him in the shin.

The ride to the palace wall was smooth, but Rin was vibrating in his seat like hummingbird wingbeats. The driver let them off just beneath the north entrance. She’d been asked to leave them here, where they were usually dropped off for climbing. Though today’s true destination was a secret. They waved to her, and skirted under the portcullis.

The Valley lay ahead.

A looming wooden gateway guarded the trail. It stood at least five meters tall, legs stubbornly wide, marking the line between this world and the wild. Crimson paint was sun-bleached and shelling off, the strong bases dipped in felty moss, bright lichens, and black lilies. Vegetation was carefully
pruned where the boys stood, but exploded unkempt just beyond the gate. Sousuke sensed a savage energy bristling about this place.

Bringing Sousuke into the Valley was forbidden. Rin had been upfront about that, at least. Humans without Matsuoka blood were not to pass through this entrance unless they were bound into the family (which Sousuke absolutely was not). To tread this sacred ground without Rin would be deadly. Despite that, the prince had danced around tradition to bring him, because he wanted to.

The dragons knew Sousuke was coming today; there should be no surprises—but his pulse still hammered hard enough to hear in his ears.

“Sousuke?”

Slipping back into himself, Sousuke noticed he’d frozen beneath the gate. Rin was craning in, inquiring with gentle silence if he wanted to continue. He’d taken Sousuke’s hand at some point, though his was trembling a little, and clammy. The excitement on Rin’s face was suspended, like the quiet note of a song before a building crescendo. This trip was special to him, but if Sousuke wanted, the prince would drop it all at a word.

Dousing that light wasn’t something Sousuke thought he’d ever want to do again. He bulled through the gate with a low growl. The prince followed, laughing, and that sound was like an early reward to Sousuke somehow.

“Wait!” Suddenly frantic, Rin swooped in front of him.

Sousuke’s swell of confidence met a wall. “What for?”

“No, it’s nothing. Just, you gotta let me go first.” The prince grinned again. “I have to be the one to lead you. If the dragons see you pulling me, they might get the wrong idea.”

What would they do with a wrong idea?

He couldn’t decide if he wanted to hear the answer. Sousuke stiffened again, but Rin edged closer with an enveloping assurance. “It’s fine! Just stay close to me.”

“I…”

“You’re my guest,” Rin motioned to their locked hands, and his features softened. “Nothing here will hurt you. I promise.”

Those words alone felt like a blanket of comfort and an iron shield at once.

“Unless you do something really stupid,” the prince teased.

“Shut up.”

Rin bit over his smile, igniting, and swept Sousuke into his world.

They advanced for the better part of an hour, dashing over grass patches, and pushing aside curtains of leafy vines. The downhill path was thin, and the loam mossy underfoot, as it saw so little traffic. Vitality was humming in the atmosphere, and Sousuke let himself embrace it. Canna grew in black-fronded clusters along the way, shooting for the treetops like shrine candles. Plants here were enormous. Flowers and ferns grew as tall as small trees, fanning out in colorful eruptions. Some of them had rows of thorny teeth on hinged jaws that snapped shut when insects happened upon them. One fanged shrub had a mouth large enough to swallow Sousuke’s whole arm. “Keep away from
As usual, Rin knew where to go. Sousuke placed every ounce of his trust in the prince, certain that he’d be lost in the off-trail tangle forever if Rin wasn’t leading him. The boys skirted beneath a meadow of giant taro, giggling in the green glow of sunlight filtered through the sturdy leaves. It was almost its own forest—bright and musical as they drummed hollow tunes against the thick stems.

Rin moved through this place much the same way that he skipped around the city streets, going where he pleased like all of it was a playground laid out for him to explore. When there was a rock to mount, he climbed it. Any tree with low branches was an irresistible invitation. Rin liked high places, Sousuke confirmed. He thrived on the challenge of ascent, and the breathless rush of standing at the summit, drinking in an expanse that he’d conquered. Sousuke hadn’t been one to chase heights for the sake of it, but sharing the experience with Rin felt profoundly right.

Every so often, he could sense the flutter of Rin’s gaze on the side of his face, or on his back as they moved. He paid it little mind at first, but the prince had been at it for weeks, and Sousuke was starting to wonder if something was amiss. There was no question that the river incident had brought them closer, but perhaps it had made things uncomfortable on Rin’s end. Sousuke caught him again, and the prince snapped away. He could get his answer later.

Jungle had cleared away into overgrown underbrush, more stalks of taro, and then lush grass sloping into the low riverbank. The water flowed tame and shallow here so the hatchlings could safely catch salmon, catfish, and eel. The “grove” Rin spoke of before was actually only a single tree: a fig, with tall, knotting trunks whose branches spilled from the sturdy upper limbs like ossified waterfalls. Or cooked noodles. Sousuke was getting hungry. The tree’s exposed roots pooled at the base, and crawled across the ground, forming perfect tangles for napping in, or climbing over. Twisting, vinelike branches made a netted canopy, shading the place, and layering the ground with leaves.

Tora met them here at the mouth of the trail, radiant and with a whole lot to say. Though today, she wasn’t alone. Rin had warned the other dragons he’d be bringing a human friend with him, and they had flocked to the clearing to see the visitor for themselves.

“Oooh!” Rin cooed, and he skipped into the sunlight as they swarmed around his legs. They made little clicks, and croaks, and excited puffs, asking him for permission to investigate. Sousuke straightened his back and held his breath as half a dozen baby dragons crowded in to gather his scent. If he clung to Rin’s shirt, it was purely to keep his balance.

He marveled at these comparatively tiny creatures, having known only the colossal beasts that he saw gliding above the city sometimes. Even dragons had to start small, it seemed. Some of these had wings, some did not—instead moving along the ground like giant salamanders. Others had fins dividing down their backs, spotted patterns, or extra rows of teeth. There had to be a dozen different breeds. Sousuke laughed when one of them leaned off a branch, and tickled warm air beneath his chin.

The grove was a sort of day care for the dragons of Samezuka Valley. It was guarded by the adults, and kept clear of any danger. This early kinship of species was important, Rin said. So that as they grew, bonds kept clans from warring with one another. They helped each other, worked together in their dominion. To illustrate, Rin pointed out a small dragon that perched on a branch close by. Even full-grown, these were barely the size of hawks. They baited giant boars by imitating bird calls. The diminutive tricksters led hungry boars out of the forest into open areas, where winged giants waited
to make the kills for everyone.

“That’s…” Sousuke trailed, “that’s pretty smart.”

Rin grinned wide, baring most of his sharp teeth, and a few of the baby dragons bared their own in admiring imitation. Sousuke chuckled at a thought he chose not to voice.

There was another important stop to make. Further up the river, Rin scurried along an offshoot that elevated slightly, leading to a stream-fed pool. The water was dark and deep in the center, tapering off to saturated blue shallows and a small bank of fine grey sand. Two shapes sped through the water. Sousuke thought they must have been fish, but at Tora’s call, they both surfaced. Only their eyes and nose bobbed above water, fixing on Sousuke for a full ten seconds before they resumed their play.

He gaped. “Those are…”

“Baby Toras! Haha!” Rin shouted, a nudge too close to his ear. “Her kind start out in the water.”

Sousuke moved nearer to them, attempting to make himself less imposing. The hatchlings swam up to the side like giant carp. One of them was white with vibrant green eyes, the other a deep purple with black stripes down her back.

Something moved in the rocky shadows nearby. At first glance, Sousuke saw only a dark mass—folds of muscle uncoiling and converging into the form of a dragon that was half again the size of Tora. It must have been the same breed—all sleek lines, and a powerful build. Its scales shone like polished obsidian with a greenish iridescent sheen, slashed by gill-shaped silver patterns down its sides. An aura of untamable intensity pulsed in the space around it. For the first time since he’d come here, Sousuke was afraid. He stilled where he was.

“Tamo~!” Rin sang, unaffected. He bounded up to the creature and tickled the thick of its tail. “Get up, lazy, I have someone I want you meet. This is Sousuke!”

The dragon set its gaze on Sousuke, locking on like a snake to its prey. Sousuke got the feeling he was being tested by the beast; it was daring him to shrink away. A racing pulse was throttling his composure. He stamped out his own survival instinct in favor of trusting the prince, and edged forward, arms at his sides. It was just barely satisfactory. A low growl rumbled from the black dragon’s core, not so much aggressive as it was defiant—a vocal eye-roll at having to put up with a new guy.

“Aw Tamotsu, be nice,” Rin scolded. He hopped up to stand beside Sousuke, and the tension dispersed. “He’s acting tough because he’s baby-sitting.”

The two energetic hatchlings swam in circles, scrambled onto a wet rock, then slipped back into the pond. They did it again, and again in amphibious loops. Their limbs were tiny, clumsy, and wings barely visible as they propelled through the water with their tails flicking side-to-side.

Fuck. So cute…

Rin giggled as if Sousuke had said that aloud.

They spent what remained of the day swimming in the pond. The babies zipped around, nudging at Sousuke’s legs underwater, and doing laps around the pond. He had gone rigid anticipating a bite from below, but the babies only wanted to play, and their skin was smooth as it slipped over his
shins. From snout to tip they were barely longer than river otters, and every bit as energetic. He tried to imagine Rin coming here, eight years old, finding the nervy little red one that would follow him for the rest of his life.

Sousuke traced the sandbank back to the louring black dragon, who had accepted his inescapable fate as Tora’s sunning mat. Wings tucked, he curled around her like an ebony moon. Sousuke felt an odd spark of connection with him for a moment, but the beast snarled, and growled again, just to make sure he knew where they stood. It was less fearsome this time, though. Sousuke looked pointedly at the hatchlings, then back to the black dragon, and raised an eyebrow, projecting, "You were an overgrown tadpole, too."

Success. The dragon glowered, and grumbled. Angry steam issued from its slitted nostrils, and Sousuke thought of a pissed-off tomcat.

“That guy sucks.” Sousuke couldn’t help but laugh as he said it.

“Mmm. He’s kind of a loner, that’s all.” Rin was treading water close enough that Sousuke could feel his choppy breaths ghosting over the surface of the pond. “He has a good heart.”

“…What?” Rin curved a smug smile to have caught Sousuke staring at him.

Sousuke splashed water in his direction, and popped under so the prince couldn’t get him back.

Rin had a house a little ways uphill from the river. It was a cozy outpost cottage that sat snug in a rock bed overlooking the grove and the green sea beyond. Downy moss splashed the outside, thick where rainwater collected in the drain, and along the gutter. A crisp stream trickled down from the verdant slope above, and Sousuke refilled their water skins when they crossed over it. He drank deeply, welcoming the rush of cold that washed through him, and filled his own again.

The inside of the cottage was surprisingly simple for housing royalty, until Sousuke remembered that royalty had to have built it for it to exist here. A stove in the corner, some woven chairs, and two large beds. It looked tidy, but lived-in, with a few personal touches.

“My parents fixed it up before I was born,” Rin supplied. “They’d live out here for days, when they wanted some time for themselves.” He dropped his bag beside the bed nearest the door, and flopped backward onto it. “Mom still comes here every now and then, and she keeps it up.”

Sousuke gently set his own borrowed pack against the footboard. He joined Rin on the bed, staring up at the rafters with his legs hanging off the same side. “You don’t help her, huh?”

“She’d rather come alone.”

The prince rarely spoke of his mother. ‘She stayed in her chamber,’ was all Sousuke had heard him say of her, and he didn’t feel like darkening the atmosphere to delve any deeper. If Rin wanted to tell him about it someday, he’d listen.

“Her loss, then.” Sousuke folded his arms, and shut his eyes.

Tora caught them dinner, and started the cook fire outside. Catfish with beets, and fresh bread with honey that Rin had brought from home. When the fire was ready, they stuffed the fish with herbs, and roasted them over the spit. They played three hands of morra for who got the larger of the two
steaks, and Rin won it with a triumphant cheer. Though he ended up giving Sousuke what he
couldn’t finish, anyway.

Sousuke explored the area while Rin put things away inside. He swore not to go far, but caught a
thin beaten trail that wound out of sight around one side of the rock shelf. Curious, he followed it.
After the turn, a short way down the ledge, was a small, polished stone slab half tucked away
beneath a hollow overhang. It stood proudly surveying the pond where the babies played, and part of
the grove. Grass rimmed the foot of it, with bursts of orange fire lilies and tiny white flowers.

Sousuke instantly got the feeling that he’d stumbled upon something he shouldn’t have seen, but a
beckoning sensation kept him from turning back. There was a plaque carved into the front—the
lettering new and exceptionally sharp. He crouched down to read, but paused. Rin’s footsteps were
coming up the path.

“That’s my dad’s grave.” The prince approached slowly.

Sousuke froze. “Ah. I…Sorry, I’ll just—”

“No, it’s ok.” A fond expression lifted Rin’s lips, and he ushered Sousuke down to the plaque. They
crouched there together. “Well, I mean his ashes aren’t even here. This is just a thing we made.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he died.” Sousuke swallowed thickly. “I thought your father was…you
know…”

“My Uncle Akira is the Emperor.” Rin brushed some loose dirt from the stone words with care.
“He’s our mom’s younger brother.”

“Oh…”

In the calm spell of respectful silence, Sousuke finally glanced at the plaque.

*Matsuoka Toraichi*

*Wait for me, my love. Our story is only beginning.*

He snapped away. The rest of the message was not for him to read. Though Sousuke caught the date
of the man’s death before shying back. Almost five years ago.

A few impatient clicks sounded from behind them, where Tora peered down the trail to look for
them. Satisfied, she blinked wide, huffed, then disappeared the way she’d come.

“We should get back. Gonna be dark soon.” Rin helped Sousuke to his feet. The glow in his face,
and skip in his step told Sousuke that his grief was something to be left here, in this hollow. The two
of them shuffled back to the cabin.

Night settled upon the Valley first. The Sun bathed the wilderness in a shrinking wall of fiery hues
before sinking below a jagged horizon. Samezuka Palace was the only visible beacon of civilization
—tall and proud as a giant shark fin out of water. It was built into the rock, exposed on both sides—a
link between two worlds. From the city side, Sousuke had always found the overshadowing
silhouette of it threatening. But from the wild, it looked something like reassurance.

Light and warmth from the fire had drawn a cloud of insects, which in turn attracted a camp of bats. Colossal moths fluttered over from somewhere in the trees, their pale wings spanning as wide as a petrel’s. No bug had any business being that big.

A creature streaked across the sky like the shadow of a loosed arrow. It landed on the rock outcrop just above the boys’ spot. Drawn up with wings folded, it was a dragon about the size of a bobcat. A pair of glowing, owlish eyes blinked down at Sousuke like golden moons. He was locked in their spell for a moment, until Rin leaned in close.

“These ones like to eat bugs and rats. Little stuff. They’re pretty shy, and only come out at night.”

Rin made a clipped chirping sound at the dragon, and it answered with a throaty warble. Its attention returned to the crumpled moth, crunching the wings like feathery dried seaweed. The tiny dragon’s mate joined him, and together they cleared the air of the remaining pests.

A light drizzle drove Rin and Sousuke giggling inside the cabin, the droplets barely dense enough to make a sound on the porch. The boys washed up and changed. Rin smoothed out his blankets, and faceplanted onto them, exhausted. Sousuke climbed in with a satisfying yawn.

The prince looked scandalized. “What…what are you doing?”

“Uuh. Going to bed?” Sousuke leveled Rin a puzzled frown.

“This is my bed.”

“It’s for more than one person.”

“Well yeah, but…”

Sousuke raked his brain. He’d always thought that if a bed was large enough, it was obvious you shared it. Body heat in the cold seasons was precious, and parents kept their children close at night for their safety. It hadn’t occurred to him that Rin might have had a different childhood experience. The prince’s private chamber was nearly as big as Sousuke’s whole house had been, his bed massive and luxurious. Tactile as he was during the day, perhaps he was just used to having a mattress to himself.

“Oh. Sorry.” Sousuke retreated, and pulled back the sheets on the opposite bed. “I didn’t realize…I mean, I’ll be over here.”

“Wait.” Rin scooted over to leave space, a little shy. “We can share if you want to.”

“No, it’s fine.” Sousuke didn’t want to make Rin any more uncomfortable than he already was. He’d have to learn Samezuka customs one at a time.

They left the sliding door to the porch open so Tora could come and go as she pleased. She was curled up on the mat next to Rin’s bed—awake, but content to be there, watching the misty curtain of rain outside. Rin was restless under his blankets, rustling the straw in his mattress. After a spell of wired, motionless silence, he threw them back, and stormed across the floormats. Sousuke thought he might be stepping outside to use the bushes next to the house. Until he stopped short, and snapped back Sousuke’s covers.
“Rin, what—!”

“Go to sleep.” Rin climbed in with a huff, and made himself comfortable.

“I told you it’s fine.” Sousuke said, toneless. “It’s not like I can’t sleep alone; if it’s weird to you—”

“It’s not weird.” Rin shifted over to stare at him in the dark. The bed was easily large enough for two adults, and a fair distance sprawled between them. Still, the boy was squirmy.

“It obviously is. Go back.”

“No. I’m not moving.” Rin pouted. “You can’t make me.”

“I can’t believe you’re being like this.”

“I’m sleeping in your bed. You wanted to share, so we’re sharing!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

They rolled over, backs to the other. Quiet pulled tight as harp strings. It was a fight, Sousuke supposed—though it didn’t feel like one with any real teeth.

Rin kicked his legs under the covers, tenting them annoyingly. Once. Twice.

“Oi! Stop that! Rin!”

Blankets churned with giddy motion, and they were both laughing when Rin stopped thrashing, legs pinned together by Sousuke’s longer ones. Undefinable happiness was warmly encased under the sheets. Tora got up, walked three steps, and balled herself back up at the foot of Rin’s new chosen sleeping place.

The prince went still, like he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say, but had committed to saying something. When he spoke, his voice was feathery. “G…Goodnight.”

“‘Night,” Sousuke breathed.

It might have been ten minutes or a whole hour, Sousuke could not say. He floated in that pleasant cloud halfway between sleep and wakefulness, aware that he could end his night any second he pleased.

“Sousuke,” Rin whispered. “Are you sleeping?”

He wasn’t. But the energy to talk was already sinking too deep to dredge up. Rin paused.

Crickets and lively frogs chorused in the shrubs outside.

Sousuke was sure Rin had given up and dropped off.

The mattress rustled, and he felt a touch on his cheek. It was the prince’s knuckle, trailing a tiny, shaky spiral over Sousuke’s jaw. The contact was so soft—barely grazing his skin; it tickled. Rin’s face was close to his now. He could hear the boy breathing nervously through his nose. Rin traced Sousuke’s cheekbone, under his chin, and stopped there. Then a fingertip ghosted over his bottom
lip, gentle as a butterfly kiss. He twitched.

The prince snapped away. Sousuke could feel eyes locked on him, making sure he was still asleep. Relieved, Rin curled up and expelled a hard breath into his pillow.

Sousuke rolled onto his side, intensely awake, and scrambling for what to make of that.

It took Sousuke a few stuttering seconds in the black behind his eyelids to remember that he was not in his bunk. No morning bell chimed to rouse him, no frantic rattling of the boy above him heaving out of bed. The air he breathed was clear and cool. There was a sheen of dew on his skin. And warm, breathy snores in his face.

Rin filled his vision. The prince must have moved his way during the remainder of the night, and stilled here, with his nose just inches from Sousuke’s, one leg over Sousuke’s knees, and arms trapped in the sheet. Sousuke swallowed a laugh, if only to let the boy sleep a little longer. Rin’s mouth hung open, with a dried trail of drool streaking down his chin. He was close enough for Sousuke to see every twitch of his eyes as he dreamed. There was a tiny birth mark near his ear that was usually hidden by wine-red bangs. Sousuke warmed with the realization that Rin was handsome—devastating in a delicate way. He couldn’t fathom how he’d missed it before.

The sky outside brightened with a honey-hued dawn, though it hadn’t reached the cabin just yet. Tora’s spot on the floor was empty; she was probably hunting. Unfamiliar morning bird songs echoed back and forth across the still valley—musical trills, then throaty caws. It shouldn’t have been so calming, but Sousuke found that he was completely at peace just to lay here with Rin for as long as time let him.

The hike back up was much slower than their dash down had been the day before. Sousuke enjoyed the easy pace—or he simply enjoyed spending longer with Rin.

“I’m glad you came with me, Sou.” The prince was in an unbound, airy mood.

“Oh, I’m just ‘Sou’ to you now?”

“Mm. When I feel like it.”

Rin said that in a way that invited some kind of retaliation, but Sousuke didn’t really mind, if he was honest. No friend had ever been close enough to him to shorten his name, and the sound of it now curled a strange, but welcome, sensation in his chest.

Rin dropped his pack, and scrambled up a tall slab of sandstone. Sousuke followed, making sure to keep a hard enough grip on the rock to catch the prince if he slipped. But he made it, heaving one leg over the ledge, and the other, then reaching backward to help Sousuke up. Rin closed his eyes to the sweeping view, and laughed loud. He lived for that full breath at the top. Sousuke saw now why Rin seemed too big for this world—too explosively passionate. He thought it could be enough just to exist in Rin’s afterglow.

It could be a whole life.
Two years unfurled in a blur of sweat, sun, and Rin. They played less, and sparred more. Sousuke’s voice cracked, and deepened. They were both shooting up in height, Sousuke more than Rin—to the prince’s biting annoyance. Though Tora was growing faster than both of them.

Eventually, Rin’s little sister had caught on to his outings, and followed him one afternoon. Gou Matsuoka was a firecracker wrapped in carnations, tied neatly with silk ribbon. She had a round face, a smart tongue, and far more questions than Sousuke wanted to answer. The princess pried his life open, but seemed to like what she found, and closed her introduction with a girlish giggle, and a wink.

Her dragon was Yuudai, one of the flightless breeds Sousuke had seen in the Grove. Though a year younger than Tora, he was already the size of a small whale, golden scales glittering with each shift of his thick-bellied bulk. He was easily big enough for Gou to ride, which Rin noted with a hint of envy and a beam of obvious pride.
Gou followed them around some days, and it was never any trouble to include her, even if Rin was slightly put-off at having to share attention. Sousuke’s heart was destined to be forever torn in two by the Matsuokas.

Each day, Sousuke’s fury-forged vows of revenge were edged further to his periphery, crowded out by an irrepressible fondness for the dragon prince. He never told Rin. Despite their closeness, Sousuke knew his place; he was a slave, and Rin the future Emperor. Someday Rin would be crowned, and ruling Samezuka would keep him from the sakura tree every afternoon. Sousuke was a fleeting piece of Rin’s childhood in the long, illustrious tale of his life to come. So he made the most of their every moment together. What they had was too precious to risk with a brash confession.

Sousuke won this match. Rin masked his tiredness in theatrics, and sprawled out on the lawn to pout about it. Their contests may have escalated in strength and technique, but the spirit of their play remained a warm constant.

“Uuugggh.” The prince moaned into his sleeve. “You keep getting lucky today.”

“’Luck’ my ass. You’re always twisting around doing fancy stuff,” Sousuke tossed the bokken aside, and joined Rin on the ground. “No need for it. There’s nobody here to impress.”

The prince puffed out his rosy cheeks. Cicadas were chirring in the treetops across the yard. Autumn whispered through the courtyard—a quiet, chilly bliss after the rigor of practice.

“Glad you’re not letting me win ‘cause it’s my birthday, though,” Sousuke teased.

Rin rolled his eyes, huffing a strand of hair out of his teeth. “As if you’re not the one who goes easy on me all the fucking time.”

“That’s very true.”

The swift knee to the ass Sousuke got for that was uniquely satisfying. It wasn’t that the prince was an unskilled opponent; much the opposite. It’s was only that—

“You never hit me hard enough, asshole.” Rin clipped. “I won’t break.”

“Mmm but you might. Just a bit.” Sousuke rolled over and flopped on top of the prince. Pinned beneath his weight, Rin wheezed and sputtered. Sousuke got comfortable. He slid down to rest his head on Rin’s stomach, and gaze up at him from there. “Wouldn’t want to make you cry.”

Rin’s brow tightened in a shallow scowl. “Off.”

“Too tired to move,” Sousuke groaned.

“I’m the prince, not your pillow!”

“Expensive pillow.”

Rin lay back and let the moment simmer. Sousuke could feel the steady rise of each breath, and the flex of Rin’s muscles under his ear. The prince reached down to ruffle the top of Sousuke’s hair, jokingly reeling his hand back as if it had been burned. Sousuke snickered. Rin was always amused by the heat of his dark hair in the sun.

Then Rin let his arm fall over Sousuke’s chest. The gesture was familiar, protective—almost possessive, sending a pleasant bloom of affection through Sousuke’s core. He wondered what Rin would do if he placed his own hand on top. His fingers twitched with an urge to do so, that he forced
underground.

“What do you want?” Rin’s question sounded softer than he’d probably intended. “I said I’d do anything if you got best of fifteen today.”

Anything.

There was nothing more dangerous than ‘anything.’ A request had been sitting on Sousuke’s tongue for a long time—like a sweet rock candy that just wouldn’t melt.

He loved Rin.

“I dunno,” Sousuke lied with a lazy drawl.

“Seriously?! You’re fifteen now! Ask me for something!” Rin paused, and kneaded his tongue against his cheek. His gaze melted over Sousuke’s face, trailing down to rest at his smirking mouth. “And ask for something good. If you waste this, I’ll be pissed.”

Just being with you is more than enough.

“You already brought me breaded pork. Give me some time to think about it.”

“Aaahhh! Whatever. Just don’t take too long.” Rin suddenly ignited with intent. “Promise you’ll think of something, Sou.”

“Sure. I promise.”

He knew Rin would hold him to that.

They made more trips to the grove, careful that no one followed them or saw them leave. The looming fear of “forbidden” figured less and less into their lives the nearer Rin drew to his birthright. Each time Sousuke visited, the hatchlings were a little bigger. The two babies in the pond were scurrying around on land now, chasing each other on longer, quicker legs. Tamo had miraculously warmed up to Sousuke—or at least tolerated him for Rin’s sake. It was a step in the right direction.

The two boys sat comfortably close together on a sun-baked rock one evening, reclining against Tora’s side, and watching early stars from between towers of stone. They weren’t far from the cabin, and Rin liked this spot more than most others. The whole valley had been underwater many ages ago, he said. All dragons were once kings of the sea. As it receded, they took to land, and then some to the sky. The water-sculpted green limestone formations in the distance remained nesting pillars for many of the winged giants. Sousuke could see some of them now, circling the area before settling in with their mates for the night.

Rin’s head fell onto Sousuke’s shoulder, and rested there. “See that big rock out in the middle?”

“There are a lot of big rocks.”

Rin scooted in and lined his arm up with Sousuke’s field of vision. His face was so near, their cheeks brushed, and Sousuke’s breath stuttered.

“There. The tallest one across the water, under the red star.”
“Hm. Looks like an enormous grass cake.”

Rin scoffed. “You have no imagination.”

“You’ve got more than enough for both of us.” Sousuke curled a half-smile. “What about it?”

“When we’re older, and Tora can fly us together, let’s go there. It’s the center of the Valley, and we can watch the sunset from the top. It’ll be nice.” Rin relaxed completely and closed his eyes, letting his hand drop into Sousuke’s lap.

“….Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

Sousuke thought he heard something then—the muted beat of enormous wings behind them. But with Rin dozing peacefully, his head heavy on Sousuke’s shoulder, nothing short of the earth collapsing could have forced him to move.

_____________________________

It was high summer again. And this year, Rin had persuaded Sousuke to join him in the Fire Festival celebrations. Sousuke had only heard the Festival in distant cracks and booms from the barracks, and he was more excited about seeing it up close than he was willing to admit.

The workday ended early, since Samezuka’s streets needed to be cleared for the celebration, and Sousuke found himself alone while Rin was busy with preparations. He’d already bathed, and rubbed scented oil on his skin. There wasn’t much to be done with his hair, though he suddenly felt a stab of inadequacy. Rin would be dressed in brilliant finery, and Sousuke was…well…this. He brushed his fringe to the side, but it was stubborn and coarse, and refused to stay where he put it. Blowing out his cheeks, he collapsed onto his back to wait.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but he woke slowly to the touch of Rin’s fingers on his cheeks, cool on his heated skin. The prince was sitting beside him in the grass, smiling down with a pretty mix of affection and humor. His chest tightened with longing.

“Get up, Sou.”

It was dark out, and had been for a while, by the look of it.

“Did you just get here?” Sousuke stretched the stiffness out of his back, frowning at the imprints of leaves on his arms.

“Nope.” Rin grinned. “I thought I’d let you sleep.” He reached up to brush stray blades of grass from Sousuke’s cheek. “You looked tired, and we’ll be up late.”

Sousuke batted the prince’s hand away, and dusted himself off.

“No more napping.” Rin slapped a folded robe into his lap. “Put this on. And hurry up; I have to be in the parade, remember?”

The Fire Festival pulled Samezuka’s capital into the streets for an uproarious celebration of the empire’s birth. Floats in the parade were wheeled down the road from the palace, each one
magnificently lit with colored lanterns, and themed with anything from historical events, to bountiful harvests, and beloved landmarks. Rin and Gou rode with their uncle at the head of the procession, waving and throwing glittering dust at an adoring crowd. Tora and Yuudai rolled up behind them on wide, wheeled platforms. Citizens sang, and waved streaming flags in shimmering oranges and reds. Food stalls lined a few busy avenues, and there was lively music everywhere you walked.

Sousuke milled about near the palace garden, sipping a cup of dark wine. He knew virtually no one, though he’d seen one or two of the finely-dressed officials around the halls before. If they didn’t talk to him first, he wasn’t going to bother.

The robe Rin had lent him was a striking shade of teal, the hem sewn with intricate embroidered waves in silver thread. It was probably the nicest garment Sousuke had ever put on, and he held the wine forward a little, out of caution. For now, he was content to simply enjoy the festivities as a comfortable spectator. After an hour or so, the parade began pulling through the palace gate.

At the top of the first float loomed Rin’s uncle. The Emperor looked severe as ever, all sharp angles in his gilded armor. Sousuke’s good mood took an abrupt nosedive. Akira’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed the concourse, attention catching on the boy’s exacted stare. He held his gaze there, and Sousuke felt the blood in his veins boiling hotter with every strangled second.

Then the Emperor swept away, as if the exchange had not happened.

Rin bounded down from the float before it had even come to a full stop.

“Sousuke!!” The prince was up in his face, ablaze with excitement from the streets, and endearingly winded. “Have you tried the food yet?!”

“Didn’t want to start without you.” Sousuke smirked, indescribably happy to see him.

“So…what, you’ve just been drinking here by yourself?! You are coming with me, and we’re trying all of the meat skewers.” The prince headed in the direction of the grill carts, pulling Sousuke along by the sleeve.

“Even the mixed liver sticks.”

“I’m not putting liver sticks in my mouth, Rin.”

“You are if I beat you at ring toss!”

Rin was like a god flown to earth, radiant in red and violet, trimmed with gold that shimmered in the firelight when he moved. There was a warm sheen to his skin, and Sousuke could not tear his eyes away. As the prince, Rin was obligated to greet a few of the more prominent nobles, but he spent most of the night with Sousuke, watching the light shows, playing games, and sampling the hot food.

Sousuke rested with Rin on a covered bench, swirling the wine at the bottom of his third cup, and nursing a glass of water on the tray beside him. People were staring at the pair with raised brows, and their barefaced judgement scraped at the back of Sousuke’s neck. Of course they were staring. The crown prince of Samezuka was lavishing all of his time on a rough, foreign-looking collared boy with big, clumsy ears. Sousuke felt like an impostor—a child playing with silly clothes everyone knew he didn’t belong in.

Rin stiffened, sensing his friend’s discomfort on the calm current between them. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Sousuke forced a smile. “I dunno…maybe it’d be better for you if you weren’t seen with me. P-people are—”

The prince was a warm weight that radiated contentment, and confidence. No matter where they went, Sousuke thought that as long as he had this, everything would be alright.

“You too.” Sousuke hated how that sounded like a reaction—as if his attraction hadn’t consumed him completely since the start of the evening. An urge pulled at him to say more, but he didn’t quite trust himself enough to do so. He took a sip of water instead, spilling a little when Rin nudged him too rough.

“Are you having fun?”

“Of course,” Sousuke scoffed. “Are you?”

“Nope. Zero. No fun at all.” Rin turned his flushed face in to giggle into Sousuke’s shoulder. “Y’know, one of these years I’ll make you sit on the Matsuoka family float with us.”

The prince didn’t take his drink quite as gracefully as Sousuke did, already sluggish and smiling lazily after barely two cups.

Sousuke bit back a laugh, and threw an arm over him. “Never gonna happen.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He winced as Rin flicked him hard on the thigh. “No, no you’re right. Maybe I will join you on the float. I could be one of those guys in the spirit costumes. With the big masks and wings. I’ll drop feathers on you the whole time.”

Maybe if he joked enough, Rin wouldn’t be able to tell how much Sousuke wanted to be a part of his life—how sad he was that Rin would inevitably drift away from him.

“A spirit costume.” The prince gave him a droopy snarl. “You could be….” The boy’s shoulders tensed for a moment, and he swallowed. “You could be something else.”

Low drum beats tore through the calm before “like what?” left Sousuke’s lips, and they both jumped. The band had started playing.

There was a circular setup near the main gate, strung up with lanterns, where couples danced to the music that wafted from a low stage in the center. They moved as one: outward, then in again, like a flower blooming and closing. Every pair was wrapped up in their own two-person universes.

“Heartbeats are the music of all life”, is what the dance is about,” Rin noted, his tone even. “It’s from a famous story.” He was faced away, trying to look distracted, but Sousuke had found enough romance books in the prince’s room to know Rin lived for that kind of thing.

“Anyway, Sou, you should try it. Go ask someone.”

Sousuke expelled a slow sigh. “I know you’re the one who actually wants to dance. See if Gou’s up for it.”

Rin wormed in his seat a little, frowning and fidgeting with the hem of his sleeve. “Gou’s busy.” He cleared his throat, eyes wandering over the lanterns. “I just—ugh—when else are you gonna do it, you know? The atmosphere is….really romantic.”
“That’s because it’s the Fire Festival and everyone’s having sex tonight.”

Rin coughed, and kicked at Sousuke’s shins.

“I’m only saying, Rin; this city’s got an awful lot of spring birthdays.”

“Just fucking dance with me, Sou!”

Sousuke laughed and stood, holding his hand out for Rin to snatch with attitude. “Since you asked me so nicely.”

Even with a mellow buzz, Sousuke felt uneasy about doing something so intimate in front of a crowd. Rin seemed to understand before he even brought it up, and led them around the corner of a hedge. They were completely hidden, bathed in soft illumination from a single orange lantern.

Sousuke sensed the mood closing in, now that they were alone. Rin’s eyes were the only ones on him now. The boy was burning, vulnerable with intent to touch him, to be touched by him, and suddenly meeting that gaze felt like a lungful of lightning.

“We can still hear the music from here,” Rin murmured.

Drum beats and koto notes pulsed from behind the hedge. If he put his mind to it, Sousuke could probably pinpoint exactly where, but his brain was occupied—every sense arrested by the person standing just in front of him. Rin quietly stretched his arm out, placing his open palm over his best friend’s chest. Sousuke did the same. Rin’s hand was quivering just a little—nervous to be touching him, and that awareness sent a shock of chills up to Sousuke’s shoulders.

The song swirled and jumped, and the two of them had spent enough time watching the others to pick up the steps. They spun outwards, then in, palms pressing back to their places on each other’s hearts. Their hands switched, they skirted sideways around each other, always out-in, out-in. Sousuke missed a step, but Rin didn’t care. Each time they pushed away, he fought the urge to reel Rin back in and keep him there. Dancing like this, twirling in perfect balance, made Sousuke almost believe that they stood on equal ground—that they could make a future together.

As the music wound down, they drew inward. Sousuke’s heart was hammering out of control; he was sure Rin could find it easily through his robe. He could feel Rin’s, beating like war drums beneath his open palm. Rin was fixed on him with his eyes piercing and brilliant like pools of red diamonds, chest rising, falling as he caught his breath. Sousuke didn’t think he could ever catch his breath again. The song had stopped, but neither of them registered the silence, stilled under the dim lantern.

“Three years, Sousuke,” Rin whispered.

“Until…?”

“Until I can claim my birthright.” He trailed his hand up Sousuke’s chest and up to the worn leather of the other boy’s collar. “When I’m Emperor of Samezuka, the first thing I’ll do is cut this off you.”

Rin ran his finger around the strap, resting it tentatively at the back. “And then I’m going to cut the rest of them from everyone else. No one will suffer like you did. No one will go unprotected, or feel…like they’re alone out there.”

Unsteady fingers stilled at the nape of Sousuke’s neck, tickling his hairline and sending shivers down his spine. “I want to see you happy.”
Sousuke met Rin’s wet red eyes, screaming with his own, *I love you, I love you so much.*

His gaze dropped to Rin’s lips, which were parted sweetly, barely showing the points of his teeth. Restraint seemed a distant whisper, Sousuke’s defenses reduced to rubble at the softness in Rin’s voice. He tipped his head, leaned down, and kissed the boy he cherished with every ounce of his being. It lasted a few seconds, Sousuke moving his lips over Rin’s nervously, adoringly. *I’m always happy when I’m with you.* The captivating taste of Rin’s mouth lingered as Sousuke pulled away.

The prince’s irises shone back at him, wide as full moons, his reaction a shocked blank. Sousuke’s gut dropped out.

Rin blinked as if trying to wake himself from a trance. He leaned in to say something, but in that instant, a loud crack detonated over the concourse. They both jumped. One burst was followed by more pops and whistles as the sky lit up with exploding color.

“Ah. Fireworks,” Sousuke said tonelessly. The image of Rin’s petrified face was branded into his brain. There was no pit deep enough in which to bury his shame. He couldn’t bear to be here another moment. “I’m going home.”

“Sousuke—!”

He was already running. He didn’t look back.

Sousuke’s sleep was restless, and teary. It had been so stupid to think Rin could ever love him back.

If the boy would be at their sakura tree the next day, Sousuke would apologize to him and mean every word. Rin was the most treasured part of Sousuke’s whole life, and he hoped to every god that he hadn’t destroyed their friendship.

Gradually, Sousuke felt the wine haze weigh over him like a woolen blanket, and relented.

The barrack door creaked, and Sousuke felt someone enter the shared dormitory room. He could tell by the weight of the person’s steps that this wasn’t one of his bunkmates. The clink of a belt and muffled squeak of leather boots.

This wasn’t a slave at all.

Sousuke swung out of bed and stalked to the other side of the small chamber. Instincts fired to life, not a second too late.

In a rush of movement, the intruder lunged for him. He expected to see a knife drawn from the man’s dark cloak, but the man grappled, trying to wrestle Sousuke to the ground instead. Even at fifteen, Sousuke was taller and stronger than most of the men, but size was not on his side in this fight.

All three of the other boys remained asleep in their bunks. Not that it mattered; they'd be of no help.

Wrenching out of the man’s grip again, Sousuke shoved him backwards and snatched the water pitcher on the table. He splashed its contents into his attacker’s face, hurled the pitcher at the man’s head, and swerved out the doorway. The intruder staggered back, swear issuing from his mouth in sharp hisses. Sousuke didn’t stay behind to hear, tearing down the dirt path. Night air was muggy and stifling as he ran, weaving between barracks in no direction, like a broken compass, just getting away. Those three cups of Samezuka wine sank in, as the dull spin of intoxication crept up the sides of his skull. His brain reeled to catch up with every hard step that his body took, like a boat out of sync with the waves.
He didn’t need to run. There was only one man. Sousuke dug his heels in, and turned around to search down the alleyway he’d come. Whoever it was, he could take them.

No one, and no footsteps followed.

Crackling broke out a few blocks away; someone was setting off fireworks in the street. Sousuke winced, straining his ears to block out the sound as it bounced off the buildings.

Then there was an arm around his neck, a black-sleeved elbow beneath his chin. He writhed violently, clawing at the stranger's arm, but a bracer stopped his fingers. The chokehold only tightened. The fight was drained from his limbs as his vision blurred fuzzy and black around the edges. He buckled, and sank to the ground in a daze. This was it. He was going to be killed in a shadowed barrack alley. Even through his murk-minded haze, he found the capacity to regret it.

“Goddamned scrappy little bastard, aren’t ya? Sorry about that.”

Pressure eased off all at once, and Sousuke gasped for his breath back. The stranger swung around to face him, trusting him to return the show of faith and not bolt for the road. He dropped to his knees with a clank that bespoke sheathed steel beneath the cloak, and lifted the hem of his hood. Irises like molten gold flashed in the shadow. The stranger crackled with ferocity.

“I’m not gonna kill you, so park it for a minute. I’m supposed to kill you, but I’m not going to.”

A backswept shock of red hair peeked out when Sousuke searched upward. Red was a noble feature here. The man was likely from a distinguished family—one close to the throne…

Sousuke spun back into himself at that. “The Emperor sent you. He saw me. He knows.”

“Bingo.” The man clicked his tongue. “And I’m loyal to His Majesty and all that, but I’m not slinking out here to slit a kid’s throat just ‘cause the Emperor asks me to. Especially since the one who’s up next loves you so much. Know what I mean?” With a half-grimaced apologetic smile, he reached into his belt and drew a knife.

Sousuke tensed.

“Relax. I only need this.” The man swiped Sousuke by the collar, and cut the seam loose with one motion. The strap fell away. It was oddly insubstantial and pathetic-looking, curled up on the ground. Sousuke’s throat felt naked without it, and he brought a hand up to smooth over the spot where it had been.

“Sorry. Can’t let you get too used to that. Be bad news if city guard caught you without.” The golden-eyed man extracted a new collar, circling it around Sousuke’s neck and closing the fastener. “You can have someone stitch it proper for you later.”

Sousuke felt a stab of possessiveness as he watched the man pocket his old one with Rin’s drawing on it, but said nothing to stop him.

“There’s a caravan of around two hundred new workers being transported to Sano at sunrise. They’re rebuilding part of the stadium, and adding a few floors while they’re at it,” the man explained. “It should buy you two years’ worth of time to hide, at least. You should have no problem slipping in with them and getting the hell out of here. Sano gives less of a shit about keeping track of you.” He tossed a roll of linen in Sousuke’s lap. “And don’t let anyone see that damned scar.”
Sousuke pushed the bandage back. “I’m not going anywhere. Rin will need me.”

“Rin’s not going to know. He’s not the Emperor, and as it is, he can’t stop his uncle. Neither should he try to, for his own safety.” The gold-eyed man stole a glance behind him, and leaned in close enough for Sousuke to catch his woody scent. “His Majesty puts his dynasty before all else.”

“Then why?”

“Rin brought an outsider into the valley,” the man hushed. “The Matsuoka’s rule has been exclusive and undisputed for ages, kid. And here you come into the prince’s life, a slave from some enemy territory with no love for the royal family.”

“I would never hurt him. Ever.” Sousuke rasped it with every drop of honesty. “And I was only in the Valley as his guest.”

“I don’t doubt you,” the man agreed. “But you’re changing him. Whether you’re aware of it or not, that means changing everything.”

“I don’t think I—”

“What I’m saying is, at the bottom of it, His Majesty places the Matsuoka legacy before his own nephew’s life. Things have stayed as they are here for two thousand years, and I doubt there’s anything he wouldn’t do to preserve this kind of stability.”

The cold bones of that truth sank in. He would kill Rin to maintain his family’s order. If the prince knew Sousuke was alive, he’d stop at nothing to find him; that much was certain. “I can never see Rin again.”

“Not if you want him to be safe.” The man’s drawn face softened. “I’m sorry. I know he’s fond of you. Gou’s told me all about you, and how much she and her brother love you. You should hear the way Rin talks at the palace—”

“It’d be easier if you just killed me,” Sousuke blurted. “You should.”

“Shouldn’t I?” The man chuckled through a spiteful grin. “Maybe! But I’m not going to.” His smile flattened. “No matter who’s standing over you, sometimes you just gotta do what you know’s right. And this is right.”

The stranger was making an enormous sacrifice. It was likely that his own life lay in the balance as well; if Sousuke was caught, his assigned assassin would be held responsible for the betrayal. His bewildered, whispered ‘Thanks’ felt grievously insufficient.

The man gave him a water flask, a new set of clothes, and sent him on his way.

“Wait!” Sousuke wheeled back. “Since I won’t be able to see him, will you…I mean for both of them, can you make sure—”

“Yeah.” The man grinned, gold flashing one last time before he tugged his hood down. “I’ll look after ‘em for us.”

“Thank you.” With a final glance at the palace, its aggressive spires dripping in moonlight, Sousuke turned and fled into the night.
Rin paced circles around the trunk of the sakura tree, eagerness fluttering to and fro between his ribs. Tora trailed his movements until they made her dizzy, and then gave up. He checked the length of shadows on the ground, clicking his tongue, because Sousuke was late. He usually left at the bell toll, bathed in the river, and would come here as soon as he was done, at the same time every day. Though Rin might’ve had a guess as to why the boy was stalling.

Sousuke had kissed him the night before. Warmth tingled over Rin’s skin at the lingering memory of it, and he touched his fingers to his lips to recreate the tender press. It wasn’t even close to the same. Tora laughed in tufts of steam at the state of him.

“Shut it, you!” Rin barked.

He sighed back into glowing replays of his first kiss, and everything leading up to it. Rin remembered how handsome Sousuke had been in that robe he chose—how handsome Sousuke looked, always. Three years had filled the boy out nicely. Sousuke was strong for his age, and Rin realized long ago that he liked it. He felt a strange, trembling thrill whenever Sousuke lifted him into a tree, or pinned him on his back as they wrestled. The light in those bright blue eyes surged in shock waves through Rin’s veins when he stared too long.

And there was another part of his attraction—deeper, though harder to define. Rin could be unreservedly himself when they were together. Sousuke steadied Rin if he stumbled, and believed in him no matter how crazy he knew he must sound. Even when he had every reason not to, Sousuke cared for, risked his life for Rin. Being around the boy was grounding, and uplifting in the most extraordinary way. Rin was head-over-heels in love with him.

He had been for a long time.

All that he’d he said before their lips touched, he’d meant. When Rin hit eighteen, he was going to make some changes in Samezuka that he thought were long overdue. With a crown on his head, and the world beneath red wings, he would cut Sousuke free, and then ask him to stay. For now, and then the rest of their lives.

Impatient, Rin leaned hard against the tree trunk, and slid down to its roots, ignoring the way it made his shirt bunch up. He’d thought of taking the reigns himself to kiss Sousuke first. He’d thought of that often, actually. But each time he spied Sousuke’s scar peeking out from under his shirt, guilt kept him tethered at bay. His family had put the boy through enough. Sousuke didn’t need Rin’s unreciprocated adoration poisoning their friendship. Rin had been waiting, and wanting for so long, when it actually happened, he had choked up and ruined the whole thing.

Today was a new day, he had himself together, and he absolutely wasn’t going to botch it this time.

“What should I do when he gets here?”

Tora looked thoughtful as she considered that. Her love solutions had never been particularly useful. The dragon’s advice was comprised of tips like, “Show him your throat, and see if he licks.” But Rin needed to air out his anxieties, and she didn’t mind listening. The dragon settled down next to him, meeting his eyes pointedly with one of hers.
“Should I ask him if he was sure?” Rin mused, “Or just go for it?”

He played that out in his head. “Yeah, I’m gonna go for it,” he decided. “Sousuke better be ready for me.” When Sousuke got here, Rin was going to give it to him. No words—he would just take that pretty face in his hands, and kiss his best friend until he passed out. The spark in Rin crackled and roared. Finally. Finally.

It was a good thought, and he clenched it in the hem of his shirt while he sat.

Rin wilted as the evening waned, and Sousuke did not come. The boy’s barrack was empty, and no one had seen him all day. Rin traversed the entire grounds, traced his recent work routes, but saw no sign of him.

“Soouuuusukeee!” He shouted. “If this is about yesterday, quit hiding, you giant baby! I want to talk!”

No answer, save a few subtle stares from passersby. The sunless sky was darkening fast, and a sinking unease blackened Rin’s spirits. Sousuke wouldn’t go this far for a prank, wouldn’t do something he knew would worry Rin in earnest. Tora landed beside him after another fruitless search from the air.

“Nothing?” Rin gritted. “We have to find him.”

“You won’t find him, nephew.”

Rin startled backward into the towering form of his uncle.

The Emperor gave Rin a compulsory nod. He had a way about him that extinguished Rin’s energy, buried it, and froze it over with his own. While they had never been close, Rin knew that an uncrossable chasm existed between them—one that had only expanded as his love for Sousuke grew stronger. Akira’s unbending indifference made Rin miss his father sometimes.

He hadn’t even heard the man approach, but his uncle’s massive dragon, Sango, was seated in the grass a short distance away. Her wings had always been eerily quiet.

“What did you say…?” Rin breathed.

Fear crawled out of the air, and thickened.

“The Tokitsu boy is dead.” Every word and spot of light dropped several pitches in Rin’s periphery, as if he were alone with his uncle in a dimension apart. The Emperor’s mouth moved, but his words were echoed, distant, circling around the edge of reality, dripping down from the vaults of an empty underworld. “Your sister informed me that this is where you two meet. You won’t find him here, so come. We’d best return home.”

Rage eclipsed shock, and Rin bared his teeth in a snarl.

Akira was unfazed. “He was involved in a fight last night,” he continued, tone flat. “I understand that strong drinks, and festival revelry often render young men…unpredictable.”

Rin’s fingers twitched.

“A few of the boys reported a quarrel in his room before he ran outside. They found his body this morning near the quarry. I’ll spare you the details, but I thought I should tell you, lest you wait any longer.”
The casual delivery of this grated like wheels on coarse gravel, and Rin seethed.

“How dare you fucking lie to me!” he spat. “Sousuke’s not dead! He was just here yesterday, he—! It’s not him; the body could’ve been anyone’s—”

Akira’s countenance tightened. He was already nearing the extent of his patience, and reached into his sleeve to extract something small.

Rin had no choice but to take it, and his uncle placed a beaten leather collar face-down in his palms. All he had to do was turn it over, show him that this one was blank; it couldn’t possibly be Sousuke’s—but still he wavered. Unwilling to waste time, The Emperor gingerly flipped the collar to reveal its face.

UNDER RIN’S PROTECTION!!

Rin’s own worn etching shouted back at him. His throat constricted when he tried to swallow, the letters he’d carved into Sousuke’s collar under this tree three years ago paralyzing every muscle.

“It was still on the boy’s neck.” Akira’s eyes softened. “I am sorry, Rin. I know that you enjoyed his company.”

Rin searched every thin line on his uncle’s severe face, desperate for some trace of a lie. All he found there was a thready twinge of pity.

“We can hold a funeral for him at the palace, if you wish,” Akira said curtly. “You may do with the ashes as you please.”

Rin hadn’t heard him. Voices and white noise spun in a cyclone around him, the piece of leather in his hands motionless at the center of it. At some point, the Emperor had given up on trying to talk to him, and left. Tora nudged her partner’s back, beckoning him out of the fog.

They should get home. It was dark. Cold crept up from the ground as light drained out of the sky. Tora whimpered deep in her throat, crouching so Rin could slump onto her back and wrap his arms around her shoulders. Receiving the warmth of her body, he hugged her tighter and the dam burst. Tears blurred his vision, and streamed down his cheeks onto her scales. The city floated by beneath them as she flew him back to the palace, farther than they’d ever gone together before.

Rin drowned himself in memories of summer days spent swimming in the river, racing down grassy slopes in the palace park, the clack of oak swords and ring of laughter melting together in a melody that was evaporating out of his reach. Not one day ago, he’d been dancing with Sousuke’s heartbeat under his hand at the Fire Festival. Sousuke wouldn’t be at the tree tomorrow afternoon. Rin could wait forever, and his ocean-eyed boy would never meet him there again.

He collapsed onto his bed, and cried until he was too exhausted to heave another sob.
Sano was a newer state than Samezuka, hedged off to serve as an oasis for lucrative recreational pursuits. Avenues were wide, living quarters well-kept, and a stream of regular visitors from the capital, as well as travelers headed north from the green stretch usually stopped here to rest and indulge. Buildings along the main road were tinted rose pink, and hung with handsome window gardens that spilled over in carefully pruned tangles—an exquisite front for a city whose origins had shallow roots in the black market. Nearly every one of Sano’s elite families had ancient ties to smugglers, magic-brewers, or some organized illicit business that they swore had long since been severed. It was the sort of place that might’ve bred dangerous underground oligarchies, had it not been in the Matsuokas’ backyard.

The entertainment district was landmarked by a massive oval stadium sitting dead in the center, holding every other building in its wide orbit. Here Sousuke’s group was stationed, stacking the stadium’s impressive framework even higher. He heaved a long slat of wood into place, and dropped back down the scaffolding to fetch more.

“Careful, Sho! You’ll hurt yourself at that pace.” Old Man Koji passed Sousuke a cup of water, which he threw back gratefully. “The job’ll get done; it’s not a race.”

“Sure,” Sousuke conceded.

Koji was an even-tempered man with skin gnarled as nutmeg shells. He hobbled on broken-down bones, after decades of this work. His upbeat demeanor had weathered what his body could not, and he made rounds up and down the groups of younger slaves to bring them water and food during the day. He was nearing eighty-three, and had never known one day of freedom. What was worse, he didn’t seem to mind. The thought of being tethered to this life for the better part of a century made Sousuke’s stomach twist with a desperate sort of hopelessness.

He felt empty these days, staring down the dusty, barren road of his own future. He asked himself occasionally if it might’ve been kinder of the golden-eyed man to kill him that night. When he indulged in daydreams, Sousuke wondered if Rin ever missed him. The prince would likely be bored in the afternoons now, but that gap would be filled. If Rin could make friends with Sousuke, he could probably make friends with anyone.

Just don’t forget me.

It was nice to remember Rin—to dwell with his ghost as Sousuke lay awake on the top bunk at night. Sousuke knew that he was grasping into the past, and the clearer he imagined Rin’s blinding sharp smile, and the heat of Rin’s hand, the more painful it ached when he opened his eyes to a block of blank ceiling. The brutal silence that engulfed the present sometimes made him cry. Following in the wake of Rin’s firestorm was where he had belonged, and now he was lost at sea.

Sousuke was miserably in love with Rin, and knew that he always would be. But as long as Emperor Akira lived, his existence was dangerous. Being with Rin had buried his anger for a time, but now it surfaced with redoubled focus, his resolve crystallizing in the bitter empty space.

With a dry groan, Sousuke took his half of the beam as he handed it off to another peer. He was right back where he’d started, at those first months in the capital. Only now, with the added torment of a broken heart.

The tinny clink clink of metal on metal pulled Sousuke’s attention to the bottom of the stadium. Three men were sparring in the dirt basin—swinging, and spitting curses. Sousuke scowled downward. Their form was pitiful.
“Does the military train here?” He asked Koji.

The old man wheezed a laugh. “The military? Oh no, no. Those men are prisoners. Prisoners, rapers, murderers with their names spelled on the executioner’s ledger—the most desperate men.”

Sousuke backed away from the edge of the platform, and faced the old man with a question on his brow.

“They’re pit fighters,” Koji said. “They volunteer for it. Sign their lives away to be slaughtered down there to the cheers of thousands.”

“Why would anyone choose to die for the entertainment of Samezuka?” Sousuke’s mouth twisted in disgust.

“Because it’s a chance to cut your collar, of course! To get out!” Koji curled a reedy smile, baring teeth that were crooked, and ground flat. “Might be the only chance. Anyone who survives four years of combat in this stadium is a free man! It’s enough to get just enough volunteers, though I daresay I can count the number who’ve made it that long on my fingers,” Koji offered, waving his left hand. He was missing a pinky. “Ah, Sho!? Where are you going?!”

“To give them my name.” Sousuke had made his mind up in a flash of clarity. He swept toward the stairs leading downward into the stadium. Four years was a long time to spend staving off death, but ending at the point of a spear was infinitely better than shrinking into invisible chains. Fighting was something he could do—the only thing he was truly good at.

“Wh—! Wait! Don’t, kid. You’ve so much time left to you!” Koji pleaded. “This life isn’t all that bad after a while. Things could be so much worse.”

“I can’t stay here.” Sousuke stopped so the old man could hear him. “There’s someone I need to reach.”

He took a breath, and descended.
The Ward

Chapter Summary

A siren in the sacred forest.

Chapter Notes

This chapter begins four years before the first. Haru and Makoto are about the same age as Rin and Sousuke.

I imagined Haru and Makoto growing up together to [this music]:D

* * *

Art from Last Chapter!:

The lovely Bakapandy did gorgeous fanart of the festival dance scene and a painfully expressive comic of that scene near the end :( The wonderful Starshi did this beautiful piece of their first kiss!!

Thank you so much, these are AMAZING! I love you both! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sky view from the sea was one of Haru’s favorite things.

When the waves were calm, the surface became an undulant sheet of silver. Haru reached out from where he floated on his back just below it, watching his hand break through into another world.

The universe above belonged to humans, and Haru lived here, in the boundless blue deep. He drew his hand back down and closed his eyes, letting his ink-black hair tickle the scales on his cheeks. It was bliss.

“Haru.”

“Haru!”

Annoying…

He flipped onto his stomach to meet a pair of luminescent eyes as large and blue as his own. Ikuya kicked up from the murk below, panic in his face. Haru leveled him a blank stare.

Ikuya was a couple years younger than Haru, a skinny boy with hair the color of wet jade and the uncanny ability to find Haru wherever he was hiding. Though Ikuya tried to mask his admiration, Haru knew the boy looked to him for a great many things he had no business being an example for.
Sometimes Haru thought he could just swim away into the open ocean in any direction, and leave the others to their troublesome lives. They probably would barely notice he’d gone, as he never went on hunts with them. But the thought of leaving Ikuya behind had always kept him.

“Haru, something’s happening back home,” Ikuya said. “We should go.”

“Too troublesome.”

“Humans, Haru. They’re at the island!”

The two boys reached Moyajima and swam up through the rocky caverns of the sirens’ den. They hurried out of the water, sidestepping piles of bones scattered over the clammy stone floor. The stench of death and rot hung stagnant in the murky caves—remnants of a plentiful hunt. The others had sunk an entire ship, Haru heard.

They're getting greedy.

Sirens terrorized and murdered humans as often as they could manage—but never ate them. They didn’t need to kill humans to survive, and Haru couldn’t wrap his head around the idea of expending so much energy doing something unnecessary. So he had asked one of the others once, why they did it.

“Watching the fire leave their eyes is the greatest feeling in the world,” she sneered. “It makes you feel alive like nothing else can. The more fire they have, the more there is to take.”

He didn’t understand. Haru didn’t think he could ever muster a desire for anything that strong, and learning to hunt with the rest of the sirens was entirely too much effort. If he never killed a single human in his life, he would be fine with that.

The boys’ breaths puffed out in frosty clouds as they ran up through the empty innards of the island. Whatever was going on above had drawn every last one of the other sirens out.

Emerging from the caves, Haru and Ikuya found them, crowded over the crags and watching the beach below. Several ogres were present as well, growling quietly, clubs in their gigantic knurled fists. The siren boys nudged their way to the front where they could see.

“Watch yourselves, shoreborns,” hissed one of the others.

Ikuya let out a soft gasp at the sight they beheld. At least a dozen sirens lay dead on the beach, their stringy black hair fanned out on the rocks. Some of them sported acid burns, others frozen with ice, and one or two were still smoking like dying coals.

Above them was a stocky blond man in polished armor bearing the blue and white emblem of Iwatobi. And beside him, three young girls.

All three had round cheeks and light hair that curled and bounced in the balmy breeze. Each was dressed in silk under her traveling cloak, the glint of colorful jewelry catching the midday light. The oldest of them couldn't have been more than fourteen.

“Magic!” Ikuya tugged Haru’s arm. “They’re sorcerers.”

Kurou, undisputed leader of the siren colony, whose gaze was strongest of them all, stood surrounded by the trio. The tallest girl looked him directly in the eyes, unwavering. It was the first time Haru had seen him afraid. They were talking, though the wind was making it hard to hear.
He did hear Ikuya’s name.

And then his own.

Haru pressed his nose close to a slit in the canvas covering of his cage and inhaled deeply. Pine, wet leaves, grass, and soil rich from recent rain. Forest air had a thickness to it, and he hated it. He couldn’t help but compare the damp, earthy stillness to the salty ocean wind he loved so much. The gusts that skipped over white crests, whipping his hair across his face. Cold. Free.

The three young sorceresses had long since departed for Iwatobi’s capital, along with Ikuya in a cage of his own. Meeting Ikuya’s wide, frightened eyes as the boy was led away needled Haru’s heart. He had been right—the others’ greed in their attack on that galleon had brought Iwatobi’s wrath down upon the island. When offered a truce, Kurou had agreed to Iwatobi’s demands for peace in their waters: the sirens were forbidden to hunt Iwatobi vessels or towns for ten years. And as insurance, two of Kurou’s heirs would be forfeit. If both sides held to their bargain, the sons would be faithfully returned to Moyajima.

Should the sirens break terms, Haru and Ikuya would be withheld forever.

Idiots.

Humans put such stock in heirs, and family, but creatures of the deep had no such ties to one another. Haru was no more an heir than any other in the den. He and Ikuya were not Kurou’s sons, nor were they strong or special in any way. They had been sent abroad because they were simply unwanted.

Ten years.

Haru would be a hostage in this forest for a longer span of time than he’d been alive, and that was the most fortunate outcome. He would be eighteen by the time the truce was up. Until then, he would have nothing but a memory to go by of the sea that he loved. Tears sprang to his eyes.

His cage rattled, and the quick thnk thnk thnk of the cart wheels rolling over a wooden bridge jarred Haru from his grief. Men were shouting all around him. The caravan’s movement had come to a halt, and he could hear heavy footfalls of his escorts dismounting from their steeds.

After two and a half weeks of travel, Haru’s cage was lowered to the ground, and the curtain covering was lifted. Though it was nearly sundown, he blinked at the sudden brightness. The sunlight was green-filtered, and the air was pungent with the stench of wet plants. All around him were humans.

Anger and terror rattled in their voices as they hollered.

“Aomori is a sacred haven!.”

“What’s the king trying to say with this, dropping one of these in a holy place? Unforgivable!”
“Don’t look at it! Turn away!” A mother ushered her two children out of sight.

The townspeople were gathered around his cage, the din of their outrage assaulting him from every side as they argued with the Iwatobi soldiers. They had their faces angled away, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Well I for one ain’t gonna take it in my house!” A tall, leathery woman rapped on his cage with the handle of her hoe. “Wouldn’t even trust it locked in my shed!”

“It’s a danger to us all! We should hang its cage from a tree,” said another man viciously.

The crowd’s ire mounted, and they clamored, railing against the soldiers from the caravan. Violence would erupt if this went on any longer; Haru could sense it in the air. Already on edge, he felt his scales appear on his back and his eyes brighten. Someone noticed. The people screamed, and the soldiers leveled the ends of their spears at him. Shaking in spite of himself, he huddled at the center of the cage, hugging his knees to chest. Haru hoped if he shut his eyes tight enough, it all might disappear, and he could be back under the waves. He was scared, and so alone. The other sirens had never been friendly, but they were familiar. He’d had Ikuya, and he’d had the water. But here, he was just a creature in a cage, at the mercy of a mob.

_I want to go home._

He blinked away the wet blurriness in his eyes. Haru lost track of how long he’d sat curled up in the middle of the cage, but at length he heard a man’s voice break over the others.

“For goodness’ sake, he’s just a boy! Let him be!”

“You want it in _your_ house, Tachibana?”

Haru didn’t dare raise his head until he heard the door of his cage squeak open. Someone was inside with him. Panicking, he backed away like a cornered animal, his head knocking against the metal bars. The person inside was a boy his age, dressed in olive.

“You don’t really look like what I thought you would.”

Curious green eyes met his, regarding him without a trace of fear. The other boy had soft-looking hair, a button nose, and glowed with an energy like the earth after a storm. Murmurs bubbled from the crowd he shuffled closer on his knees.

Haru didn’t answer, but the boy wasn’t deterred. “I’m Makoto! I think you’ll like it here.”

_As if I could._

Makoto extended his small, dimpled hand. Haru stared, completely at a loss for what to do with it. The hand remained outstretched, expectant.

Slowly, cautiously, Haru lifted his own hand to touch fingers with the peculiar green boy. Makoto managed to smile even wider, and eagerly grasped Haru’s entire hand in his. He pulled, and Haru stumbled out of the cage after him.

Makoto knelt to pick up a stick he had left outside the grated door, and then led Haru by the hand calmly through the crowd. The townsfolk had gone silent, and Haru could feel their gazes searing into his back. The only audible sound was the leaves crunching under the boys’ feet as they passed by, and the rhythmic tapping of Makoto’s stick in the dirt. The human boy strode up to a gentle-looking bespectacled man near the edge of the group. The man looked at Makoto, then at Haru, and
laughed.

“Hi there!” Haru recognized his voice as the man who had spoken up for him earlier.

Haru instinctually squeezed Makoto’s hand once.

“Dad, can he come with us?” Makoto asked.

The man paused. Haru didn’t miss the way his smile faltered. “Can he…ah…”

“Please?” Makoto begged. “He needs somewhere to stay.”

“He does, but…” Mr. Tachibana glanced at Haru, still holding Makoto’s hand, and back to the stunned, angry crowd. “Sure. Alright. Let’s…let’s go.”

Makoto cheered and Haru let himself be pulled away.

The human boy and his parents lived in a modest wooden house next to an old oak tree. Smoke rose in a thin stream from the chimney and the smell of something delicious wafted from the windows. Fallen needles crunched under their feet as they ran up to the front door. Makoto kept his hold on Haru’s hand, and the siren felt his scales gradually disappear. Inside, a woman welcomed them home, and greeted Haru. She had a sweet voice, and her belly was round.

“Oh, hello!” she leaned down and smiled at him. Makoto looked like her, he thought. “I’ve heard about you. Welcome to Aomori. Has my son been showing you around?”

“I will, Mom!” the boy said.

Makoto’s parents spoke in hushed voices near the stove for a long while as the human boy excitedly showed Haru the rest of the house. Haru knew they were talking about him—what to do with him.

Tachibana was their family name. They were carpenters, running a small shop out of the back of their home. Unfinished chairs, benches, and other items lay in various states of completion around the workshop. Makoto had made Haru wear his shoes so he didn’t get splinters walking around, and his feet slid around clumsily inside the too-big slippers.

When the boys returned, supper was on the table. The family made quiet conversation, and Haru was grateful they never pushed him to talk. It was a strange thing, eating together this way. In the sirens’ den, no one had deemed talking important enough to stop chewing for. Haru listened to the family as he sipped his soup, curious in a way he’d never been.

Taking care to stay out of the Tachibana’s way, he washed up and searched for a corner to sleep in. The space under the table would do, he thought. He ducked his head and curled himself up, brushing away some of the crumbs from dinner.

“What are you doing?” Makoto’s face was in front of his, blocking the light, as he crouched down to see Haru under the table.

Haru frowned and drew further in.

“You can’t sleep there!” The green boy laughed. “Get in with me! My bed has lots of room, see?” To prove his point, he threw back the covers and clambered into his low wooden bed, scooting over and vigorously patting the empty spot beside him.

“Come on! You’ll catch cold over there!”
Haru extracted himself from beneath the table and stood in the middle of the house, suddenly unsure of what to do with his own limbs. But Mrs. Tachibana was at his back, gently ushering him to the edge of Makoto’s bed. He let himself be eased in, and the second his head touched the pillow, Makoto brought the covers up over them both.

“I told you!” He giggled. “Isn’t it better than the floor?”

Makoto went on babbling about some small creatures he’d seen in the woods that day. Eventually, he fell asleep and Haru could stare at him unreservedly. This had to be the strangest child Haru had ever met. The townspeople’s reactions were quite typical of humans at the sight of sirens. Though he had only been on one hunt, Haru knew they had every right to fear him. He could drain the life out of any one of them with nothing more than his eyes. Yet Makoto was here, unafraid, ready to share his home, even his bed with Haru.

The pillow was soft, and Makoto was radiating warmth Haru could feel in the cocoon of the quilts. The future of his life as a hostage in the human world was terrifying and unclear, but tonight he was safe—and it was enough. He closed his eyes and let sleep claim him.

Haru woke to the sight of Makoto’s back. Makoto was still asleep on his side, all the way to the far edge of the mattress. Haru lifted his head and looked behind him at the expanse of empty bed space that was supposed to be his, and recoiled from where he was curled up against the other boy. Some part of him missed the comfortable heat, but if Makoto woke and saw him, Haru would die of embarrassment.

A muffled snicker came from the other corner of the house where Mrs. Tachibana was making steamed buns for breakfast. Haru yanked the covers back up over his head.

The Tachibanas had a daily routine to which Haru became an awkward spectator. They ate together, fed the birds in the backyard, then Mr. and Mrs. Tachibana set to work in the shop while Makoto readied himself to go out.

Haru was perched on a stool wearing one of Makoto’s borrowed tunics, thumbing at the webbing between his fingers, and reminded once again that he didn’t belong. The night before had been nice, but now Haru had to figure out where he would be staying, what he would do with himself for the rest of the day—for the rest of ten years. Surely this family didn’t want him another night.

“Aren’t you coming?” Makoto stood by the door with his stick and a lunch basket, fumbling with the ties on his shirt. “You like lots of water, right? And swimming? The lake isn’t that far from here. I’ll take you!”

Haru blinked, regarding the green boy from across the room.

“Don’t you want to?” Makoto straightened, clearly expecting Haru to come with him.

He did. He did want to swim. Warily, he slid off the stool and left the house with Makoto.

“Ah! You left without a cloak!” Makoto said as Haru strolled through the doorway. “You’ll get cold! Wait, I’ll get one for you. You can use my blue one!”

Makoto strolled down the fern-lined beaten trail while Haru followed beside him, wearing his borrowed indigo cloak. The pair made their way down toward the lake under the shade of the trees.

“Walking around the woods is good practice for me, too” Makoto said, stick held out in front of each step. “The White Cat chose me last year, so I’m going to be a guardian when I’m older.”
Haru listened intently, hoping Makoto would continue without being asked.

“Aomori’s Tear is hidden somewhere in the forest, and when my trial comes, I’ll have to find it all on my own.” He approached a tiny stream, nimbly hopping across. “So walking all over helps me learn.”

Before his departure, Haru had heard about Aomori from some of the others in the den. It was the most sacred place in all of Iwatobi. Tucked deep in the woods was a legendary stone imbued with powerful protective magic that kept evil at bay. People in Iwatobi called it the Blue Tear.

It was the reason Aomori was chosen to host Haru, a prisoner from a den of demons. No siren could enter the forest without a human because of the Tear, and once inside, he was at the mercy of the staff-wielding humans who protected it.

He had seen a few already, since his arrival. They had looked like travelers, all dressed in green and brown, each with a beautifully carved staff. Haru could feel the stone’s magic pulsing through them, even from afar.

Haru deftly trailed after Makoto, careful not to step on the moss-covered roots half buried in the dirt.

“But really, I don’t think I’ll be a very good one,” Makoto slowed abruptly, and Haru nearly bumped into him. “I want to go out and explore. I love the forest. It’s so pretty, and everyone needs it, but I’m…afraid of it, sometimes. When it’s dark and I’m alone, I get scared. I shouldn’t be scared.”

Makoto’s knuckles tightened around his walking stick.

“I start imagining something terrible is out there, and I come running back. I’m really pathetic.”

Makoto looked out into the endless tunnel of trees off the path to his side. His light was dimmed somehow, and Haru suddenly couldn’t bear to see it.

“I think you’re brave,” Haru said.

“You…” Makoto started. “You do talk! I knew it, I knew you could talk!”

Haru shrank into himself. His scales tingled under his skin, but Makoto was looking at him with an expression he’d never seen on anyone before. The boy’s entire face was lighting up, brighter than the morning light streaming through the gaps in the canopy. Any apprehension he had left melted away before it.

“Of course I can.” Haru turned his face away, suddenly too bare under Makoto’s full attention. “And you helped me, when no one else would even look. So if you ask me, you’re brave.”

Makoto watched him push past, eyebrows raised.

“Embarrassing. What a stupid thing to say.”

Then Haru’s hand was swept away from his side as Makoto took it in his and walked calmly next to him.

“Do you have a name?” Makoto asked cheerily.
“…Haruka. Haru is fine.”

“Then thank you, Haru-chan!”

The forest thinned and gave way to a wide open body of dark, glittering water. It lapped lazily at the stony embankment, framed by tall reeds and sinewy trees that bent over the edge to skim the surface with thin branches.

“I know it's not the ocean, but if you want to—”

Haru had his tunic up and over his head before Makoto could finish, making a beeline for the lake’s edge. He could hear the boy’s amused chuckle behind him, but once he dove in, any shame he’d left on the shore was infinitesimal.

A splash told Haru that Makoto had jumped in as well, and was paddling toward him. Haru kicked and surfaced beside the human boy, shaking his wet hair away from his face. He was grateful for this, and everything Makoto had done for him since he’d arrived. Haru wanted to thank him, though he didn’t know how. Recalling Makoto’s gesture the evening before, Haru extended his hand.

It was webbed, and scales shimmered all up his forearm, now that he was in the water. He knew his irises were large, and glowing—like a demon’s. But Makoto took his hand with a giggle, weaving his fingers between the stretches of slippery blue skin.

“You're welcome!” he chirped.

The boys spent the rest of the afternoon at the lake, and for the first time in his life, Haru wanted a day to be longer.

Haru stayed with the Tachibanas again that night, and every night after that. There were few complications, and their volunteering to harbor him met no contest from any of the other people in Aomori. He spent all of his time with Makoto, exploring the forest, gathering herbs and roots for his mother, and attending the boy’s lessons on days when children were required to have them. With nowhere else to go, he found he had latched onto Makoto, following him around everywhere he went. But the human boy never seemed put off; he began calling Haru a friend.

Some days, his longing for the sea would hit him harder than others. He would rise early in the morning before sunrise and steal down to the lake. If he looked out over the water while the fog still rested over it, he couldn’t see the woods on the far side. He could pretend then that there was no other side.

Come nightfall, Haru would be more than ready for sleep. A while ago, Mr. Tachibana had pulled him aside and asked if he wanted his own bed made. Haru had firmly shaken his head no. He slid into his spot next to the wall and waited for Makoto to join him.

“Don’t wait for me, Haru. I have to finish something first,” Makoto said with a smile.

Haru shrugged and turned over, distantly hoping Makoto wouldn’t be too long.

Haru’s body had betrayed him again during the night, and he woke at dawn to find himself pressed
up against Makoto. Only this time, the green boy was awake. Haru hissed through his teeth and recoiled, but Makoto only grinned gleefully and sat up. His brown hair was sticking out in several places, and Haru battled the urge to smooth it down.

“You’re up! You’re finally up!” Makoto dropped down and reached over to his table nearby. He came back holding something small covered in his cupped hands.

“Look, I made this for you!” He opened his hands to reveal a small carved wooden item. It was vaguely bean-shaped and the pair of eyes at one end must have meant it was supposed to be an animal of some kind, Haru guessed.

“I know you miss your home in the ocean, right?” Makoto crossed his legs nervously. “So I thought I could make you something from there. It’s a dolphin!”

Haru stared in astonishment at Makoto, then at the carved toy. He rose and slowly plucked it from Makoto’s palm, turning it over inquisitively. It was far too round, had no snout, and was painted red and green.

“This isn’t what dolphins look like,” Haru said flatly. “But I…thank you…Makoto.”

Makoto cleared his throat. The green boy was still strangely happy, Haru thought. “Ah, well…I guess it looks like a trout, doesn’t it? I’ve never seen a dolphin before.”

“I can show you,” Haru said.

Haru picked up woodcarving quickly, dexterous hands whittling the small blocks into delicate shapes. Recalling images of dolphins flicking and cutting through the water helped Haru remember the ocean in a way that felt fond, and stung less. A few days later, he dropped his finished carving into Makoto’s hands when the other boy had come home from gathering mushrooms.

Makoto was overjoyed to receive Haru’s gift. He flashed Haru a smile that was radiant and soft, warm like late morning sun after a swim in the deep. For some reason, Haru wanted to see it again.

Haru made more toys to give to Makoto, recreating all of the sea creatures he loved best. Mr. Tachibana gladly gave Haru any good scraps of wood from his work, and the young siren carved them to life. Each time he gave Makoto a new one, the other boy would glow with excitement no less bright than the times before. They would play together with the wooden creatures, naming them and creating fantastical stories. Makoto was always eager to learn about the ocean, and Haru answered all of his questions, talking more than he ever had back home.

Months slipped by, and some of the trees bronzed and shed their leaves.

“What’s wrong with them?” Haru asked. The loss was sad to him, somehow. “Are they dying?”

“They’re not!” Makoto said. “The leaves grow back in the spring!”

Haru had never heard of anything like that before, but he liked the idea of the green coming back.

Mrs. Tachibana gave birth to two healthy children that Autumn. One girl, one boy—both tiny and squealing, and the most amazing things Haru had ever seen. Makoto held the girl, Ran, in his arms as he sat on their bed.
“Would you like to hold him, Haru?” Mr. Tachibana cradled the boy close. Haru nodded.

Ren was sleeping, his stubby hands opening and closing like sea anemone. Haru held him carefully, gazing down at him in awe. The child was warm, and fragile, and precious. The ineffable desire to cherish him exploded in Haru’s heart, and he looked to Makoto in a desperate attempt to describe the feeling to him. Their eyes met, and he knew he didn’t need to.

Seasons cycled again. And again.

_Eight more years._

If asked his name, Haru introduced himself as Tachibana Haruka.

Makoto had to attend special lessons as a future guardian of Aomori. Haru went along with him, rules be damned, because everyone knew by now that they came as a pair, or not at all.

Makoto still loved the forest, and still froze in fear of it when faced with darkness ahead of him. The other kids bullied and teased him cruelly, but he never bit back. Any snide remark about “Scaredy-cat Tachibana” was answered with a threatening blue glare from Haru when Makoto’s back was turned, and the bullying quelled.

Both boys had been cast adrift in their own way, though neither one of them minded that much.

_Five more years._

Haru still went down to the lake before dawn sometimes, but far less these days. The water was too cold for humans in the morning, so more often than not, he waited for the sun to climb higher and warm the shallows so Makoto could come with him. He’d taught Makoto to swim like him, and they did so together, kicking on their backs on the surface, side by side.

During the evenings, Haru would work in the Tachibana’s carpentry shop, embellishing the items with beautiful carvings and reliefs. He had come to thoroughly enjoy making art, and was happy for the opportunity to improve the family business. People from all over Iwatobi (and even some from overseas) bought things made from Aomori wood because the Tear’s magic protected them against evil. He wondered what they might think if they found out their prized furniture from the sacred forest was decorated by a demon.

Makoto and the class of other future guardians went on long treks, delving deeper into the forest, splitting into smaller groups. Haru usually went along with him, always there to help him when the need arose. The other students had eventually accepted them both, and Haru thought he could even call some of them friends. Yazaki Aki was one of them, a shy, pretty girl who could scale trees faster than a squirrel. She would sometimes accompany the pair, offering to navigate from high branches.
But today they were alone, walking through one of the oldest parts of the woods, where the trees were so tall, they couldn’t see the tops. Their majesty was overwhelming. These plants had been here longer than the people in Aomori—at least two thousand years. He and Makoto passed through the dappled shadows beneath them in awe.

The crumbled limestone ruins of a temple were scattered around the area, roots and lichen having taken much of the stone back into the earth. But a few walls were still standing—the carved reliefs miraculously intact and untouched. Most were of ships, and men on horses, and long-tailed, sharp-toothed beasts breathing fire.

“Those are dragons,” Makoto said, running his hand over the pediment. “The great protectors of our world. But there hasn’t been one in Iwatobi since the old wars. They live over the sea somewhere.”

“I want to see one.” Haru tried to imagine what a real dragon must be like, staring upward at the carving until his neck ached.

The two of them continued down the path, stopping here and there to make observations. Makoto scribbled notes into his scouting journal, Haru adding drawings to it when he saw something he liked. When the time would come for Makoto’s guardian trial, he would have to know the woods like they were his own backyard. He studied hard, and ventured out further and further each time, even though Haru could tell doing so often made him uneasy.

Haru marveled at Makoto’s courage—his willingness to fight his fear for the chance to protect this place. Thinking about it made Haru want to walk closer, make sure Makoto knew that he would
never have to make the journey alone.

“Hey, Haru-chan,” Makoto nudged Haru gently.

“Don’t add ‘chan.”

“Have you ever wanted to meet your birth parents?” Makoto asked, looking somewhere far off in the canopy.

“Not really.” His answer came easily.

“Why not?!?” The human boy looked scandalized.

“Why would I?” Haru shrugged. “I don’t remember them, and if they see what I am, they’ll just run like everyone else.”

“Haru…” Makoto’s face fell. “Well I know if I lost a child, I’d want to see them more than anything, no matter how much time had passed, or what happened since I’d lost them. I’m sure your parents are the same.”

Haru opened his mouth to protest, but Makoto continued. “And besides, if they met you, they would see what a loving, gentle person you are.”

“I’m not.” Haru insisted. “I could kill anyone, with one look.”

“But you don’t, do you?” Makoto turned around to grin at him, walking backwards on sure feet, and there was that look again. A smile like something was bubbling just under the surface—a new part of their friendship Haru couldn’t quite identify.

“I do use my power.” Haru corrected. “It’s how I catch fish.”

Makoto laughed into his knuckles.

“I’m afraid of a lot of things, Haru.” Makoto said softly. “But I’ve never been afraid of you. Not even the first time I saw you.”

“You should have been. That was stupid.”

“Maybe.” Makoto reached out for Haru. “Maybe I could tell you weren’t going to hurt me.”

“Hm.” Angling his face away, Haru let Makoto take his hand. “Still stupid…”

“Well I can’t make you, but if you get the chance, you should find your birth parents, Haru. I’ll be there with you when you do.

Three more years.

It was hard for Haru to recall a time when his days had been different. The part of his childhood he had spent with the sirens felt distant, like it might have been someone else’s experience—because his home was here. He still pined for the sea in his heart. Only now he had something he treasured more than all of the water in the ocean.
Makoto broke the surface and made his way over to where Haru floated in the shallow part of the lake. He was walking on the bottom past the rocky bank, he was so tall now.

Love wasn’t a concept Haru had been acquainted with before he came to Aomori. He knew that you helped another if you expected them to share their meal later, and that sticking together in groups was a safer way to travel. But in seven years, Makoto never asked for anything in return for his kindness, and Haru had come to accept that a smile from his green boy was the only thing he really wanted.

Sometimes Makoto would look at him with such tenderness it made his chest swell until he thought it might burst from his ribs, and he knew he would give anything to see that expression as many times as he could. In a way, the siren woman’s words from years ago made sense to him now. His affection for Makoto was frightening in the way it encompassed him completely.

“Haru-chan? Is something wrong?”

The human boy’s closeness brought Haru back into the present. It was raining lightly, though the sun still leaked through the clouds, glistening on Makoto’s wet shoulders and sparkling in his hair.

“I love you,” Haru said.

He did, and he knew that he had for a long time. It felt natural to say—an obvious truth that they both felt in every touch of their fingers, swirling in the spaces between them when they walked side by side in the woods each morning.

Still, Makoto looked taken aback by the admission for a moment. Then his face softened, and he reached up to cup Haru’s cheeks, pressing a delicate kiss to the tip of his nose.

“I love you too, Haru!” He laughed shyly. “So much!”

His heart full, Haru wrapped his legs around Makoto’s waist under the water and used them to push himself up and lightly press his lips to Makoto’s smiling mouth. Makoto’s lips were wet with rain, but still warm and pliant. Haru did it again, and once more before they toppled under the surface and came up again splashing and giggling.

Two more years.

Ran and Ren adored the collection of toys Haru had made. After he and Makoto came come each night, they would play with the wooden sea creatures together. Having four people play meant more of the animals could be a part of the story, Ran said. Haru always picked the green and red dolphin—the only one Makoto had carved.

The twins were his age now, when he had made them.

Makoto and Haru had their own house, as was customary for teenagers at their age. It was just down the road from the family’s cottage—quaint but sturdy, and with a garden of flowers and vegetables in the back. Haru had painted the inside walls in blues and greens, with fish swimming from the kitchen to the door.

He would fish in the lake, and cook for Makoto, since the guardian-in-training couldn’t even crack an egg without burning his fingers on the griddle. Makoto brought logs for the fire, and wood for Haru’s work when the siren boy needed more.
“I’m home!” Makoto stomped inside and unlaced his boots at the threshold.

“Welcome back.” Haru said. He was at his desk, chipping away at his latest commission. Haru still worked for Makoto’s father, but sometimes the wealthy buyer from overseas had special requests just for him. Little things—charms, decorative tools, frames, the handles of fans, or weapons. Makoto would bring him blessed wood from deeper in the forest for these projects. He enjoyed these the most; working small felt intimate somehow.

Hanging up his cloak, Makoto strode across the house to him and planted a kiss in his hair.

“What’s that?” Makoto kept his mouth where it was, resting his head on Haru’s and peering down at his work. Haru could feel his breath on his bangs, and leaned back into Makoto’s welcoming embrace.

“It’s a hilt.” Haru said. The order requested a winged dragon, wrapping around the object, with carnations and roses along the edges.

“Mmm I hope it’s just for decoration, then.” Makoto chuckled, moving his face down to peck Haru on the cheek. “It’s so beautiful!”

Makoto pulled away to look Haru in the eyes, and Haru knew it was coming, could see it in the other boy’s face:

“Still not as beautiful as you.”

Haru set down his carving knife and elbowed Makoto for his efforts, rising to start preparing lunch as a stubborn blush crept up his face.

“Haru-chan are you embarrassed?” Makoto draped himself over his shoulders, swaying them to and fro. He could hear the playful smugness in Makoto’s voice, and he refused to be the only one flustered today.

Haru twisted around in Makoto’s arms and shut him up with a firm kiss that lasted until the back of his legs hit the bed they shared.

Lunch could wait.

Out in the garden that evening, they sat watching the moths flutter around their lantern.

Makoto had been silent for a while, and Haru wished he would speak up and say what he was thinking about.

“When I’m a guardian, Haru…I can’t leave the forest.” Makoto reached a finger out, and moth landed there gracefully. “I have to stay near the Tear to protect it, so I won’t be able to come see you that often. Maybe only once every…every few years.”

Haru knew this. He had known since Makoto told him about becoming a guardian ages ago—but hearing him say it felt like getting crushed into the surf by an angry swell that he had seen coming long before it had broken.

“Oh,” Haru said.
He would have to return to Moyajima. The sirens had, against all odds, upheld their end of the bargain for nine years, and likely would for one more. Peace between their races was bigger than Haru, bigger than his family, and the law would see that he was returned to the den.

It was something he tried hard not to think about, because waiting for so long to get back to the ocean was painful and sad when he'd had all those years of captivity ahead of him. Those years were almost up, and the road back was short—yet now he found himself grasping for every grain of sand that slipped down the hourglass, his anticipation replaced with the inevitable realization that he was running out of time.

*One more year.*

The leaves were falling again in Aomori, coppery reds and oranges breaking up the walls of evergreen. Haru reached up to pluck one from where it had settled onto his shoulder, and held it aloft in his pale hand. He spread his fingers, and the leaf slipped past the blue webbing, floating to the ground to join the others. This would be the last time he could see them fall.

Makoto was afield again, traversing the woods with Aki and a few others. He wouldn’t be back until the next day, and Haru thought he could use the time to work on a gift he had started. Every guardian had a staff that they carried, using them as walking sticks, weapons, and reminders of home when they were gone on patrol. Haru would find a way to carve the contents of his heart into a staff for Makoto. He smiled to himself.

Eyes on the ground, Haru didn’t notice Makoto’s approach until he felt the weight of a cloak on his shoulders.

“It’s getting chilly out, Haru. You’ll get sick walking around with just that thin shirt on…” Makoto fussed over him, fastening the front of the cloak, smoothing out the sides while Haru watched him intently. Makoto had always been excessively attentive, making sure he had all he needed.

He used to find it annoying occasionally, but now he wondered how many more times he would get to see his friend wrap a cloak around him, or sigh in that exasperated, fond way he liked so much.

“I thought you’d still be out.” Haru brushed Makoto’s hand away and hugged the wool tighter.

Makoto shrugged. “I turned back a little early. The trip was going well, and…you know, I…” he trailed off.

*I want to spend more time with you.*

“Let’s go home.” Haru led the way, Makoto following gratefully.

*One more night.*

“How much farther?”

“Don’t worry, Haru,” Makoto said, not missing the concern in Haru’s voice “It’s not that far out; I’m
Makoto held a lantern out in front of himself as he led Haru by the hand down the narrow path winding away from their house. Makoto had a special surprise for Haru tonight, he’d told him, and Haru let his mellow excitement swallow his apprehension.

“Here!”

Careful not to trip as he led Haru out of the brush, Makoto stepped aside to reveal a tent of sorts he had set up in the small clearing. A heap of blankets lay beneath a sheer woven sheet that was pinned at the sides by a thin wooden frame.

“What is this, Makoto?” Haru glanced over at his best friend, his family, his love.

“Get in!” Makoto pulled the sheet open, and Haru ducked inside. “You’ll see.”

They slipped off their shoes and laid out on top of the blankets, close together in the middle of the pile. On their backs in the clearing, the sky brimming with stars stretched out over them, twinkling like a million tiny beads.

“Wait, Haru.” Makoto was reaching into his bag, removing his tinder set. “Wh-! Don’t look, it’s a surprise!”

“Fine.” He sighed and lay back.

“Close your eyes.”

He did. He heard Makoto strike a fire, then shut something metal, and finally the lantern was blown out.

“Open them.”

Haru gasped. The insides of the tent swam in luminous blue.

“Do you like it?” Makoto sat on his knees near the candle he had made for Haru. It was an oddly-shaped container crafted out of metal and a mosaic of cerulean glass. The flame inside fluttered, filtering through the shards and making blue shapes dance on the sheet above them.

“Makoto…it’s…”

“Ah, It’s supposed to look like the water,” Makoto said sheepishly. He joined Haru on his back and snuggled closer. “So this way, it’s like we’re under the sea together. It’s stupid, it probably doesn’t look anything like—”

Haru turned Makoto’s face toward him and stopped his chatter with an impatient mouth.

They broke apart after a few minutes, panting softly and dizzy with affection.

They could still see the stars through the sheer sheet, blinking beyond the current of moving light. Treetops rustled in the breeze, and Makoto and Haru rested in comfortable quiet. Inside of here was Haru’s own piece of heaven. He was floating beneath the waves in the middle of the forest, curled up into Makoto’s steady warmth. It was all he’d ever need.

“Can we stay in here forever?” Haru said finally.

Makoto laughed, lacing his strong fingers between Haru’s and squeezing. “Sure, Haru. We can stay
Soon he would be under the salt waves looking up at the same sky in the heavy silence of the ocean, alone. Once it was a feeling he spent every waking moment dreaming about, hopelessly yearning for. And now he would give it up a thousand times over to spend the rest of his life here.

Panic ensnared and stung him, paralyzing him with dread as he thought, *this is the end.* Haru turned onto his side to face his Makoto, eyes wide as blue moons, tears streaming unchecked into his hair.

“I don’t want to go.” The words came out in a strangled whisper. “Makoto, I don’t want to go.”

Makoto drew him in, hand splayed on the back of Haru’s head, and their world shrank into a candle, a pile of blankets, and each other.

“I’ll find a way, Haru.” Makoto said shakily into Haru’s silky hair. “We’ll bring you back, this isn’t goodbye.”

“It is,” Haru hissed into Makoto’s chest. “I love the forest, and our family, and…and you. But I can’t be here; I can’t leave the island, and I’ll never belong here.”

The air left Haru as Makoto held him tighter.

“Yes you do,” Makoto breathed. “It’s your home as much as anyone else’s. You’ll always belong here with us, and with me.”

Hope was a dangerous thing to keep, and he knew there was little of it where he was going, but Haru let himself surrender to Makoto’s unshakable optimism. They made love under the quilts, keeping the night’s chill at bay, drinking each other in and savoring every moment like the last berries of summer. Sleep settled over them as the candle flickered out.

The morning of Haru’s departure came as surely as any other.

An official escort from the capital had come to fetch him, and Haru recognized the general with the sideswept blond hair from the first time he’d made the trip. His family, friends, and a few of the neighbors he knew (Aki, and Mrs. Tamura) were all gathered beside the main road to see him off. Ran and Ren were bawling, hanging onto his shirt until Makoto sympathetically pried them off. Haru had said his farewells to his family. There was no way he could ever thank them enough for what they had given him. But he thought he would try.

Haru made Mrs. Tachibana a comb painted with vines and hydrangeas. They were her favorite flowers in the garden. For Mr. Tachibana he carved noble fir and pine trees along the edges of a box, so he could have a place to put his small tools he would always lose around the shop. To Ran and Ren he gave a pair of birds he had whittled out of birch.

“You should keep them together,” he said. “They’ll get lonely without the other.”

After the family and townspeople had returned, only Makoto was left.

“I have something for you too, you know.” Haru reached into the brush where he’d hidden his gift for the person who meant more to him than he could put into words. He handed the finished staff to Makoto.
“Haru I don’t know what to say. Thank you. This is…it’s gorgeous.” Makoto held it reverently, smoothing his fingers over the intricate, polished, impossibly smooth carvings of leaves and waves. A pod of dolphins swam next to a vine of ivy one side, and an orca encircled the other. And cleverly hidden in the foliage was a pair of hands, holding onto one another.

“I’m glad you like it.” Haru smiled. Their gazes met.

*So I can be with you in the forest, even when you think you’re alone.*

“Thank you,” Makoto whispered. He cupped Haru’s cheeks and leaned in, the way he had the first time they kissed in the lake that rainy morning. The kiss was as slow as they could make it, both of them locking the taste of the other in their memories.

*I love you*, they told each other in silence.

Haru turned to leave, suddenly aware again of the many eyes of the Iwatobi soldiers on him.

“Come home soon, Haru,” Makoto called out to him.

“Yeah.”

He couldn’t bear to look back as he made his way toward the cage held open for him. It was easy to forget what he was to the rest of the world when he was with Makoto.

“Wait.” The blond captain stopped him before he entered. “Why don’t you ride up front with me this time, kid?”

Haru settled on then carriage bench, and started on the road back to the sea.

Ikuya was standing on a rock overlooking the island when Haru returned.

He cut a tall, dark silhouette against the white spray of waves breaking on the low cliff. It had been ten years, and he wasn’t little anymore. Haru approached him, and there was so much to say, yet when he reached down for the words to begin, he came up empty.

“Hi, Haru.”

Ikuya’s eyes were red, when he wasn’t in the water. Haru had barely ever seen them like this, but they stared at him now, and he thought absently that their hue matched the rust-colored leaves on the forest floor this time of year. Ikuya was changed, like he was, he could tell. Where before his hair had hung into his face like the other sirens’, it was now short—cut just above his ears and baring his slim neck. He looked *human*.

“Hi.”

Haru stopped a few steps away. The two shoreborn sirens stood mute, neither one knowing how to move forward from here. Before he could stop himself, Haru had closed the gap and gathered Ikuya in a tight embrace. Ikuya’s arms came up around him, over his shoulders because the kid was taller than he was.
They stayed like that, swaying slightly, letting the wind ruffle their dry hair. Haru wanted to hear about Ikuya’s stay with his humans, and tell him all that he’d done and learned in Aomori. Tell him about Makoto, and how much family meant to him. They had time.

Slowly, they broke apart and settled onto the rocks, watching the push and pull of the ocean. A pod of dolphins swam past, jumping over the water with a flick of their tails.

“I found my older brother, Haru.” Ikuya said. “My human brother.”

Haru turned to him, shocked.

“He came by the Shiina house one day, where I lived. And Asahi introduced me to him. He didn’t want to talk to me at first, because he hated our kind so much. Said that they sank his family’s boat, years ago. And I don’t…we don’t look much alike, but somehow I knew.”

“Did you tell him?” Haru asked.

“Yeah. After a while.” Ikuya smiled at the ground, poking at a barnacle in the tide pool. “He believed me right away. I think he knew too, if that makes any sense.”

“His name’s Natsuya, and he’s big, and amazing.” Ikuya gushed. “He’s the best swordsman in all of Iwatobi, Haru. My brother.”

Haru huffed a laugh. “I bet your haircut looks like his.”

Ikuya sputtered and shoved Haru off the rock.

Life in the den was as if no time had passed at all. Sirens came and went, speaking little to each other. Haru caught mackerel again, and how he had missed the taste of it. Though he asked himself what it might taste like seared over the fire pit in his and Makoto’s house.

*Does Makoto cook for himself now, without me?*

Suddenly his appetite was gone.

The others were forbidden to hunt in Iwatobi, but they occasionally found other shores, or vagrant ships to plunder. Each time they would return in high spirits, adding new bones to their mounds in the island’s caves. It made Haru sick.

They were murderers—hateful, evil. He could see that clearly now, and wanted no part in it.

This existence wasn’t for him, and he knew Ikuya felt the same. They spent more time together, recounting their experiences and the places they went on land. When they weren’t talking, they would drift under the filtered bars of sunlight near the surface, gazing up at the world they now knew was a bigger part of them than the one below.

“I’m cold, Haru.” Ikuya said one morning.

It was late spring, and the water was warm, but Haru thought he understood. He decided to stop drifting.
Haru waited with Ikuya for Kurou to come home from a hunt, watching as the clan leader emerged from the dark water at the tunnel entrance. The chief of the sirens was thick and muscled with a hard jaw, broad features, and dark hair that clung to his face like kelp. No creature’s hatred for humans burned hotter than his. To most, he was terrifying in his unrivaled ability to tear the light from the living—but today Haru would have his answers.

Blocking Kurou’s path to the den, Haru met his deadly eyes. A faint green shimmer from the water below the cave passage played on the sirens’ faces, and the craggy walls.

“Why did you take me?” Haru demanded.

Kurou bristled, his pupils narrowing dangerously at Haru’s display of insolence. But he must have decided the boy’s bravery was worthy of a response.

“You ask what you know already.” Kurou said. “Our numbers were low, so I made shoreborns. Simple. Now, move, fry.”

But Haru wasn’t finished. “You robbed me of my childhood, my family, my home—twice.”

“And? What do you want from me? An apology? You waste my time. We gave up all of Iwatobi waters to spare your lives, you ungrateful leech.”

“I want you tell me who my real parents were, and where I came from.” Haru clenched his fists to steady himself. “You stole it from me, and you owe it to me.”

The boys held their breath, and for a moment, it looked like the siren chief was going to attack him. But again, he settled.

“Fine.” Kurou glanced venomously at the two boys. “If you want to know that badly, then follow.” Kurou dove back into the water.

Haru stood motionless on the rock a moment. He hadn’t expected Kurou to give him what he asked for so easily, much less agree to take him in person. This wasn’t the time to hesitate, he knew. But what would he do if his parents saw him? If they rejected him? A hundred questions to ask them converged in his mind.

“Haru.” Ikuya put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Shall we go?”

I don’t have to make the journey alone.

Haru gave him a quick nod.

Hours rolled by, and Haru and Ikuya kept pace behind Kurou, following the spidery black of the siren leader’s hair. The sand was miles below them now, the quiet of the open ocean surrounding them.

It was nearing sundown when the sea floor rose up again to meet them, rocks and reeds visible below. Haru’s gaze lingered on the wreck of a ship as they passed.

At last Kurou stopped, treading in the water and sparing a glance behind him for the first time since they had left Moyajima. He swam upwards, and the boys followed, breaking the surface in quiet bursts. It was nearing dusk. The three sirens floated near a stony outcropping where the water swirled around the bits of dark rock above the rising tide.
“Over this boulder is the human city we took you from.” Kurou said. “Go on, then.”

Haru swallowed. Fear of absolute rejection tethered him to the water as he looked up at the rock. He wished Makoto could be here to tell him it would fine, it would all work out no matter what happened.

“Lend me your strength, Makoto.” Haru said under his breath. “I need it for a little while.”

He pushed out of the surf up onto land. Cool evening air chilled his wet skin, making him shiver. Stepping carefully over the jagged stones, he made his way up the rock as he heard Ikuya trail after him. On the other side of it was the place he could have lived, and his family. Just below the crest of the rock, he halted.

Ikuya waited at the foot of the scarp behind him. He smiled reassuringly.

Haru grinned back, and with a final pull, heaved himself over the rock.

What he saw froze the air in his lungs.

The beach before him was completely empty, bleeding into a blackened, barren desolation that reached up the mountainsides of an entire crescent-shaped bay. Nothing but the leaden bones of houses and buildings stood upright, the rest of the seaside state laid waste in bleak onyx heaps.

Haru was sliding down the rock before he was aware of himself. There was a path leading into the town from the beach, and he started walking, one foot in front of the other. Ash was sticking to his legs, and he nearly tripped over the shattered remains of a statue. A gust swept over the naked hillside, and he coughed.

Numbly padding up a wide street, he came upon the stone frame of what was likely a house. It might’ve been his family’s house, he thought. He stopped and seated himself on the crumbled edge of the structure’s foundation. Without turning, Haru felt Ikuya sit down beside him, a comforting presence at his hip.

“Find what you were looking for?” Kurou stood on the path leading up to the house, his body a menacing, shadowy form in the low light.

“What happened?” Haru rasped. “Where is everyone?”


Haru looked out once more over the charred city he could have grown up in, and any hope of meeting his human parents went up in bitter smoke. They had died without ever knowing him.

“They can’t all be dead.” Ikuya persisted. “There must have been survivors. They could be somewhere else—”

“If any survived, they’re gone.” Kurou’s voice was stern and even. “I don’t know where. But this place has long since been empty.”

Haru knelt and buried his fingers in the ash piled up against the stone he sat on. This house had been lived in—people had laughed and loved here, like he had in his family’s cottage in the forest. He thought of all the memories he had made in Aomori, how every person here must have had their own, and now they were nothing more than heaps of grey dust.
The shoreborn sirens sat in silence, mourning the deaths of humans, and watching the tide creep higher up the shore with every push. Kurou waited, never lifting his gaze from the two of them.

“You can’t go back.” The siren leader said at last.

Sitting up, Haru frowned. “Can’t go back where?”

“You can’t live as we do. Not anymore.” Kurou replied. “So I am releasing you.”

“You’re…” Haru wasn’t sure he was grasping the meaning of this.

“I said I’m releasing you. It’s clear the two of you are of no use to the rest of us. If you want to crawl back onto land and find the humans you love so much, you’re both free to go.”

“We—we can just go?” Ikuya clambered to his feet incredulously.

Kurou had started the trudge down the hillside, back to the ocean, his voice still loud over the crashing of waves on the beach. “For what little it’s worth, I still thought of you both as my own.”

The siren leader continued down the street, leaving Haru and Ikuya to gape at each other in disbelief.

We’re free.

Haru leaned out over the side of the carriage and inhaled. Pine, wet leaves, grass, and soil rich from recent rain. The scents of Aomori reminded him of a lively house, a wood shop, and kind eyes greener than the brightest leaf in the forest in spring.

The carriage rattled over the wooden bridge as it was pulled into the city, and Haru’s hand flew to the pendant on his neck.

“Take it.” Extending his thick arm, Kurou placed the delicate blue necklace in Haru’s hand. “So that you’ll always have a drop of the sea with you.”

He could feel the salt water moving around inside the glass, and even if he would never forgive Kurou, he appreciated this piece of the ocean he still loved. He had parted ways with Ikuya where the road split into north and south. The other boy was on his way back to the capital of Iwatobi, to live with his brother and the Shiinas.

“We’ll see each other again soon,” Ikuya said, wrapping Haru in a tight embrace. “Asahi’s always wanted to visit the sacred forest, so you’ll have to show us around.”

Haru huffed a fond laugh. “I’d love to.”

When they rolled into town, Haru jumped off and pulled his hood down over his eyes as he strode through the street. He would greet everyone properly again, in due time. But there was someone he needed to see before he did anything else.
The excitement built up in his chest, and he ran, hopping over the pinecones scattered on the path to their house.

Makoto was there in the garden, heaving a stack of logs into the pile for firewood. He was facing the other way, but suddenly he stopped, back straightening as if he sensed Haru coming.

Slowly, he turned around.

Haru was utterly unable to contain his joy, letting it spill over and leave his face too open, and his stealing his breath. Laughing unreservedly, he sprinted down the path and into his lover’s waiting warmth. Makoto lifted him and twirled him around, repeating his name over and over.

Makoto finally let him down, but kept his strong arms around Haru’s waist.

“I’m home, Makoto. For good.”

“Welcome home, Haru.”

Chapter End Notes

I thought it was best not to split it up and leave off on a happy note. :)
The angry tapping of Gou’s beaded sandals on polished tile echoed in the hall as she made her way toward the nearest balcony.

Rin was late, again. If he was even planning to show up to the council meeting at all.

“Gou, your skirt is dragging…” Chigusa, her handmaiden and best friend, flitted behind her.

“Ugh, if it tears, it’s my brother’s fault.” The princess clutched the fabric and jogged out the doorway.

She was in luck. Rin’s slight, silver-haired assistant was already outside, anxiously holding his leather schedule book close and leaning out over the balustrade.

“Ai, where on earth is my brother?”

“He’s…he’s um…” The boy shied away from her intensity, scooting up against the railing like a scolded puppy. “I told him about the meeting today. He said, he’ll be back…”

Gou opened her mouth to press the boy for more details, but the words vanished on her tongue as a huge shadow passed over the balcony, blotting out the sun, and ruffling her skirt with the beat of massive red wings.

“Never mind,” she fumed.

Rin soared over the palace, heading toward the valley on Tora’s back. He wasn’t getting away that easy. Gou pushed herself up onto the rail and let out two long whistles.

“Gou!” Chigusa ran up behind her. “The council meeting is at noon! Leave him, you’re going to be late!”
One of the winged dragons circling the palace swooped downwards, landing on the balcony gracefully and tucking in his wings so Gou could climb onto his back. She slung her leg over, letting her beautiful skirts bunch up messily around her thighs.

“T’ll be back in time!” Gou said with a sweet smile. She slapped the dragon’s flank thrice, and they were in the air with the quick pump of his blue wings.

“Gou-!” Chigusa cried, but the princess was already well out of earshot. “I spent almost an hour doing that hair…” she sighed. She and Nitori exchanged a tired glance as the dragons took off over the city.

Gou disliked flying. The feeling of weightlessness wasn’t one she enjoyed, and being this high without a saddle had her nerves in a ball at the bottom of her stomach. She much preferred the thundering, grounded mass of her Yuudai, but this dragon was kind enough to do her this favor, so she swallowed her fear and stroked his neck appreciatively. She pulled up beside her brother. Tora was twice the size of this dragon, and keeping up with her was proving to be increasingly difficult.

“You can’t just fly off on Tora whenever there’s important things to do! We’re hosting the king of Iwatobi in less than a week! They’re going to want to discuss the southern border, and lately things with them have honestly been—”

“Uncle can handle it.” Rin said over his shoulder.

“Well maybe, but you should still be there! You could help!”

“Don’t need to.”

“You do! If you don’t talk, at least watch! You’ll be doing all of that someday!”

Kicking Tora’s side lightly, Rin sped up and left Gou in his dragon’s wake. Once, Rin would have jumped at the chance to climb another step closer to his dream of becoming the greatest emperor Samezuka had ever seen. He had told her countless times how he couldn’t wait for the day he’d show everyone what he could do. But her brother had slowly changed, and not in a way she liked. The prince’s eighteenth birthday had come and gone with winter’s chill, and his birthright remained untouched. Another year passed, and then another, but he made no move. The throne sat waiting for him, yet with each passing season, it seemed he flew farther away from it.

Rin and Tora were fast in the air, and there was no way Gou would catch him if he didn’t want to be caught. He spent most of his time riding, these days. But Gou had a fair guess where he was headed, and urged the dragon below her slowly, steadily in the right direction.

She had been right.

Her escort landed a little ways away from where Rin was leaned up against a rock, facing outward at the valley below. He would come here occasionally, when he wanted to be alone. Gou wasn’t sure why exactly, but he’d said it had been a spot he would sit sometimes with…

Gou halted, her ire extinguished and crushed into coal embers as she thought back to her schedule and remembered the date.

“Brother…” she started.

He made no move to acknowledge her.
“He’d be twenty-two today, if he was still alive.” Rin said listlessly.

“Under my protection.” His face twisted into a snarl. “What a load of shit. He died alone in some ditch. I couldn’t protect him from anything.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Gou pleaded.

“I know that!” he snapped. “It’s just…sometimes I think if I had—if things had turned out differently that night, he wouldn’t have run off by himself.”

“Look, why don’t you come back with me?” Gou inched closer, cautiously. “You should do something else, distract yourself. I’m begging you to stop this.”

“You couldn’t understand,” He scowled and stepped away from the cliff.

“Then talk to me.” Gou put her hand tentatively on her brother’s shoulder, even as she felt his doors slamming in her face. “You can tell me things, let me help you. I know I nag, but don’t shut me out, Rin. Please.”

She was treading thin ice. If there was one thing her brother hated, it was being pitied. Still, she needed to remind him that she was on his side.

“Rin, it’s been six years. I know how much you loved him, but you need to let him go,” she said desperately. “I can’t watch you do this anymore. I can’t watch you become like—”

Gou cut herself off, but not soon enough.

“Say it, Gou.”

She gulped.

“…like Mom.”

Her brother met her eyes, and Gou had never seen so much hurt and anger. He shoved past her without a second glance, climbing onto Tora’s back once again. He sat there, hair hanging over his face, and Gou felt the rift between them tear wider.

“You’d better get to that meeting,” Rin said, taking the reins roughly. “ Wouldn’t want you to be late.”

“Where are you going?!” Gou called out.

“To distract myself.” Rin shifted in the saddle, slapped Tora’s flank, and she heaved herself off the cliff into the wind. Gou dropped to her knees in defeat as she watched them leave.

Rin hated that he was running from his duties. Hated that he made his little sister worry for him. Hated that he was going to a fight on Sousuke’s *birthday*.

Gou was right—of course she was. Six years was far too long a time to leave his heart empty, but Rin simply couldn’t bring himself to move on. When his father died, there was a grand funeral, and a month of mourning in the capital. A cenotaph was raised for him in the valley. Matsuoka Toraichi survived in him and Gou, and their mother—wherever she was. The people would hold him in their hearts, and his legacy would live on.
But Sousuke would have none of that. He’d had no home, no family, and left nothing behind. Rin’s vivid recollections of their time together was all that there was, and if he let that slip into obscurity, it would be as if the boy had never existed. So as painful as it was, Rin would cling to his memory for as long as he lived.

They arrived in Sano, gliding over a line of slaves busy at work on a gigantic bridge over the canals. Rin had railed against their enslavement for years after Sousuke died. But each time he spoke out, he had been ignored, laughed at, brushed aside like an errant fly in his own court. What were the pleas of a boy in the face of centuries of tradition? All the more reason to skip today’s meeting, he supposed.

Sano’s bustling entertainment district beneath them was swarming with people entering the stadium. They stopped to stare as he soared over the rooftops, landing on the upper platform. Kisumi was already there waiting for him, his stark white robes shimmering and billowing like clouds in the midday sky.

“Rin!” he chirped. “I knew you wouldn’t miss today.”

“Hmph,” Rin made an irritated sound and slid off the saddle. He stretched his back and strolled around to Tora’s head. “Go eat something, yeah? I’ll see you in a bit.”

She snorted in affirmation and pushed off the platform.

“You know, I never get tired of watching her,” Kisumi said as the dragon flew toward the ocean. The young noble was Sano’s wealthiest businessman, an avid patron of recreational pursuits, and Rin’s closest friend. As soon as Rin was near enough, Kisumi grabbed his shoulder and pecked him on the cheek.

Kisumi fell into stride beside him as they headed down the stairwell to the emperor’s box. “You’re wearing them today!” he sang, tapping the hilts of Rin’s dual knives at his belt. “Aah, that makes me happy!”

The weapons had been a gift to Rin on his eighteenth birthday. They were incomparably sharp blades with polished wooden hilts decorated with gorgeous carvings of dragons and Rin’s favorite flowers. Kisumi had ordered them from someplace overseas. He insisted the wood had some kind of special magic, but Rin didn’t know how much of what Kisumi said he could believe.

The stadium air was already sweltering, abuzz with palpable excitement as thousands of people filtered in and found their seats. A band played at the center of the pit while preparations were made, and cream-colored awnings were pulled taught on corbels high over the lively spectators. Rin took his seat to the right of the emperor’s empty chair, Kisumi next to him.

“One of his last fights today.” Kisumi said, leaning over on the armrest. “He’s got one more after this, and that’ll be it.”

Rin glanced sideways at his friend.

“I hope you’ll still come visit me after he leaves.”

“He’s not…the only reason I come. It’s just something to do.” Rin felt like he needed to reassure himself of that as much as he did Kisumi.

Kisumi giggled and faced forward. “If you say so.”

A horn blew, signaling the start of the games, and Rin was thankful to be spared any more teasing.
Across the field from them, the announcer took his stand, and began animatedly pumping up the audience. The prince shifted in his seat impatiently. After a deafening introduction, the show began. A beast tamer walked out with her three tigers, ordering them through hoops, then a troupe of flame dancers, and finally a singing duo from the northern region.

“Looords and Ladies!” The announcer’s buoyant voice rang out over the audience. “That was all spectacular.” A wave of applause. “But I know what most of you came for, you scoundrels! You came to see a FIGHT!” The crowd erupted into cacophonous cheers and yelling. Drummers started up again, and Rin could feel each beat rattle his bones.

He kept his eyes trained on the iron portcullis at the edge of the field as it clattered open.

“We’ve got an especially good one for you today! First out, Team Gold!” The announcer began listing off names, introducing the fighters one by one as they trotted out into the arena, each wearing bright yellow sashes around their waists. Some of them Rin recognized from previous games.

“—and finally, Team Gold’s heaviest contender, MANBOU!”

The crowd roared as a giant of a man slogged out of the gate. He was more than a head taller than the next largest in the group. Wide, with enormous arms and a thick middle, he raised his battle axe, urging the spectators to applaud even louder. Manbou had been in the arena nearly a year now, and he’d overcome challenger after challenger with sheer bulk and surprising speed. He’d earned a reputation for being exceedingly savage, killing nearly all of his opponents, even in blood matches.*

A hint of unsettlement passed over Kisumi’s face.

“He’s on the other team, then,” Rin said, clenching his jaw.

“And now, the challengers, TEAM BLUE!” The announcer proceeded to introduce the members of the other team, each walking out with an indigo sash and a confident wave. None of them looked even close to being a match for Manbou.

“At the tail of end of this roster,” the announcer boomed, “is a guy we might not be seeing much of soon…” The audience cheered in anticipation. “One of the only men I’ve had the privilege to see make it this far. Not that we intend to make it easy on him here at the end—”

More shouting.

“The unstoppable, unforgettable, JINBEI!!”

Rin craned forward, ignoring Kisumi’s smug sniggering. Jinbei walked out of the gate like the audience wasn’t filling the stadium to the upper level to see him. He didn’t wave, or bow, or even acknowledge the crowd, though that didn’t seem to hamper his earsplitting reception.

A masked helmet always covered Jinbei’s head, and spaulders armed his right shoulder. An array of laceration scars streaked across his tan skin, from his chest to the edge of the sash at his waist. Dressed in a pieced-together replication of traditional Tokitsu armor, he was a novelty in the stadium—one of the last remnants of a lost people. Word of his heritage had been what caught Rin’s attention initially. He came to the first fight with the forthright intent to ask Jinbei if he’d ever known a boy back home named Yamazaki Sousuke.

But Rin’s will failed him that time, and every time after. Occasionally Jinbei would do things, small things—a brush of his arm, or a casual stretch—that reminded Rin so much of Sousuke, it hurt. If he thought too deeply about it, Rin was ashamed of himself, projecting the shadow of his first love onto a man who doubtlessly had his own tragedies. But it was a secret no one had to know.
Fight after grueling fight, he found himself watching Jinbei in earnest.

The fighters in the pit were a mixed bag of apples, and most of them were rotten. Criminals, murderers, and bloodthirsty prisoners from the ranks of Samezuka’s enemies made up the bulk of them. But Jinbei had been a common slave. A man who wanted his freedom badly enough to die reaching for it. Rin had never been one for pit fights before, and even though he’d never met him, Rin wanted Jinbei to win.

As his sponsor, Kisumi stood and clapped for him, naturally. Rin struggled to stop himself from doing the same.

With a steady, even stride, Jinbei made his way to the end of the blue team’s lineup, and the audience dissolved into chaos as bets were placed. After a stretch of deliberation, the announcer took the stage again.

“Wagers are in! Aaaand now we come to the most important question: RED or BLACK?!” A woman was chosen from the audience and brought into the box with him. The announcer presented her with a bag, and the woman reached an eager hand inside.

Red. Red, please.

Rin grit his teeth as the woman extracted and unfurled a pitch black flag from the bag. The crowd screamed their approval. Kisumi hissed quietly beside him.

“Fate has SPOKEN! And a battle to the death it will be! ARE YOU ALL READY!!?” The audience could probably be heard from the palace, Rin thought.

Fighters shuffled into place in the arena below. The drums beat faster.

A second horn was blown, and its blare vibrated in the wood of his chair, shaking ripples in the cups of wine on the table. The match began.

Metal met metal as the warriors fanned out and locked blades with one another. Manbou barreled forward, effortlessly taking down two blue men. Jinbei moved to the back of the group, skirting around the edge like a watchful hawk.

“What’s he doing?” Rin asked.

“He knows this is going to end with him and the big guy.” Kisumi took a nervous sip from his water cup. “So he’s gonna let the giant tire himself out cutting through the others to get to him.”

Rin sat back and watched carefully. Jinbei was no hero, he learned from years of observation. None of them were; he supposed they couldn’t be. A teammate one day would be an enemy the next. The brutality of it all hit him hard sometimes.

“He’s not the biggest, strongest man out here,” Kisumi had said once. “He’s survived because he’s the smartest.”

A member of the gold team approached from behind, blade aimed for the back of Jinbei’s neck. Without turning to look, the fighter slid out of the way, taking advantage of the other man’s open stance to jab him between the ribs with his sword. Jinbei fought with concise, calculated strength. He was aware of every body on the field, wasting no actions as he dominated the space in a wide radius around him. Rin was mesmerized by the way he moved.

The others caught on as Manbou bowled through two more blue team members, making a bold
break for Jinbei at the other end of the fray. They cleared a path to let him through. Jinbei stopped moving and lowered his stance.

Rin grasped the armrest of his seat.

*He’s watching.*

Sousuke’s senses zeroed in on the only things that mattered in this moment: the sure grip of the sword in his right hand, the sight and sound of the man charging at him through the chaos, and the electrifying rush of Rin’s eyes on him.

Manbou came forward with an exalted yell, axe poised to take his head. The others moved their brawl out of the way, leaving a wide area open for the two of them. Sousuke took two deep breaths, washing out the loud babble of the crowd.

One landed attack from Manbou would mean the end. Rin was in the box above, his presence a calm reminder of why Sousuke still strove for victory—the reason he couldn’t afford to make mistakes. Watching the giant clobber through the others had given Sousuke a good idea of the length of his reach, and he slid around of the edge of it.

Manbou swung at him when he stepped deceptively closer, missing each time as he jumped nimbly back out of reach. The man was getting angry, his attacks more manic as Sousuke wore him down. The audience wanted to see a duel, but he wasn’t going to chance a move inward unless it would yield a success.

Sousuke knew his athleticism gave him the upper hand in stamina where he lacked it in size, and finally he saw the other man slow. Quick as an eel, he darted inside, scoring a deep cut into Manbou’s right arm. The warrior cursed, taking another wide swing. His strikes were weaker now, and Sousuke ran around, slashing the back of the giant’s knee. His thick legs buckled, bringing him to the ground.

Sousuke finished the fight.

Rin could see the blood from Manbou’s throat cascade down the man’s wide chest as he landed face-down in the dirt. The prince let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

The fall of the giant shook the gold team to its foundation, and with Jinbei joining the melee at last, Team Blue seized a quick, deadly victory. The remaining five men stood in the center of the field on the red-soaked ground and raised their fists in triumph, to the thunderous cries and applause of the stadium.

Beside him, Kisumi was bouncing excitedly and clapping. As royalty, Rin was forced to school his face into neutrality, but he kept his eyes on one man. Jinbei was in the center of the other fighters as they slapped him on the back and cuffed him on the arms. He turned his head up toward the stands, and Rin swore he was looking at him through the metal mask of his helmet. Rin doubted Jinbei could see it from where he was, but he sent down a small, relieved smile.

The announcer was saying some words to wrap up, but they were wholly drowned out by the din.
“That boy’s really something,” said Kisumi, falling back into his seat and popping a fig tart into his mouth.

“He is,” Rin replied. “He’s amazing.”

Sousuke removed his helmet and wiped a spot of blood from his cheek where it had splattered through the grating.

The image of Rin’s smile from a few moments ago lingered in his mind like the sweet aftertaste of honeycomb. Time had only made Rin even more impossibly beautiful. That smile had become a painfully rare sight, and Sousuke treasured every one.

Raucous laughter burst out from the chamber behind him. The other victors were celebrating with rum and women, but all Sousuke wanted right now was a hot bath and the peace of his own room. He wanted it almost badly enough to pretend he couldn’t hear the bubbly shouts assaulting him from down the hall.

“JIINBEI!” Kisumi bounded toward him, comely face brimming with joy. “Incredible, as always! Not even a scratch on you. Give your biggest fan a hug!” He giggled, spreading his arms wide.

Sousuke raised his eyebrows and stared blankly at his sponsor’s immaculate white robe. Kisumi’s gaze landed on Sousuke’s gore-spattered torso, and his smile slipped.

“Ah…imagine my arms encircling your body…” Kisumi made a dramatic hugging motion as Sousuke strode past him.

Sousuke’s sponsor was a pink ball of cotton, rolled in flowers and dipped in sin. They had met as teenagers when Sousuke was in combat school. He still has no idea where Kisumi obtained the information, but the wealthy trader’s son had known Sousuke’s real name, and everything about him he’d worked so hard to hide. When Kisumi asked to personally sponsor him and vowed to keep his secret, Sousuke agreed. They’d been odd partners ever since.

Kisumi whirled around and sidled up to him, leaning in to speak quietly. “He was happy, too. You should see how worried he gets.”

Sousuke scoffed dismissively.

“He comes just see you, you know,” Kisumi prodded.

“It doesn’t matter how many times you tell me that; I’m not going to believe it,” Sousuke said.

“Oh I know.” Kisumi grinned. “But I’m still going to tell you. Have you decided what you’ll do once the collar’s cut?”

“No. Not sure. I’ll…go home, probably. To whatever’s left.”

This wasn’t true. But not even Kisumi could know what he planned to do with his freedom—the flame at the end of the tunnel that had fueled him through years of bloody battle.

Distracted, Sousuke hadn’t noticed as Kisumi ushered him into a private chamber.

“Well then, while you’re still my champion, I have a favor to ask.” Kisumi cleared his throat. “In a week, the king of Iwatobi and his court will be hosted at the capital. Predictably, the royal family has
a huge reception banquet planned.”

Sousuke didn’t like where this was going.

“I’ve been invited, of course, as a prominent, upstanding citizen of the empire,” Kisumi continued, twirling his rosy curls in his fingers. “And while I do love a good party, I’d feel much better if I had some…extra security with me.”

“You’re asking me for a favor on my birthday?”

“I promise I’ll make it up to you!” Kisumi whined.

“It’s at the palace,” Sousuke said. “There’ll be more guards there than guests.”

Kisumi just waited, smiling innocently. Sousuke let the answer find him. Charming and generous as he was, the nobleman had his own secrets. There were probably more of them than Sousuke ever dared to count. His wealth was achieved through prosperous trade with the kingdom of Iwatobi, and while most of it was legal, some of the goods he dealt with were decidedly undisclosed.

“You’re up to something shady and you need security of the unlisted variety,” Sousuke stated flatly.

“I tell everyone you’re smart for a reason, Sousuke.” Kisumi made to sling a friendly arm around him, but stopped himself again and settled for patting Sousuke gingerly on a clean patch of his shoulder.

“Anyway, I’ve already had a bath sent up to your room with rose petals, your favorite!”

“You dumping them in my bath every time doesn’t make them my favorite.”

Kisumi ignored him as usual, planting a quick kiss on his cheek and leaving in a flurry of pink and white. “I’ll see you in a few days!”

“Oh and Jinbei!” Kisumi peeked his head around the doorway. “Just remember there’s always a place for you at my house, if you decide to stick around.”


The arrival of Iwatobi’s royalty was the talk of the moment on every street corner from the capital gardens to the underground markets of Sano. Young King Serizawa had come with his court and a hundred men, his proud captain Kirishima at the head. They rode through the main gate in magnificent gleaming armor, flying their rich blue and silver banners.

It was the night of the banquet, eve of their first joint summit, and Rin was a frazzled mess.

Iwatobi had come under friendly terms, but if things played out as Samezuka planned, they might not be leaving in the same fashion. The southern border had been a point of contention for the last two seasons—Samezuka creeping downward, and Iwatobi unyielding. Rin knew his uncle wanted to fly in and claim the rest of the bountiful province, regardless of whatever terms King Serizawa put forth.

It spelled almost certain conflict, and Rin had spoken stubbornly against it. He had been summarily dismissed.

Uncle Akira was a better leader, could command fealty from people in a way Rin hadn’t been able to. An empty-headed idealist wasn’t fit to rule Samezuka, Rin reminded himself. Though at the same
time, the fear of what might come of this Iwatobi visit loomed on the horizon.

Pacing around his room, Rin halted in front of his mirror. He hadn’t slept at all the night before, and the dark circles under his eyes gave his pale complexion a haunted look. Rin was exhausted—worn down and pulled taught like a frayed thread at the end of its spool.

“Prince Rin. The wine you requested.” Nitori was at the doorway shuffling timidly, holding a tray with a flagon and two bronze cups.

“Set it on the bed table.”

“Of course.” Nitori did so, then drew his arms in, making no move to leave. He coughed into his fist, wide periwinkle eyes meeting Rin’s in the mirror.

“Yes, Ai?” Rin tried to mask his irritation.

“It’s just…you rarely drink, and it’s nearly time for the banquet. So I was wondering if it’s wise to… do so at this time.”

Rin whipped around with a guttural growl. “I asked for wine, not a flimsy lecture from the boy who does nothing but badger me all fucking day.”

Nitori flinched as Rin slammed his hand on the dresser, rattling the bottles of oils and perfumes.

“Leave.”

“Apologies, Your Grace.” The assistant bowed deeply, and skittered out of the prince’s chamber.

Regret snaked its way into the quiet that followed. Rin poured himself a cup of wine with shaky hands, and drained it in seconds flat, desperate to calm his fried nerves. Years’ worth of frustration and loneliness was layering on top of him, and he was drowning. He had watched helplessly as the people he loved disappeared, and his dreams slipped through frozen fingers.

Everyone would be looking at him, and Rin knew somehow he would find a way to be a failure. He snatched the flagon again and refilled the empty cup. He had kept his walls up for years, and he could hold them together tonight.

A concerned grunt drew him to the door. Tora was curled up on the balcony outside the bedroom, lining her eye up with the doorway to see Rin inside.

“I know. I know. I have to stop pushing them all away.” He reached a hand up to scratch her under the chin. She tilted her head to the side contentedly. “At least you’ll have my back, right?” Rin leaned his forehead into Tora’s rough scales, sharing in her pleasant warmth for a few precious, peaceful minutes. He steeled himself for the evening ahead.

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Sousuke’s breath hitched at the sight of the palace as he rode up to the entry. The last time he’d seen it this closely, he’d been running away from the love of his life. He had no business coming back here.

The palanquin came to a stop, and Kisumi stepped out gracefully. The bright crystals on his bracelets
jingled with his every movement. His favorite iridescent green feather earrings hung from his ears.

“My contact and I won’t be meeting until a bit later tonight. You don’t have to stay with me the whole time,” Kisumi whispered through a smile as he waved at some of the other guests. “It’s a party; enjoy yourself.”

“I’m in an imperial guard uniform, in case you forgot.” Sousuke glanced around anxiously. If he was caught off the compound, it would mean trouble for both of them.

“True. But still. It should be an easy exchange. If all goes well, I might not even need you.” He lifted the hem of his robe to begin the stairs up to the entrance. “Just pay a little attention to the orb is all I ask, okay?”

Sousuke’s hand slipped into his pocket, fingers curling around the glassy sphere. The apricot-sized orb was one of Kisumi’s odd magic-infused items he’d acquired from his trips to Iwatobi. They had used it a few times before. Sousuke couldn’t begin to guess how the things worked. Kisumi kept its mate, and they were charmed to glow and draw together like magnets when one of them was rubbed.

The muffled sound of calm crowds and soft music greeted them at the top of the low stairs. Samezuka Palace’s mammoth gilded doors were held open, illuminating the threshold in the glow from inside. Sousuke followed his sponsor dutifully, nodding once at the stationed guards. He had never entered through the front before—he and Rin had always taken their mischief through other passages. The fearsome grandeur of the main hall from this angle was breathtaking.

On the ceiling high above was a mosaic mural of two winged dragons encircling each other around a ring of flames. The dragons’ scales were brilliant tiles of lapis, jade, topaz, and gold flecks, glittering in the light from tiered chandeliers. Sousuke nearly lost sight of his sponsor as he craned his neck upward to admire it.

Guests from Iwatobi and Samezuka alike were milling around the ornate marble floor, dressed in a rainbow of lavish ensembles. Sousuke fidgeted with his shirt behind Kisumi, feeling wildly out of place and grateful that he could hide within his helmet. His sponsor’s easy magnetism was already on full display as he engaged in some lively conversation with two amused Iwatobi women. He caught Kisumi winking at one of them, and rolled his eyes.

Sousuke spotted the imperial family and their royal guests on a platform across the hall. He scowled behind the visor as his eyes landed on Emperor Akira at the center. Beside him was the king of Iwatobi, a wise-looking young man with green eyes and neatly braided argentate hair. Gou was there, radiant and chatting animatedly with the king’s charismatic captain. To the emperor’s left, sunken dejectedly into his chair, was Rin. Down as he seemed, Rin was still the most beautiful thing in this entire palace.

The night inched on, Kisumi was off somewhere, and Sousuke had long since had enough of the party. He strode out the tall doors to the balcony, welcoming the open air. There was no moon tonight.

Balconies in Samezuka Palace were wide and sturdy, built to serve as perches and landing spots for gargantuan winged beasts. Standing at the far edge of one, Sousuke felt comfortably removed from the noise in the main hall. The courtyard garden lay beneath him.

He’d spent countless afternoons down there in lively battles with Rin, chasing each other and locking wooden swords until sundown. The old gingko at the edge of the clearing used to be their favorite spot to stretch out afterward, lying close together on their backs in the grass and piles of fanned leaves.
Commotion erupted to Sousuke’s side. People murmured in hushed shock, and cleared aside as a red-haired figure stormed onto the balcony.

*Rin*

The man headed straight for the balustrade in a bullish rampage, kicking over a potted plant, spilling soil and vines over the ground.

Guests left the area in a hurry, whispering to one another. Sousuke stayed where he was, hand all but chained to the stone as he watched the prince stomp his way to the rail beside him.

“I'M DONE!” Rin roared. “FUCK ALL OF IT!” He let out a despairing cry and gripped the thin golden crown on his head, hurling it off the balcony into the trees.

The prince was leaning heavily on the railing, hair disheveled, black and crimson robe slipping off one shoulder. He looked up at Sousuke with miserable, defeated eyes and Sousuke felt his heart stutter and splinter into tiny, useless pieces.

“Pathetic, right? That what you’re thinking?” Rin’s voice was low, dark and laden with emotion.

Sousuke shook his head. He couldn’t take his eyes off of Rin. He hadn’t been this close to him since they parted at the Fire Festival. The exuberant boy he had left that night was nowhere to be seen in this man.

When Sousuke made no move, Rin took a drink from the tall cup in his hand, wincing slightly at the strong taste.

Music from the main hall reached them, lively notes wafting out from the bright, open doors. Sousuke knew he should go; he wasn’t a part of Rin’s life anymore—but he couldn’t seem to move his feet. He was grateful for the band inside, staving off the weight of complete silence.

“Don’t like dancing?” Rin said at last.

Sousuke jumped. “I…I uh. I’ve never been…that good.”

“Yeah. Not my thing either.”

“Yes it is.” Inwardly kicking himself, Sousuke coughed. “I mean, it…you look like you’d be good at it. I’m sure the people would love to see you.”

Rin huffed a spiteful laugh. “People don’t care. If I stayed out here all night, I doubt anyone would notice I’m gone until morning tomorrow.”

The prince’s handsome face was flushed cherry red, and Sousuke caught the scent of alcohol on his breath from where he stood.

“I’m sure that’s not true. You’re their prince.”

“And you’re *Jinbei.***”

Caught, Sousuke bristled.

“You came in with Kisumi, and palace guards don’t slouch.”

Sousuke instinctively straightened his back, and Rin’s thin mouth pulled up at the corners.
“Also… I recognized the way you walk.” The flush on Rin’s cheeks deepened, and he busied himself with the intricacies of his cup. “Don’t worry; I won’t fucking tell anyone you’re off the compound. I know Kisumi brought you out here.”

Another taught silence fell over them, and Sousuke thought he should say something, but couldn’t make any perceivable sense of his jumbled thoughts. It was all too much, too close. In the six years they had been apart, he had daydreamed a hundred different impossible ways he might meet Rin again, and this wasn’t even close to being one of them. Rin sighed and looked out over the courtyard.

“Tonight was supposed to be a casual greeting with Iwatobi, but I still managed to fuck it up.”

“Serizawa asks me what the future looks like, how long I plan to sit on my birthright. And I didn’t have an answer for him.” Rin took another sip of wine. “So I got mad and yelled, and left. Uncle and Gou are in there trying to salvage the whole thing. It’s what I always do—let people down.”

Sousuke stilled, listening as Rin raised his head and continued.

“Thing is, I used to know what I wanted. We’re dragon lords, and people obey us because they’ve seen what we can do, and they’re afraid of us. I had all of these big ideas about how I would change that. I was so sure I could give Samezuka a better future. But when I tried, no one would listen. No one cared, and nothing changed.”

He fixed his gaze somewhere over the wall, toward the valley.

“Somehow I thought people would want to follow me because they loved me, but Uncle was right. Fear is always stronger than love. There was never a place in the real world for a stupid kid with a head full of hollow dreams.”

“You’re not wrong to want that.” Sousuke said as Rin took another despondent drink. “You can’t give up on your dreams.”

“That’s easy to say.” Rin scowled into his cup. “But it’s tiring, beating against the waves. You just want to stop swimming, and let yourself sink, because the tide keeps rolling no matter what you fucking do.”

“Rin, I think you’ve already helped people—saved them in ways you aren’t even aware of.” The words were out of his mouth before Sousuke could bite them down.

Curious, Rin scooted down the railing and shortened the distance between them. His eyes were unfocused and he swayed slightly. Sousuke knew the prince couldn’t possibly see his face in the helmet, but his jaw still tightened nervously under the scrutiny.

“You’re a weird guy, Jinbei.” Rin tilted the drink back and took a long draught to finish the rest of his wine in one go, as Sousuke watched worriedly. When he’d emptied the cup completely, Rin let it drop off the balcony into the bushes below. He sagged over the rail, breathing hard.

“Not sure why I told you all that shit. I’ve never said it to anyone before. M’sorry. Gonna head back in.”

“Are you sure you’re alright to go back?”

“M’fine,” Rin slurred. He let go of the balustrade, but didn’t make it far. The hem of his long robe caught under his slipper, and he stumbled headlong into the spilled planter. Rin landed gracelessly in a hunched-over heap of black and red.
“Rin!” Sousuke forgot himself completely, rushing down to help the prince.

“I’m fine!” Rin sat up lightning-fast, and spat out a blade of grass. “Get away! Don’t look at me! I’m fucking fine! Just…leave!”

He rolled over and pushed himself halfway to his feet, only to step on his robe again and collapse. This time, he stayed down.

“I said leave…”

Sousuke stood motionless, aching to help him, but afraid to overstep his already sorely tested boundary. He watched, arms hovering outstretched in the air, waiting on a word. The soft sound of sniffling reached him, followed by a muffled sob. Rin’s shoulders started to shake, and Sousuke swooped down without another second thought.

Looping Rin’s arm over his neck, Sousuke hugged Rin’s waist and rose, pulling the prince up with him. Rin found his unsteady footing as Sousuke brushed the dirt and leaves from his front. His sobs were coming in earnest now, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Humiliating…” he croaked.

“Not at all,” Sousuke said. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Once the crying had begun, Rin couldn’t seem to stop. He crumbled and wept into Sousuke’s sleeve, ripping the clasps of Sousuke’s shirt as he grasped the fabric.

“I’m so tired.”

“So fucking tired.”

With his shirt torn wide open, Sousuke’s collar was exposed, and sweat beaded on his temple at the prospect of being seen. Dragging Rin through the main hall would be disastrous for both of them, so Sousuke pulled him the long way through the garden, around to the servants’ entrance. Grateful that the smaller hallway was not in use during the party, they made a stop at a washroom, and stumbled onward toward the royal chambers.

After a few more failed attempts to keep Rin upright at the top of the second staircase, Sousuke resigned. He bent to sweep the prince’s feet out from under him, hoisting Rin high on his chest. Rin was too drunk and drained to put up much of a struggle for pride’s sake. He let his body go slack, head lolling onto Sousuke’s shoulder. As they made their way down the long corridor, Sousuke could feel Rin’s quiet sobs on his neck and a growing wetness on the hem of his shirt. He flexed his arms and held Rin tighter.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

He had let his friend go to live a long, glorious life as royalty without him. Rin had been a star over the open ocean, burning with passion enough to set all the rest of them aflame. The world had dragged him out of the sky, and Sousuke hadn’t been there to catch him.

The prince’s room was the same one it had always been—the high-roofed chamber at the end of the hall. Sousuke pushed the double doors open, and brought Rin inside, shutting them with a kick. Making his way to the bed, he pulled back the covers and gently lay Rin down on the mattress.

“Are you alright?” he asked.
Rin groaned and hissed through his teeth.

Sousuke slid down to remove Rin’s shoes, and made deft work of the sash at his waist, unclasping golden anklets and arm bands as he moved up. Rin lay still, watching with teary, half-lidded eyes as Sousuke undid his necklace and set it on the bed table. He shivered at the touch of Sousuke’s calloused fingers at the back of his neck.

There was a partially-filled flagon of wine on a tray there, and Rin made a clumsy grab for it.

“I think you’ve had enough of that.” Sousuke moved the wine out of Rin’s reach and poured water into the cup for him instead.

Rin drank it as Sousuke held the cup steady, and dropped back onto the pillow with an airy whumpf. Sousuke drew the cover up over him. This was far too dangerous, and he knew he shouldn’t be here. But every tiny sound from Rin was keeping Sousuke helplessly anchored to the bedside.

“Can’t…see you…” Rin whispered.

Blinking away the moisture in his eyes, the prince was peering into the slits of Sousuke’s helmet. He was searching for a human face inside the iron shell— looking for a pair of eyes to draw assurance from, and Sousuke couldn’t give that to him. It seemed cruel to leave him like this.

Rin needed to know he wasn’t alone.

*I’m getting swept away. I should go.*

He stood.

*What the hell am I doing?*

Sousuke extinguished the sconces on the wall, acutely aware of Rin’s gaze following his every movement. Taking a deep breath, he put out the last flame, plunging the room into darkness.

*There’s no moon tonight.*

Sousuke was accustomed to moving in the dark, but he had never used the shadows for something like this. Faint starlight filtered through the windows onto Rin, washing his beauty in mellow silver. With his back to them, Sousuke seated himself on the bed. Against the night sky, he was nothing but a shape in the gloom.

Sousuke unhooked the chinstrap, and slid the helmet off of his head.
They sat unmoving, breathing softly in the dark. Rin brought a cautious, trembling hand up to run his knuckles across Sousuke’s cheek. The prince smoothed his fingers through Sousuke’s short, coarse hair. Warm palms slid around to cup his jaw, grazing the scar on the right side, a thumb running curiously over his lips. Sousuke let Rin explore, almost sick with affection for the man beneath him on the bed.

“You’ve…always reminded me of someone I knew.” Rin murmured through the fog. “My best friend.” His fingernails stroked the shell of Sousuke’s ear. “I let him go…and I lost him.”

Rin’s whispers were a sharpened spear through the gut. Guilt curdled in Sousuke’s veins.

It took Rin’s soft touch at his collar for Sousuke to come back to himself. He took the prince’s wrist and brought it down to the bed. Rin’s hand instantly curled around his.

“I won’t go anywhere,” He lied. Another promise he would have to break.

Sousuke waited, bowed over his friend’s bed, until Rin settled into sleep.

Sitting there, Rin’s hand in his, Sousuke felt something inside him stir and flicker. He had spent four torturous years furiously carving out a space for himself amongst the living. In the midst of savagery, it had been easy to let his darkness overtake him. But beneath his wrath and simmering lust for revenge, there had always been love. There had always been Rin.

With a shaky exhale, Sousuke sat up. A veil of peacefulness lay over Rin’s delicate features while he slept, his long eyelashes still sparkling with tears. A stray lock of hair had caught in his sharp teeth, and Sousuke reached over to brush it back. The phantom warmth of Rin’s skin lingered on his fingertips.

Minutes ticked by, and Sousuke couldn’t tear himself away.

At the bottom of his field of vision, he caught something moving. Blinking.
Sousuke scrambled to extract Kisumi’s orb from his pocket. It glowed a faint violet in his palm. He had to go, now. Carefully, regretfully, he slipped his hand out of Rin’s grasp. After refilling the cup with water, he traversed the dark bedroom, halting at the doorway to drink in the sight of Rin one last time.

“I’m so sorry,” he said again, and darted out into the empty hallway, shutting the door behind him.

The sphere was glowing brighter.

Shit shit shit shit

He hadn’t been minding the orb, too captivated by Rin to notice much of anything else. Speeding down the corridors, he remembered he had left his helmet on the floor beside the prince’s bed. It was too late to go back for it now, and panic moved his legs faster.

Following the orb’s pull down a narrow staircase, he blew past a petite silver-haired boy who yelped and flattened himself against the wall to stay out of his way.

Don’t be dead, Kisumi, I fucking swear—

Night air cooled the sweat on Sousuke’s skin as he sprinted over the palace rampart, heart still beating wildly. He rounded a corner, and— was face-to-face with his extremely distressed sponsor.

Kisumi had never looked so relieved to see him. “And here he is! My secret weapon!” He leaped around Sousuke to hide behind his wide back, urging his champion forward. “Save me,” he hissed in Sousuke’s ear.

In front of him were three Iwatobi mercenaries with longswords drawn, and a cloaked, hooded figure behind them.

Sousuke drew his own blade as he sized the men up and flipped through his options. “What happened to ‘easy exchange?’”

“Well I did get what I came for,” Kisumi said, lifting a leather case in his hand. “And my business contact left earlier. So if we both live, I’m still calling tonight a success.”

One of the men came at him first, swinging high. Sousuke blocked, ducked in to knock him off-balance, and kicked him over the parapet. Occasionally, rarely, Kisumi’s secret meetups were interrupted by thieves, which necessitated Sousuke’s presence, he supposed. He could only assume that was the case tonight, though something about these mercenaries seemed off.

“Oooh Sousuke!” Kisumi cooed as Sousuke engaged the other two men at once. “Where’s your helmet? And what happened to your shirt!? Do I owe you an apology?”

“Not now, Kisumi.” Sousuke growled, running his blade through the back of the second attacker.
“Later, though!”

Rounding on the one left alive, Sousuke charged forward. The rampart was wide, giving the man plenty of room to run if he chose. He didn’t. And after a cut to his hand, Sousuke was at his throat to end the duel.

“Well that’ll about do it!” Kisumi called out to the hooded onlooker. “I think we’ll be off! Enjoy what’s left of the evening!” Waving, he started down the walkway, beckoning Sousuke after him. Warily, they began jogging back the way he’d come.

Shrill laughter pierced the air over the palace grounds. They chanced a look back as the mysterious figure threw back their hood. Pale blonde hair shone in the starlight, framing the complexion of an alluring young woman. More confused than ever, Sousuke turned to his sponsor to demand an explanation, but Kisumi was staring across the wall at her, skin blanched.

“I think I will enjoy the rest of my evening, Shigino, thank you!” The woman waved her hand in an elegant arc, and a stream of stone and sand swirled up over the parapet onto the walkway in front of her. The bodies of the two men Sousuke had just felled dissolved into sand before her and joined the rest of the twisting, clumping mass.

All Sousuke could do was stare in horror as the mass began to take shape. A thick pair of legs, bruitish arms, a hunched back, and finally the hideous face of an ogre materialized on the walkway. In full flesh and towering over the woman at twice her height, the creature snarled and forced air from its flat nostrils, beady eyes fixed on Sousuke and Kisumi.

“Kisumi…?”

“Run.”

Sousuke’s knowledge about Iwatobi and its workings was limited, to say the least. It was a land with magical rocks, and a few magical people, and that was the extent of his awareness. It was enough to recognize the woman for what she was: a sorcerer.

“Who is that, and why is she trying to kill you?!?” Sousuke barked as the two of them sprinted down the rampart. He could hear the rumble of the monster thundering after them, feeling each pound of its massive feet in the vibrations of the stone.

“Hazuki Kyo,” Kisumi panted. “And she doesn’t want to kill me. She wants to catch me.”

“What?!”

The ogre let out a gurgling growl. The distance between them was shrinking too quickly. Sousuke seized Kisumi’s sleeve to urge him faster. The doorway leading to the staircase was ahead, and once they were through, the size of the creature would strand it outside.

Just a few more meters, and they would be safe within the wall.

With a harsh crack, one of the stones on the walkway was upturned to cover the doorway completely. They were trapped.

That high-pitched cackle carried over the air again. “If you come with me, birdbrain, I’ll let your friend live! It would be a true shame to ruin a gorgeous face like his!”

The ogre snorted as it approached, the rumbling in the ground increasing with every step. It would be on them in seconds, and Sousuke adjusted his grip, preparing to make a desperate stand.
Kisumi spun around and pulled Sousuke to a gap in the parapet. He was grinning through obvious terror as a gust from below blew his bangs up.

“Sousuke, do you trust me?”

“Honestly, no.”

Kisumi snickered and jumped off the wall, bodily hauling Sousuke over with him.

He opened his mouth to curse, but Sousuke had left his voice at the top of the rampart. Somewhere above, the ogre let out an anguished cry. The ground was screaming up to meet them, and he knew he should close his eyes for this last part, but morbid fascination compelled him to keep looking.

As he fell, he let himself think of Rin, happy that he’d been able to see the prince one last time.

And then his world was white and gold.

Feathers encased him, glowing and shimmering, almost ghostly in their appearance. They opened back up in a split second, and the streets of the capital were gone. He was floating, no—flying, downward into Sano Stadium.

“Watch your feet!” came Kisumi’s songlike voice from above. His arms were still locked beneath Sousuke’s shoulders, holding him high over the ground of the empty arena.

Sousuke tipped his head back to look up. The feathers belonged to a pair of white wings, and those wings belonged to Kisumi. He allowed himself a few seconds to question if he was dead after all.

Circling once around the dark stadium, Sousuke touched down in the sand with a brief stumble. Kisumi landed daintily a short distance away, stretching his wings once and folding them behind his back. Embers floated down around him like tiny fireflies.

Speechless, chest heaving, blood still pounding in his ears, Sousuke watched Kisumi dust himself off, waiting for anything. The man turned around unhurriedly.

“It’s later! So, are you gonna tell me who ripped open your shirt, or can I guess?”

Sousuke was really, truly not in the mood for this. He fisted his hand in the fabric of Kisumi’s robe. “What the fuck was that?” He waved a frantic arm at the man’s wings, which still emitted a faint light. “Why do you have wings, Kisumi? What the hell is going on?”

Kisumi let himself be manhandled, unperturbed. “Rude! If you don’t answer my questions, why should I answer yours?” He ducked out of Sousuke’s grip and put a few meters between them.

“Do you remember the ten-year treaty Iwatobi made with the sirens of Moyajima?” Kisumi’s irises flashed a deep, otherworldly purple.

“Of course,” Sousuke breathed.

“The Hazuki sisters made that deal. Just the three of them alone, not even fifteen years old, scared the sirens enough to sign a truce. That was thirteen years ago, and they haven’t been idle. All three serve King Serizawa.”

“If they’re so powerful, why have a treaty?” Sousuke frowned. “Why haven’t they just killed the creatures?”

“You’re asking the right questions,” Kisumi said with an impish wink. “Unfortunately, I don’t have
time to answer any of them before I go! I have to see to something, immediately.” He whirled away, facing the sky again.

“What?! Hold on, you can’t just—”

“Oh, I nearly forgot!” Kisumi spun around, and Sousuke felt the warmed air from his wings. “Happy Late Birthday, Sousuke!” He pushed the leather case into Sousuke’s arms.

“Thank…you.” Sousuke blinked.

“It’s a sample of potions from Iwatobi,” Kisumi said. “I’m having a shipment of them delivered in a few months. Tonight was just smoothing over some details.”

Reaching into Sousuke’s space, he clicked open the latch. An assortment of colored glass vials filled with liquid were delicately cushioned in velvet inside.

“Green ones are antidotes and healing, blue ones are for good luck, yellow are for energy. Oh, and the pink ones are my favorites! They make that feeling right before you orgasm last three times as long!”

Sousuke choked. “Kisumi! Are you telling me you risk your life for magical sex potions?”

“See, you say that because you haven’t tried them.” He skipped away, spreading his wings again. “And I sincerely hope you do!”

“You’re leaving?! Now?” Sousuke closed the case and rushed forward. “What about the sorcerer sisters? Where are you going?”

“I’m sorry, Sousuke. Something is very, very wrong, and I need to talk to the Cat as soon as possible. Been a while since I’ve paid the forest a visit.”

Desperate to have at least the most important of his burning questions answered, Sousuke shouted after his friend. “Is Rin safe!?” He knew he sounded pathetic, but he didn’t care. “Those sisters are at the palace, aren’t they? Will he be in danger?”

Kisumi paused, thoughtfully considering a response. “I can’t say for certain.”

Sorcerers and monsters didn’t scare Sousuke half as much as hearing those words.

“But don’t go trying to warn him.” Kisumi eyed him gravely. “I know how the Hazukis are, and if he tries to do something about them, which he will, he’ll put himself in danger for sure.”

Sousuke hated that Kisumi had made so much sense.

“Be careful, Jinbei.” Kisumi darted in to peck him on the cheek. “I’ll be back before you can miss me!”

His luminous wings wrapped around him again, and when they drew back, an elegant white bird hovered over the ground where Kisumi had been. With a teasing glint in its violet eye, the bird took off over Sousuke’s head, and disappeared in a flash of gold.

Sano Stadium was deathly quiet, and Sousuke stayed rooted to the middle of the field as the last of the embers twinkled out around him. Making sense of everything he had just seen would take some serious thought and time. But he was sure of one thing: Rin needed him. His freedom could not come soon enough.
“Prince Rin.”

“It’s quite late, Your Grace. I really think you should wake now.”

Rin groaned and rolled over into the pillow. His entire body felt heavy, and pain throbbed in his head like he was clamped in a dragon’s jaws. Even Nitori’s considerate whispering was too loud.

“Mmngghh later, Ai,” he mumbled.

“But Prince—”

“Later.”

A sigh and the sound of quiet steps fading in the direction of the door told Rin that Nitori had left. He let his mind float lazily back into the downy lull of sleep.

“RIN, GET THE FUCK UP!”

Morning light exploded into Rin’s bedroom as the curtains were thrown back. He might as well have been tossed into the sun.

“Gooouu,” he whined, heaving an arm up to block out the blinding white.

“I can’t believe you! Get out of bed!” The princess unlatched the lock and opened his balcony doors to let in the crisp outside air. Tora was gone, likely out catching breakfast with Sango. “I’m not even going to start with how angry I am at you for getting so drunk at the banquet.”

“Nnngh I know.” Rin flopped onto his back. “I’ll sort it out later,” he said, still not deigning to open his eyes. “Least I made it to bed, though.”

“That’s not what I heard.” Gou was in his closet, fishing around for something clean. “Nitori said one of the guards carried you to your room.”

Rin lurched up onto his elbows. “Huh?!” Rubbing away the sleepy blurriness, he glanced over at his bedside table. All of his jewelry was laid out flat and orderly, his sash folded neatly and hung over the chair. Something metallic caught his eye.

A helmet sat forgotten on the floor next to his bed. Rin’s eyes widened.

The previous night came flooding back to him. The conversation on the balcony, staggering up to his room, gentle hands and a deep, clear voice. After endless months of walling himself in, Rin had laid himself bare, and broken down into the arms of a man he’d never even spoken to before. A man he’d spent the last few years admiring. His cheeks burned hotter the longer he thought about it, and he collapsed back onto the pillow, utterly mortified.

Yet guilty as he was, he felt like a leaden weight had been lifted from his chest.

“I need to find him. I have to apologize.”
Gou hurled a tunic at Rin from the wardrobe, and he sat up just in time to catch it with his face.

“Yes, you do. But lucky for us, King Serizawa was incredibly understanding,” she said.

“Er, I was actually talking about…”

“Rin, something happened last night after you left.” Smoothing out her skirt, Gou lowered herself to the bed. She took a deep, calm breath. “Seijurou tried to murder Uncle.”

“What?!”

“He—out of nowhere—he took a carving knife from the table and just, lunged. He looked crazy. I’ve never seen him like that before. I could tell he was really going to kill him.”

“Gou…”

“Captain Kirishima got there in time and wrestled him down. Sei bolted, and we couldn’t catch him. We found him asleep in the garden a few minutes later. But when we talked to him, he couldn’t remember any of it.”

Gou had started anxiously scratching at her nails, and Rin reached over to pry her hands apart and weave his fingers between hers. She squeezed gratefully.

“He says he didn’t do it,” she said, voice small and unsteady. “And he wouldn’t. I know he disagrees with Uncle often, but he would never do something like that. I was right there. I saw it happen with my own eyes, and gods save me, I still believe him.”

Seijurou Mikoshiba had been in their lives for as long as they could remember. Rin had watched as the older boy had gone from teacher to friend, to captain, and his little sister’s devoted lover. He was strong and loyal, straightforward to a fault. Hard as it had been to accept him as Gou’s suitor, he admitted he couldn’t name a more honest man.

“I know Sei loves you too much to make you suffer.”

Gou nodded tearfully.

Rin slid out of the covers and stood, pulling his sister up by the hands. He framed her narrow shoulders surely and locked eyes with her. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, Gou. Together, we’ll figure it out.”

His sister sniffled once and crashed into him. Her arms went around his middle, and he wrapped his over her back. Cool air from the balcony swirled around the room, tickling their red hair. At length, Gou pushed herself away, wiping her eyes and firming her expression.

“It’ll be ok,” she said. “It’ll all be ok.”

“Yeah.”

Cracking a fond smile, Gou shoved Rin off and made for the door. “Now take a bath already and get dressed, you bum. We’ve got a lot to take care of today.”

Rin watched his baby sister leave, struck suddenly dumb by how much she’d grown. Mired in his own woes, he had been absent from her life for too long. He decided he was done letting her down.

“Ah, Prince Rin…?” Nitori edged into the room, gaze downcast. “Shall I have a bath drawn? I apologize for telling your sister everything, but I thought it best.”

Nitori’s head snapped up, instantly alight with joy. Head still pounding as it was, the sight warmed Rin’s heart. He took the filled cup of water on the bed table and quenched his parched throat. The helmet still sat there like the token of a promise.

“Ai?”

“Y-yes!?”

“Last night, did you happen to see anyone enter or leave this room?”

“Oh, yes.” Nitori said pensively. “I saw a guard coming down the stairs on his way out. Though he was missing a helmet…”

Rin spun around, crossing the room to his assistant. “You did?! What did he look like?”

“I…He had dark hair, and was…tall?” Shocked by Rin’s sudden fervor, Nitori craned back, scratching his chin. “I’m sorry, he was in a hurry and I didn’t really notice much else. Did you know him?”

“No,” Rin said. A vaguely familiar jittery sensation was blooming in his chest, spreading to his fingers and down to his toes. “But I think I’d like to change that.”

Nitori raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway, I’ll have that bath now. Busy day ahead.”

“Yes, Your Grace!” Nitori gave an enthusiastic bow and scurried out.

Rin’s attention was drawn right back to the empty helmet at the foot of the table.

“Ai, wait!”

“Yes?”

“Do we have any roses? Or rose petals? I’d like them added to the water…please.”

Nitori’s puzzlement lasted all of half a second. “I’m sure some can be found. It will be arranged, Prince Rin!”

“Thank you, Ai.”

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The shaft of Sousuke’s bamboo sword came down hard on the back of his opponent with a blunt crack. He could hear the man crumple and swear at him through gritted teeth. Practice was the only way he could think of to quell his boiling vexation. Dangerous sorcerers were at the palace, Rin was at their mercy, and the only person who seemed to know anything about it all—the friend he thought he’d known—had fucking turned into a bird and flown off to another continent.

He mulled over Rin’s anguished words again and again in his head. It had taken only one meeting
with his lost friend to push the anger he had harbored so fiercely to the sideline again. Six years had passed, and he still couldn’t help but surrender every inch of himself to Rin.

One more battle, and he could leave the compound. That battle was scheduled for one month from now.

Another peer stepped onto the sand behind him, feet shuffling loudly in the dirt. Sousuke struck low and tripped him at his ankles, frustration spiking the blow. A month might as well be another year. Those sisters were at large, and he had to be there to protect Rin now.

Distantly, Sousuke knew the prince of Samezuka was a skilled warrior himself, and had a fire-breathing dragon at his call to boot, but Tora couldn’t be with him inside the palace. She had been the size of a young horse when Sousuke had seen her last, so he doubted she was small enough to enter now. His inability to do anything from here was burning him alive. Rin could be dead, and the Iwatobi company gone by the time he was free.

The other fighters were beginning to tire of defeat, most leaving Sousuke’s sparring ring to take lunch. Nearby, he heard what sounded like a scuffle. Fights often broke out around midday, as the men picked bouts over pieces of food and other trifles. This one sounded particularly one-sided. Sousuke tore off his blindfold.

“You think I’d sign on under a twiggy little monkey like you?” One of the brawnier fighters was pinning some kid to the wall by his neck near the kitchen. “Like I’d give half a damn about your kiddie fight?”

“Y-you don’t have to,” the kid choked out. “I was just…askingghhh…”

Sousuke could make out the boy’s bright ginger hair from behind the larger man. Normally, he couldn’t be bothered with petty quarrels outside the arena, but this…

Planting a firm hand on the fighter, he fixed the brute with an icy scowl. The man was only slightly taller, and seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of a clash with Jinbei.

“Have ‘im,” the man said with a grunt. He released the boy, who fell to his knees coughing.

“Everyone knows Jinbei always chooses the redheads!” one of the others chimed in. “He’s all yours!”

Sousuke turned his glare on the rest of them, and they quieted in an instant, busying themselves with their food.

“Be more careful about who you piss off next time, kid.” Sousuke hauled the boy up by the arm, and started walking back toward the training ground.

“Hey! Hey, wait up!” Jogging to catch up to him, the kid hovered around his side. “You’re Jinbei?!”

“Wow, so this is what you look like without the helmet! Even scarier! And you’re young! I’ve watched you before; you’re the best! The way you’re like shaaa—from behind,” The boy made some vague swiping motion, “and then, wraaaahh!”

“That’s nice of you. Why don’t you go eat lunch?”

“I’m Momo! Do I call you Jinbei? Or do you have like a cool nickname just for people who know you, or—”
The kid reminded Sousuke one of those chipmunks that would follow him around the yard all morning after he’d given it a piece of bread crust. As the boy chattered, Sousuke glanced down to get a good look at him. Youthful countenance, catlike amber eyes, skin with no scars or bruises, and no collar.

From time to time, outside citizens would join the ranks of Sano’s pit fighters. They sought fame, money, excitement. Some lasted longer than others, but at the end of the day, they could go home. Sousuke envied them bitterly.

Momo was still sticking to Sousuke’s arm, trotting to keep up with his long strides. “Thanks for helping me out back there, by the way! I was thinking…do you…would you—?”

An unconditional ‘No’ was waiting on Sousuke’s tongue, but he supposed he could let the kid finish.

“Would you fight with me in my match? I get to pick my own team of whoever will sign up, and it’d be super great if you could do it. Especially since we’re friends now.”

“We’re not friends,” Sousuke said.

Momo looked hurt. “Yes we are! You bailed me out just now! And I think we’d fight really well together. We’d definitely win! JINBEI and…CRAZY OTTER!”

“Have you ever even been in a real fight before, kid?”

“Of course I have! There was this mean guy in my brother’s class, and one time when Sei wasn’t around he goes, ‘Momo, I’m gonna feed your beetles to my father’s hounds if you don’t shut up.’ Can you believe that?!”

“Yes.”

“Me neither!! Then I told him, ‘I can’t let you get away with threatening my beetles!’ And I shoved him into the fish pond! So hah!”

Part of Sousuke wanted to laugh, and the rest of him wanted to drink an entire barrel of rum. This kid was almost certainly going to die if he stayed. And with one fight left, Sousuke was not willing to remain here any longer than he needed to to prevent it.

“Momo, was it? You need to drop whatever this is, and go home. If you’re after a thrill, get it somewhere else, because the arena is not a game, and you will get yourself killed fooling around.”

At this, Momo’s expression hardened. “I’m not just fooling around.”

“Then why are you here?”

The boy went suddenly mute, and Sousuke was done entertaining him. He continued on in the direction of the training yard.

Momo stood his ground, determined. “There’s no way I’m backing out! If you won’t do it, can’t you at least suggest someone? The match is in four days, and I’m gonna be screwed!”

The realization jolted Sousuke’s spine, and he spun back around. “Say that last part again.”

“I’m gonna be screwed…?”

“The part before that.”
“M-my match is in four days.”

Looming close enough to cast a shadow over Momo’s alarmed face, Sousuke scanned him for any trace of deceit. The kid seemed well-meaning, if not the most sensible.

“I’ll do it,” Sousuke said. “Sign me on to your team.”

“Wait, you’ll fight with me? For real?” Momo’s whole body lit up with energy again at the promise. “Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“JINBEEEIII!” The boy flew forward to wrap his arms around Sousuke, but wasn’t quite fast enough.

“You can hug me after the match,” Sousuke said, flicking Momo’s unruly hair. “Now go eat. You’ve got a rough few days ahead of you if you want to stand any kind of chance.”

“Yes, sir! You won’t regret this!” Momo skipped backward once and took off toward the mess hall.

Shaking his head and heaving a weary sigh, Sousuke turned back toward the yard.

Four days, Rin.

“Oi, Whale Shark!”

One of the compound’s guards was leaning out the watch house window, beckoning him over with a stiff wave. Annoyed at being interrupted again, Sousuke trudged across the lawn with a scowl. “Someone important here to see you at the shrine!” The guard dropped his voice as Sousuke approached. “It’s the Dragon Prince.”

Rin wandered around the temple garden while he waited.

The shrine was small and well-used, intimate where Samezuka Temple was imposing and opulent. Paint on the beams and carved figures was worn and chipped, stone statues blanketed with soft moss. A sacred flame burned low and leisurely in a modest enclosure at the back.

Rin had flown here without telling Gou, and there was a colossal mess waiting for him back home, but he felt he had to talk to this man. Currents of nervous anticipation buzzed through him as he remembered the events from the night before.

Rin knelt beside the fire. On the table nearby was a box of paper slips and chalk for people to write their wishes and submit them to the flames. It used to be his favorite part of visiting the temple as a kid. There had been one wish he would write over and over, though he knew it could never come true. So eventually he stopped making them altogether.

The crunch of maple leaves under heavy feet alerted Rin to a person’s approach. He rose slowly and
turned around.

Jinbei was standing there, panting as if he’d just been running. He was bare-chested, the hard planes and contours of his muscles rolling with every breath under a thin sheen of sweat. The low-slung linen pants he wore exposed more of him than his armor did, and the sight of him up close in the daylight left the roof of Rin’s mouth suddenly dry.

He still sported his helmet, and black spaulders on his right shoulder, and Rin’s hands tingled as he tried to recall the shape of the man’s face in the dark. He wanted so badly to see Jinbei’s face, but he would wait patiently until that privilege was offered.

Jinbei seemed to notice him staring. “Uh, s-sorry, I should go put something on…”

“No it’s fine!” Rin said a little too quickly. “You’re…you don’t have to.”

They shifted in the dense spell of silence. Finally, Rin gathered his initiative.

“So I…the other night, I was a mess. I’m sorry you had to see that. And you were so….” Rin was sure his entire face was on fire. He could sense Jinbei watching him intently, and clung on to his courage. “Ah, I just…wanted to say thank you.”

“Oh,” Jinbei said. He still kept himself a safe distance away, like he wasn’t sure he was allowed any closer. “I didn’t think you’d remember. Are you feeling better?”

Rin laughed dryly. “Still got a killer headache, but I’ll live.”

“That’s good.” Jinbei nodded. “But I also meant are you feeling…uh, better?”

That took Rin by surprise. “Yeah. Yes. Much better.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

Jinbei seemed to relax a little, walking forward into a sunny gap in the tree’s dappled shadow. The light warmed his skin and shone on his helmet as he joined Rin beside the fire pit. Rin moved aside to give him room, his pulse quickening.

“Don’t be sorry about last night. There’s no shame in needing someone to help you up once in a while.”

Rin dropped his gaze, biting his lip over a smile. “Well ah…thanks…for being that someone.”

Jinbei cleared his throat, embarrassed, hand snapping up to fidget with his leather collar. “Y-yeah.”

Rin knew he should be the one embarrassed, but he found the gesture both incredibly endearing and achingly familiar.

“You know, what you said yesterday about wanting to rule with love instead of fear….” Jinbei turned to watch the flames dancing inside of the enclosure. A flush was creeping up his throat, peeking out below the mask. “You shouldn’t give up. Even though you may lose sight of it sometimes, if there’s one thing in the world that’s always worth fighting for, it’s love.”

Rin was dimly aware that his mouth was hanging open as he gazed in wonder at Jinbei. His gratitude was overwhelming.
“Thank you.” Rin managed. “I think I needed to hear that.”

It was getting late, and Rin’s duties at the palace were waiting. For the first time in a long while, he was ready to meet the challenge. Though he didn’t want to take a single step away from where he was.

“Jinbei, can I…” Rin pressed his lips together shyly, his wits scattered in fluttery fragments. “Can I see you again?”

Jinbei froze. This clearly wasn’t something he’d expected to hear. Rin had gone too far. That had been too forward—

“You’re the Dragon Prince, and I’m just a guy.” Jinbei said. “Pretty sure you can see me if you want to.”

Rin could hear his breathy chuckle coming from inside the metal mask.

“A gentleman and a smartass.” He flashed Jinbei a playful smirk. “Fine. I meant would you like to see me again?”
Jinbei turned to look at Rin dead-on. A long moment passed, and Rin felt the man’s purposeful stare through the shadow of the grating as he considered an answer.

“Yeah.”

Exhilaration lifted Rin like a wing-full of wind.

A drawn-out bellow coming from the stadium shattered the tranquility of the temple garden. They looked up to see a tall burst of flame erupt into the sky. Tora was getting impatient.

“That’s my call to get home,” Rin noted ruefully. It took all of his willpower to pry himself away from his spot by the fire.

“Wait! Rin, have you…at the palace, ah…” Jinbei struggled. “Nevermind. Just, be careful, ok?”

“Huh?” Amused, Rin sauntered over to the nearby table. “If anyone needs to be careful, it’s you. When’s your last fight?”

“Four days.”

“I’ll be there.”

With the corners of his mouth fixed in an upward curve, Rin wet his fingers and drew one of the paper slips from the box. He scrawled something and folded it squarely in half.

“What are you wishing for?” Jinbei laughed.

Rin sealed the slip of paper with a kiss and tossed it into the flame. “Secret.”

He flashed his sharp teeth in a shameless grin that lit up his entire face. It had been too long since he’d been so unabashedly hopeful.

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Light from narrow openings in the stone leaked into the dungeon hallway, bouncing off the walls and catching on flecks of dust in the airless chamber. It was uncomfortably warm down here, and Gou fanned herself with the front of her shirt as she slipped down the broken stairs, gripping the ring of keys in her sleeve so they wouldn’t make a sound.

She had borrowed a plain cloak from Chigusa, pulling the hood up to hide her bright carmine braids. Keeping as close to the opposite wall as she could, Gou passed by half a dozen bleak cells—most of them empty.

“Gou?”

A pair of confused golden eyes met hers from the other side of the next cell. She almost sobbed with relief, and crossed the floor to her lover.

“Sei!” Gou wound her arms through the gaps on either side of Seijuurou, gently pulling his face close enough to touch their foreheads together.
“You shouldn’t be here.” Seijuurou extended a hand through the bars to tuck her hair behind her ear, flicking his finger to jingle her earring. She pouted.

“Stoppit! I’ve always hated it when you do that.”

“I know. But not as much as I hate you risking yourself for me.”

Ignoring him, Gou extracted the keys and began searching for the one that would fit.

“My brother and I are going to figure out what happened.” She said. “So in the meantime, you’re leaving, and hiding. And don’t you even think about coming back until I say.”

“Your uncle thinks I made an attempt on his life. I’m not getting out of this alive.”

“The hell you aren’t!” Gou cried indignantly. She went back to the lock. Sei’s easy resignation was maddening. He seemed already convinced he was going to die.

“Gou…I might not get another chance to tell someone this. And I’m sorry it has to be you.” There was a sadness in his voice that sent chills over Gou’s skin.

“Sei?”

“…Do you remember Rin’s friend from Tokitsu? The slave boy with the burn on his shoulder?”

“Sousuke? Of course, how could I forget—”

“He’s alive.”

Gou’s hands slowed. “Sei, what are you saying? Sousuke died six years ago.”

Seijuurou shook his head, swallowing hard. “That was a lie. Your uncle wanted him dead. And if not him, he— He would have killed Rin for threatening to upset your family’s rule.”

“How dare you!” Coiling back, Gou would have slapped him if not for the bars in her way. “How dare you drag this out of the farthest depths of my brother’s grief, and accuse Uncle of something so ridiculous!”

“I heard it out of the emperor’s own mouth when he sent me to murder the poor kid!” Seijuurou snarled. “Your uncle loves you both, I don’t doubt that—but his priorities aren’t what you think they are.”

Gou was stopped at a fork in the road. Caught between her lover and her own blood, the indecision tore at her seams.

“I let the boy go and stuck him on a cart to Sano.” Seijuurou continued. “He might still be there, who knows.”

“That’s impossible. We burned his body, Rin scattered his ashes over the valley.”

“Wasn’t him.” Seijuurou leaned in. “I cut his collar, took a corpse from the waste trenches near the quarry. Burned the shoulder with a lantern… messed up the face. No one took more than a quick look at it before wrapping it up again.”

Gou edged away in stiff disbelief.

“Gou, I’m sorry. I just…I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t kill that boy. And I didn’t want anyone to know,
for the kid’s safety, and for Rin’s. You can’t tell your brother, but someone needs to know this before I go.”

“Sei, I—”

There was a screech as the dungeon door opened, followed by footsteps descending the stairs.

*Hide*, Seijuuro said with pleading eyes.

Gou skirted around his cell and ducked behind a stack of two crates of straw. She pulled up her hood and straightened her back against the wall, ears prickling.

“Enjoying the accommodations, Mikoshiba?”

Gou instantly recognized the smooth, even voice of her uncle. He had never spoken to her with such uncloaked malice, and she shivered to hear it.

“Very much, Your Majesty, thank you,” Seijuuro said with a dark hint of spite.

“Good. Though not for much longer, I’m afraid.”

“I didn’t try to take your life. I know it’s difficult to believe, but I swear it.”

Emperor Akira let out a derisive hiss. “Do you take me for an idiot? I’ve granted you and your family my utmost trust, was ready to give my niece to you, and you repay me by attempting to kill me in front of our enemies.”

He approached the cell. “I come with good news for you. When it’s time for my dragon to burn the flesh from your treacherous bones and your soul rises to the heavens, at the very least, you’ll have company.”

Peering through a slit between the crate and the wall, Gou watched her uncle curl his long fingers around the iron bars.

“Young man, your little brother has enacted your right to a trial by combat, as a member of close kin.” The emperor relished the words. “He’s battling for your life in three days.”

Seijuuro’s brave front vanished in an instant. Gou heard the metal clang of his chain as he forced himself as close to the emperor as he could get. “How could you?! How could you let him do that?!”

“It was his own idea. He knew you wouldn’t plead guilty, and he also knew you couldn’t lie your way out of your due punishment.”

“Stop him, please! I’ll do it! I’ll fight for myself; Momo has nothing to do with this!”

“It’s already been decided, Mikoshiba. He signed the contract. Of course, there’s the small chance that he wins, and you both walk free. But that’s highly improbable, given what he’ll be up against.”

The emperor drew in close to Seijuuro, almost whispering into his ear. Hard as she listened, Gou couldn’t make out what was said. Then her uncle pulled away, and Seijuuro sank to his knees in tears.

“He is allowed to have help, if he can find any in the scum of the pits. But it won’t make a difference. Your brother is going to die, and so will you. Samezuka does not tolerate disloyalty.”

Pulling away from Seijuuro’s cell, the emperor glanced down the hall. “Oh, and Gou. Perhaps next time you steal keys from the gaoler, you should have the nerve to kill him.”
Gou’s heart skipped several beats. The stairs crowded with armed soldiers.

“Seize my niece. We can allow her some time with her lover before his execution. Lock her down here with him. No one is to hear of it.”

“Uncle, please…” Gou thrashed in the men’s grip as she was shoved into Seijuurou’s cell.

“You’ll be released, Gou. When you’ve thought long and hard about the responsibility you carry as a member of this family.”

“But Momo will—!”

“Momotarou will fight for his brother as he promised. And he won’t win.”

Chapter End Notes

*How flags work in Sano Stadium:

A Red flag drawn means a blood match. These fights are over when one party is down/injured/unable to fight. They’re not meant to be deadly, so there is a penalty for killing. However, some deem the small punishment worth taking if they see an opportunity to eliminate a troublesome fighter they might have to face in a future death match.

A Black flag drawn means a death match. These are over when one team or party is perceivably dead. There are four flags in the bag, and one of them is black.

Here are some hella dirty sketches of what Sousuke wears in this chapter, since I wanted to get a visual for myself of what his helmets kinda look like lmao. Also for fun.
Sousuke shook off the autumn morning chill, stretching his arms over his head as he and Momo made their way down the dirt path to the armory. He could hear the boy behind him imitating the movement.

It had been mere hours since Sousuke had seen Rin in the temple garden, and he could scarcely think of anything else. *Rin wanted to meet with him again.* A part of him knew it was stupid to agree—to risk exposing everything he’d kept safely buried these past six years—but the prince needed a person to talk to, and Sousuke could do at least that for him.

Moreover, if he was to protect Rin from the Hazuki sisters, he would have to find a way to be close. It was nothing he couldn’t do with a helmet on, he reasoned. He ached to feel Rin’s hands on his skin again, but there was a cold piece of metal between him and the prince, and there would always have to be.

“Jinbei, Jinbei!” Momo jogged up to shorten the gap between them, stealing Sousuke’s attention back. “If you were a stag beetle, what color would you be?”

“No.”

“What! Why not!?”

“Because that took me years to learn, and you have three days.” Fishing around in his pocket, Sousuke closed his hand over the key to the longhouse. “Also, it requires you to be observant, and a good listener, which you aren’t.”

To his credit, Momo had sprung out of bed at sunrise when Sousuke had come to rouse him. They’d already stretched, and run several laps around the compound, and the kid hadn’t loosed a single complaint. Whatever his reason for doing this was, at least he was taking it seriously.

Sousuke turned the key, pushed, and the door creaked open, scraping over the ground with a sandy rasp. Most of the other fighters spent their evenings drinking and reveling when they could, rising late and wasting the early hours. It had always baffled Sousuke that people still thought his skill and success in the arena were owed to some unknowable secret. There was no secret—it was simply hard work.
Shoving both doors wide open, Sousuke flooded the building with sunlight and walked in, the boy at his heels. Pikes, whips, swords, morningstars, and a score of other weapons were mounted between thick wooden beams, or leaning up against rusty racks. Their blades flashed as the pair passed by.

“Alright, Momo.” Sousuke said. “We don’t have much time, so I’m just gonna show you a few things, have you practice them, and we’ll hope that’s enough.”

“Yes, sir!”

“So. Since you’re a little guy,—”

“I’m not that small!” Puffing out a pout, Momo flexed his bicep.

“Down here, you are. Don’t interrupt.”

“Sorry!”

“Like I was saying,” Sousuke continued, “since you’re small, you’ll need to keep as much distance between yourself and the other guys as possible. If a big opponent gets in close with you, things could go south quickly. Have you ever used polearms before?”

“Huh?” Momo wrinkled his nose. “No, I usually bend my arms.”

*Gods grant me patience.*

Heaving a long-suffering sigh, Sousuke made his way over to the racks of staff weapons lined along the wall. He plucked a black tube-shafted spear off the mount, testing the weight and spinning it once in his sure hand. The kid should probably start light. Moving down the rows, he searched for something short and easy to handle.

Momo hadn’t said anything in a while. Sousuke turned. The boy’s eyes were glued to the blade of his weapon, irises round as gold plates. He had seen this look before: the exact moment when someone understood the consequences of the choice to be here. That blade could slice your flesh like a ripe pear, and it might. In a few painful minutes, your life could bleed out of you into dirt that had drunk the futures of so many others before you. The cost of failure was high.

“…Momo?”

The kid shrank, wilting in on himself. He looked even younger than he had before.

“I’m gonna die.” The admission was small, and defeated. “I’m gonna die. I can’t afford to die.”

Sousuke was not good at this. He’d learned to deal with his own fear alone, and hadn’t the first idea about how to help another. But this was his last time in that arena, Rin needed him, and damn it all, he would try. Striding up, he grasped the boy’s shoulder.

“Look, Momo. I can’t afford to die either. So we won’t.” He dipped his head to hold the kid’s gaze. “If you listen to me, and stay close, I promise you’ll live. Got it?”

Momo nodded, and the unbridled trust in his expression felt heavy on Sousuke’s shoulders.

“Good.” Reaching behind him, Sousuke snatched one of the spears and tossed it to Momo. “Now go stand outside, and let’s get started.”
The palace library was blissfully empty this early in the day. Rin and Nitori entered the main chamber, breezing by gilded statues of ancient scholars, poets, and monks along the walls. The figures were carved with scripts in their arms, smiling, welcoming visitors in to explore their lives’ work.

Rosy blooms of sunlight yawned into the atrium, catching on eddies of dust that floated in and out of them. Shelves reached out through the three wings of the library, stacked two floors high and filled with books and rolls of parchment. The comforting, musty scent of old paper stuck in the air.

Rin’s father had adored this place. Bittersweet memories of running his tiny fingers over book spines to choose one for story time were woven in the spaces between the shelves.

“Texts on magic are on the top floor, right?” Rin was already headed up the wide staircase, taking them two at once, past the cases of scrolls on the ground floor that were older than the palace itself.

“I believe so, Prince Rin.” Nitori followed close behind with quick, timid steps.

“Where the hell is Gou?” Rin reached the top of the stairs and made for the back of the shelf. “It’s not like her to skip out on this.”

“The princess is on a trip, the Emperor told me this morning. She and Momo left before dawn.” Nitori paused. “Momo is having me care for his beetles while he’s away.”

“Really? Hm.” It was strange for Gou to leave without telling him after the talk they’d had, but Uncle didn’t seem worried. He supposed it made sense that she and Momo would want to search for answers together. Rin didn’t want his future brother-in-law sentenced to a life in the dungeons either.

Tora was curled up just outside, peering though the windows, tapping the tip of her tail on the limestone tiles. She was usually sluggish in the morning, but she’d probably get bored soon and go search for something to eat.

Rin scaled the step ladder up against the shelf with surefooted agility, skimming over written labels. Samezuka’s collection of texts about magical arts was pitifully small. Most magic was outlawed in Samezuka, on account of it being a threat to the dragons, so sorcerers were few and quiet. Most of the books and scrolls filed away in this place were at least a century old.

He’d been loath to start here. Blaming Seijuuro’s behavior on magic seemed like a cheap option, but he was shamefully short of other ideas. Rin plucked out a thinly-bound text.

Nitori took the book from his hand, to rest it in the crook of his arm. The prince’s assistant would normally be tasked with things like this, but Rin knew Ai was a basket of jitters at any height above the top of his own bed.

He chose another title from the row, humming loudly.

“Prince Rin?” Nitori perked up cheerily.

“Hm?” Rin kept up the tune while he leafed through the pages.

“If you don’t mind me asking, did…something good happen? You seem to be in higher spirits today.”
Rin nearly tripped, and Tora breathed a rumbling laugh in the yard, her breath fogging the window with heat.

“It’s just a nice day, Ai.”

Another jet of hot air left Tora’s snout.

“O-of course!” Ai chirped.

Since he was here, Rin thought he might borrow some of his favorite books to reread later as well, when he had a moment to relax. He pushed them aside, carefully turning the titles away from Nitori.

The morning wore on, and the two of them had garnered a small stack of texts.

Rin glanced over one named, *The Classification of Iwatobi Rock*. Nothing inside seemed to be of use. Though, he remembered—if there was anyone who was bound to have a more extensive collection of information on magic, it was *Kisumi*. He could make a trip out to Sano later.

“Any luck?”

“N-not presently…” Nitori pored over another about love potions, cheeks glowing steadily redder.

There was no way Rin was missing the chance to tease the boy about it. He snickered and scooted in, but Nitori was staring in shock at something over Rin’s shoulder.

A cold hand was at his neck before he could turn, long fingers lightly sliding up to his chin. The sharp drag of nails trailed over his throat. He spun around in his seat lightning fast, backing up against the table, hand flying to his belt for his knife. Nitori scrambled to his feet, stumbling over his shoes and landing on the floor with a squeak.

“Ahaahaha! Sorry, sorry. You just looked way too easy to tease.” A tall woman loomed behind Rin’s chair, pressing her weight onto the backrest, leaning in close enough to breathe his air. “This one’s a cutie too.”

Bewitching magenta eyes twinkled with devilish amusement, framed by cascading waves of cool blonde. Emeralds the size of walnuts adorned her neck, and the smell of lavender perfume wafted around her. Two other young women were there, giggling, over her back. Rin hadn’t heard so much as a footstep when they entered.

All three were beautiful in a way that smelled like danger. Like fruits so perfect, they had to be poisoned.

“Do you remember us?” The tall woman retreated with a coy wink.

Regathering his dignity, Rin recalled the three of them from the banquet. They were Serizawa’s personal sorcerers. “You’re…Hazuki, right?”

“Oooh!” They giggled in unison. “I didn’t think you’d remember anything from the other night.”

As if he needed the reminder. Rin’s arm twitched in annoyance. “Right. Well it’s good to see you three again. Please, enjoy the library and the rest of your time in Samezuka.” He nudged back into his seat, hoping the Hazukis would take the hint.

They didn’t.
The shortest of the sisters sat herself prettily on the table and lifted a book from Nitori’s pile, turning it over delicately. “Illusory Spells? An interesting choice of reading material for a dragon prince. What’s got magic on your mind?”

Rin realized too late that he was wedged into a tough corner. Given the events from two nights ago, the answer seemed obvious. To lie would be insulting, but to tell the truth was all but accusing Iwatobi of the crime. He backed away from the woman, combing his mind for anything to say to keep this situation from tumbling downhill.

“His reasons are his own, I’m sure.”

The five of them traced the voice to the door, where King Serizawa strode into the center of the atrium. Serizawa’s calm, regal presence seemed to change the mood of the entire library.

His Guard Captain, Kirishima Natsuya, loomed close behind him—a well-built man with curly chestnut hair and a barely-hidden store of untapped ferocity beneath his polished gait. Wary amber eyes landed on the sisters and narrowed.

“What are the three of you doing here?” His voice was rough, and commanding.

“We’re here to protect His Majesty, of course. What else?” The smallest skipped up to him, batting her long lashes.

The captain jerked his arm away, stiff with venomous disdain. “That’s why I’m here, yeah.”

They fluttered down from Rin’s table, circling Kirishima like three sparrows taunting a hawk.

“Natsuya.” Serizawa rested his hand on his captain’s back. His touch was light, and lingering. Kirishima dropped his arms instantly, leaning into the king’s hand just enough that Rin noticed.

“Ladies, please leave us. I’d like to speak with Prince Matsuoka alone.”

The tall woman curtsied. “Anything for you, Your Highness.” She snuck another wink at Rin before exiting the library, her two sisters in tow.

Captain Kirishima shot a spiteful glare after them.

“Shall we?” The king made his way toward the rear of the library, out the double doors to the garden.

Rin followed, nearly forgetting that he was the host here. Kirishima moved ahead to hold the door open for them, and they stepped out into the sun. Whatever wild intensity burned inside the captain seemed to be tempered by Serizawa’s poised serenity. Proffering his elbow, Kirishima waited, and the king casually linked their arms as they walked. Rin felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched them. He imagined what it might be like to do that with—

Ashamed, he stubbornly snuffed the thought out. “You…said you wanted to talk to me alone?”

“Ah, yes. Well. I hope you don’t mind if I bring Natsuya along, as you have trusted company of your own, no?” Serizawa nodded kindly upward at Rin’s dragon. She was busy chewing on the veins of yellow ivy growing up the library wall. Which she wasn’t supposed to be eating.

“Right! Of course.” Rin said, subtly glaring at her from across the lawn. “And, Serizawa, I…I really can’t apologize enough for—”
“Ah, ah.” The silver king raised a finger to silence him. “Say no more. It is already in the past. Though I do hope the situation with that man is sorted soon.”

The king was only four years Rin’s senior, but as he listened, that gap felt more like two decades. Where Rin was rough and foul-mouthed, Serizawa spoke with perfect manners and a harmonious lilt that was smooth with practiced grace. It was almost hypnotizing.

“I couldn’t help but notice your book pile on the way out,” Serizawa quipped. “Fond of Lady Matsui’s *Summer Love Poems*, are you?”

“Uh—!”

“I like them as well. Some of the only examples in her work of happy endings.” He flashed Rin a genuine smile.

“Y-yeah.” Rin relaxed, arms going loose at his sides. “Good endings are…nice.”

The three of them ambled down to the fountain. A finely-carved river dragon wound around the center of it, water streaming from its mouth into the blue marble pool. Serizawa stopped.

“May I speak honestly with you, Prince Matsuoka?”

Iwatobi manners were tiresome as hell. “Of course. And just ‘Rin’ is fine.”

“Very well, Prince Rin.” Smoothing his robe, the king perched himself on the lip of the fountain, his captain dutifully quiet at his side. He motioned for Rin to join him. “It is true I made the voyage here to discuss border disputes…but the other reason I came was to meet you.”

“Me?” Rin had to stop himself from outwardly wincing as he remembered how badly that had gone the first time.

“Yes! One young royal to another, I’d like to tell you something.” The king rested a long-boned hand on Kirishima’s knee like that was where it belonged. Without missing a beat, the captain covered it with his larger one.

“I was nineteen when the crown fell into my lap,” Serizawa began. “Grandfather was too old. He was a good man, but he was…well, his mind was not as sharp as it had been. He made mistakes.”

The king’s gentle eyes flicked to the library door, then back to Rin.

“I was nineteen when the crown fell into my lap,” Serizawa began. “Grandfather was too old. He was a good man, but he was…well, his mind was not as sharp as it had been. He made mistakes.”

The king’s gentle eyes flicked to the library door, then back to Rin.

“I was offered the kingdom, and I refused. I was selfish and rebellious, and I wanted my freedom. Though in the end, I took it.” Serizawa pinned Rin in place with an eerily calm, simmering stare. “Because even if it didn’t seem like I’d be ready, it was what my people needed me to do.”

In one fluid movement, Serizawa rose, pulling Kirishima up with him. Rin felt like he should say something, or at least *stand up*—but he stayed where he was, feeling like he’d been slapped in the face by a war fan coated with feathers.

“I do hope we can be friends, Matsuoka Rin. We may well have need of one another soon.”
The sky was dark when Rin left Kisumi’s house, frustrated and disappointed.

His lively friend hadn’t been home. Not that Rin was surprised; Kisumi often went on trips to set his overseas affairs in order. The servants had let Rin use the library, as usual. Kisumi did have an impressive collection of texts on magic. Rin had spent the entire afternoon reading through them, and found the same dead-end answers. Sorcerers could move rock, and boil water, heal wounds, and make stunning illusions. Curiosity had even lead him to peek at a book titled *The Art of Magic and Carnal Pleasure*. He immediately regretted it. But there had been nothing applicable to the captain’s outburst, and Rin was beginning to worry. With any luck, Kisumi would return soon so he could ask the man himself.

If Rin was honest, the better part of the day had been spent struggling to stay focused—to keep his thoughts from floating back to the man he’d left in that sunny temple garden. It was vexing and thrilling, and it didn’t show any signs of letting up. After waving good-night to the gardener, Rin stopped at the stairs in front to take in the sight of the city. Sano always made ample use of its nights, and Kisumi’s mansion had a magnificent view. Firelights glittered from streets and windows, the city flickering to life in the darkness. Scanning the sprawling expanse, Rin’s eyes landed on Sano Stadium. It was lit at the top floor even when not in use, shining like the massive crown of a god.

It wasn’t that far away.

Sousuke had sent Momo to bed after dinner, using the remnants of the day to sneak in some practice alone.

He swung a naginata around in a circle, jabbing the mounted straw dummies, letting his muscles move the weapon while he tried to imagine he was face-to-face with the Hazuki woman’s ogre from two nights ago. He’d taken down men much larger than himself, but something that size would be a different match entirely. Still, humans had felled the monsters before, and if it could be done, he could do it for Rin.

Two more days, and Momo’s fortuitous match would grant him that freedom. All things considered, the kid was doing unexpectedly well for a sheltered sixteen-year-old. In the duration of his career as a fighter, Sousuke had never been one to tie himself to another. The nature of the sport wasn’t very conducive to honest friendships, and his own survival had always been paramount. But Momo’s pure, guileless determination was tugging at something inside him he was grateful was still there. Something in the way Momo paled in fear when the boy thought he wasn’t looking told Sousuke that Momo wasn’t here for himself. If he could help this kid make it home, he would. Talking to Rin had this effect on him, he guessed.

Sousuke snatched the towel off the bench nearby, swiping it messily across his sweaty face. He fastened the helmet over his head for the walk across the compound to the dormitory. When he wore it, the others usually left him alone. The south yard was wonderfully vacant, and Sousuke inhaled a deep, peaceful breath of evening. He wondered if he would miss any part of this place.

A soft voice and the rustle of grass underfoot snapped his attention to a spot off the path, near the low inner wall. He moved like a shadow into the cover of the nearest overhang to watch the figure pass. He should be ashamed at such a reaction, but the incident with Kisumi on the palace ramparts had his senses honed to the slightest sound out of place.

He heard… Singing?
A man appeared on the path in front of him, stopping to peer around, like he was searching for something. He stepped into the cold starlight, and Sousuke’s heart jumped into his throat.

He stepped out of the dark. “Back so soon?”

“AAAGHH!” Rin’s singing cut and he spun around, teeth bared. It was unbearably cute.

Sousuke stifled a snicker. “Are you looking for something, Your Highness?”

“Someone.” Eyes moving up Sousuke’s body, Rin’s lips curled into a smirk. “I found him.”

“Oh?” The playful swing in Rin’s voice made Sousuke want to test the limits of propriety. “To what do I owe the honor of this visit? Just couldn’t wait to see me again?”

Rin’s smile went soft. “Something like that.”

Every cheeky remark Sousuke had stored up evaporated like water on hot brick. This was utterly unfair. His fingers crept up to tug at his collar.

“Hmm.” Peering up thoughtfully, Rin started down the path again. “Since I was in the area, I thought I’d drop by. Hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

“No! Nothing. I wasn’t…doing much of anything.”

“Wanna give me a tour, then?” Mischief dancing in his eyes, Rin brushed past Sousuke without waiting for a response.

Conversation flowed effortlessly, as it always had with Rin. They talked about past matches, and Rin’s combat practice regime at the palace, joking and teasing like there weren’t thick city walls, and a crown between them. There wasn’t much to show him. The yard, training grounds, recreation house, the work area. Strolling past the armory, Sousuke felt Rin slip an arm around his elbow.

Rin had never been shy about physical contact. Hanging off Sousuke’s shoulder, draping himself over his back, grasping his wrist to drag him around—it had always been his way. It seemed that part of him hadn’t changed, and it was driving Sousuke a little crazy.

Neither of them mentioned it, and they circled around the compound, the prince steadily leaning further into Sousuke’s side as they walked. Nearly all of Sousuke’s willpower was working to keep him from sneaking glances at Rin’s defined chest down the deep cut of his robe. He couldn’t for the life of him make sense of what was happening, but it was comfortable, and exciting, and all of the things he knew he shouldn’t be feeling.

When it was time for Rin to head home, they started in the direction of the old tree near the gate, arms still wound together. Walking faster. Jogging. Rin met Sousuke’s eyes with the hot spark of a challenge, and they broke away into a full-out sprint.

Their hands slammed into the tree at the same time, and they erupted into a fit of giggling. It had been too long since laughter had come this easily. Rin leaned up against the trunk, throwing his head back and panting as he laughed, the skin of his neck exposed, and fine hair tangling in the bark. Sousuke forgot what he was doing and why he’d just raced across the yard. His desire was making a mess of him.

Rin must have sensed the weight of his gaze, and returned it with one of his own.

He swallowed thickly, still slightly out of breath. “What’s your name? Your…your real name.”
Sousuke flinched. He hadn’t said his own name aloud in six years. If not for Kisumi, he might’ve forgotten what it sounded like. The one he’d given people was “Sho,” after a classmate he’d known back home, but feeding Rin that lie felt wrong in every way. He was taking too long, he had to—

“Never mind. I’m sorry.” Shaking his head, the prince ran a nervous hand through his hair. “You can tell me another time.”

The air between them was humming with energy. “Can I ask you something else?”

Rin peeled himself away from the tree. “You…of all people, have every right to hate me. You could’ve just left me in that pile of dirt the other night, and let me take the fall. Gods know I’d have deserved it. So why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know.” Sousuke said quietly. “I guess I believe in that dream of yours. Even if you don’t.”

The breeze whispering through silky reeds was the only sound in the empty yard for a long moment.

That answer had been the truth, even if only a part of it. All of the tension fell from Rin’s face, his jaw gone slack. Something bright and vulnerable flashed over his eyes, and then he was moving closer.

His hand flattened at Sousuke’s collarbone. Sousuke hoped the prince couldn’t feel his heartbeat skyrocketing from there. Eyes falling shut, Rin raised himself up on his toes to press his mouth to the front of the helmet.

Sousuke felt Rin’s soft breath on his lips, just inches away. The mask had never felt more like a cage.

“Thanks.” With a shy smile, Rin dropped back onto his heels. “Good night.” He retreated, and jogged off through the gate, leaving Sousuke paralyzed and speechless.

Sousuke stumbled back to the dormitory, stunned, blood rushing in his head like he’d spent an hour hanging by his feet.

Bolting the door to his room, Sousuke untied the helmet and set it on the table. He didn’t dare ask himself where the hell that had come from, dragging his fingers over his mouth and sinking into his chair. As well as he thought he knew Rin, the prince was still unpredictable as a summer storm.

I can’t fucking believe I just did that.

Rin sighed to the heavens and hugged his cloak tighter, riding home over the darkened road with
fireflies in his chest, and the tang of iron still on his lips.

The sun crept over the horizon on the fourth day, dim and smothered in gloom.

Sousuke didn’t bother asking Momo if he was ready.

They stood outside the mess hall with the group of fifteen men who had signed on after learning that a victory in this match would mean instant freedom, no matter the person’s term. Momo should have opened with that, but enough people had showed up anyway, Sousuke supposed.

Even the burly fighter who had given Momo a hard time in the yard earlier had joined the roster. Tsuchi was his name, and he strutted in front of them, stretching and leering at Sousuke.

The night before, Sousuke had finally sorted through his birthday present as he packed his things. Most of the smuggled potions were aphrodisiacs and sex enhancers of one kind or another. He’s not sure why he’d expected any different. But one auspicious vial of bright green liquid was good for immediate use on open wounds. If things went as planned, Momo would come out of this ordeal in one clean piece, but it couldn’t hurt to have it in case. He emptied the stuff into his metal flask, and tucked it deep inside his boot. The container dug into his shin uncomfortably.

Sousuke could just about hear Kisumi whining about this final fight happening without him, but gods only knew when his sponsor would be back.

He hadn’t seen Rin since that night in the yard, and he’d long since lost count of how many times he’d replayed those fleeting few seconds in his head. Even if it didn’t mean anything more than friendly affection to Rin, it had been more than he’d ever dared hope for. The prince had promised to be there today, watching. Suddenly Sousuke was thirteen again, waiting for the end-of-day bell.

He’d be sure to give Rin a show.

A small company of imperial guards came to escort them to the stadium. Compound security was usually enough, but maybe today was special. In any case, Rin had been right—none of them slouched.

Instead of making for the chambers beneath the stadium, the guards lead the men off the compound completely, heading for the docks near the main canal.

Strange…

“Hey, where are we going?” Momo prodded one of them, pulling at the guard’s thick crimson cloak. “Arena’s that way, right?”

The man made no reply.

With a low chime, the iron gate of Sousuke’s home of six years closed behind him, and his apprehension grew with each step they took away from it.
Seijuuro sat on the rickety cot, facing the opposite cell wall, Gou snugly nestled behind him. He was hunched over so she could use his broad back as a surface to write on, but he felt he probably would be sitting this way even if she wasn’t.

Gou tapped the quill on the edge of the ink cup before bringing it back to the paper. She had requested ink and parchment earlier so that she could write her uncle a heartfelt apology letter. Her uncle, the emperor, who was sending Momo to his death. Seijuuro felt betrayed, and he wanted so badly to be angry with her—but in this barred box, she was the only joy he had.

He sat, stewing in silence while she wrote.

Seijuuro’s shoulders were getting stiff, but he’d wait until Gou finished her line. “Are you gonna tell Rin about that boy?”

Her writing stopped. “No.” Refilling the quill, she went on. “I’m going to search for him first, and if I find him alive, I’ll decide on what to do then. There’s no need to break my brother’s heart twice.”

“You’re not worried about what your uncle will do? If the kid’s found again?”

“Rin’s twenty-one. The throne is his, if he’ll take it. And if it means he can have Sousuke back, I can promise you he will.”

That didn’t quite answer his question, but Seijuuro had only a short while left with Gou, and he’d rather not spend it like this. She’d been writing for far longer than he thought necessary, penning kind words the emperor didn’t deserve to read. He stayed dutifully unmoving, glowering at the guard outside their cell.

Finally, Gou set down the quill and blew the ink once to dry it. “Done.” She handed Seijuuro the cup and quill to place on the floor, turning him around on the bed. “Mmmm come here.”

Gou pulled Seijuuro in, hiding herself from the guard’s view behind his girth. He felt the temperature of the small cell rise. In the gap between them, she flicked him with a folded piece of paper, pressing her face to his cheek. “To save Momo.”

Seijuuro stole a glance at the parchment. Gou had neatly torn the bottom off the larger piece and filled it with a different message in her tiny, precise handwriting. Fascinated, Seijuuro immediately jumped onboard. He moaned, loud and licentious.

The guard outside grumbled something, and turned away.

“Nnnnnnggg, Gou—” Seijuuro dropped his voice to a whisper: “How?”

“My brother.” Tearing at the thread in her robe’s ornate hem, she worked the creased message inside, making her own wanton noises. Even under the pretense, her voice was doing a number on him. She smelled so good, it was almost maddening. He helped her out of the garment, eagerness warring with his awareness of the situation.

Before they could go any further, Gou pushed away, folded her robe, and slid off the bed.
“Guard!”

The man in armor stood at attention. “Yes, Princess!”

“My letter to Uncle.” She handed the rolled parchment to him. “And I won’t be needing my fine clothes in here.” The robe was placed delicately in the guard’s hands. “Deliver this to my handmaiden. Tell her to put it in the closet drawer for me.”

“Yes, Princess.”

“Right away.”

The guard left with a curt bow, his hurried footsteps fading up the stairs.

Seijuuro exhaled, praying with all he had that this plan would work, and loving the woman in front of him even more than he thought was possible. Gou walked on light feet back to the bed, pushing him down and curling up beside him.

Nitori spared a look upward. The sky was a somber, lightless grey. Today would likely be filled with more reading and helping Rin find an explanation for Captain Mikoshiba. The prince had been tireless in his search, and Nitori was prepared to do anything he could.

But first, beetles.

The Mikoshibas were an exceedingly wealthy family, their white brick estate primly nestled in upper Samezuka near a small orchard. All of the family members save the two brothers were currently abroad, but they had a fair amount of servants who were perfectly up to the task of placing fruit slices in a beetle cage. However, Momo had been adamant about Nitori holding the honored title of caretaker. It was out of his way, but the fact that Momo valued his friendship so much had meant a great deal.

Sometimes Nitori felt like he was a difficult person to befriend. His stubborn courtesy kept most people he met at the surface—pleasant acquaintances and nothing more. The youngest Mikoshiba rammed straight through Nitori’s courtliness like a hammer through a sheet of rice paper. And for all of the trouble Momo caused, Nitori appreciated his boisterous candor more than he’d ever be able to say to the other boy’s face.

He sighed fondly and started up the shallow stairs to the front door.

“Ai! Aichirou!”

Nitori started, looking back down the road to see Hanamura Chigusa running toward him. Her hair was pulled back in an unusually messy bun, dress wrinkled where she held it clear of her feet. She was cutting straight across the orchard. Strange, given the girl’s aversion to most things involving the outdoors…

“Ai!”

“Miss Hanamura! What’s—”

Out of breath, bangs stuck to her sweat-shined face, she halted in front of Nitori and thrust a piece of
paper into his nervous hands. She glanced around in all directions as if waiting for someone to jump out at them. “Read it!”

Nitori did.

He had recognized the princess’ impeccable handwriting instantly. With each line he read, his panic grew thicker. Halfway down the note, he stopped. “Momo’s fighting in a trial!? He’s at Sano Stadium?! He told me he was on a trip!”

“Ssshhh!! No, he isn’t. Read the rest of it!”

Ai flipped the paper, and when he reached the next part, his fingers stilled.

“I have to get this to Prince Rin.”

Chigusa nodded vehemently.

The prince had left for Sano already. The only way to get the letter to him was to ride there, hard. Firming his resolve, Ai refolded the note, slipped it into his pouch, and made for the stables. “Miss Hanamura! If you would be so kind, please feed Momo’s stag beetles! Instructions are on the table! Thank you very much!”

Chigusa watched him leave from the top step of the staircase. “His what?!”

Years ago, Rin’s mother told him that true love was a wind that blew only once in your lifetime. You either caught the current and rode it into the stars, or you let it pass you by to wander the world without. If it stopped blowing, and you fell back to the earth, there would never be another like it.

He had believed her. Sousuke had been his wind, and when the boy died, Rin had fallen so hard, he was sure his one chance was spent.

Yet today, as he landed on the upper platform of Sano Stadium, breeze fluttering around his face, hope glimmered in his heart again in a way he never thought was possible for him.

He waved Tora off, but she refused to move. Whatever was about to happen, she wanted to see. Kisumi usually met him here, but the man was still off on his business excursion. It was unfortunate that he would miss his own champion’s last battle in the arena, but Rin would be sure to tell him everything.

The stadium would be filled to capacity, Rin was certain. Jinbei was popular. His origins and success was inspiring to people in a way that few fighters were, and the day the slave finally went free would not be one to miss. Rin was so happy for him, he could hardly keep from bounding down the staircase to the Emperor’s box.

He knew what he was going to say to the man, after the match was over. A dozen practice runs in front of the mirror this morning told him he was ready. Body alight with anticipation, Rin pushed open the wooden doors to his seat.

Sano Stadium was completely empty.
With a hurried thank-you, Nitori shoved the reigns of his horse into the stableboy’s hands, and dashed toward the arena’s entrance, wheezing as dust from the quarry clouded over the street. It was a long way to the top of the stadium, and the ride here had been taxing— but he’d come this far, and his friend’s life was hanging in the balance.

On top of that, Nitori was no fool. Prince Rin had a deeper reason for coming to the match today. He hadn’t missed the way the prince walked about the palace with his head in the rafters, or how he kept that guard’s helmet sitting on the table beside his pillow. The guard he’d seen racing down the stairs that night with a leather collar around his neck.

He could make out the prince’s red dragon perched on the upper platform from where he was. Rolling up his sleeves, Nitori charged up the stairs.

“**TELL ME WHERE HE IS!**” Rin roared, and the guards backed up against the opposite wall. “You all know, don’t you?!!”

Desperate, temper kindling, Rin had searched the yard, and the lower chambers, but Jinbei was gone. Something was definitely wrong, yet everyone he talked to remained hushed and strained. They knew.

“I’m s-sorry, Prince Matsuoka!” One of them fell to his knees. “We were expressly w-warned not to tell you. We can’t tell you, we can’t…”

“Not to tell me what? And by whom?”

The man only buried his face in his hands.

“Prince Rin!”

Sun burst into the room as the door was flung open, and Ai was there, coughing and rasping, his robe stained with sweat. He crossed the floor, and pressed a folded piece of parchment to Rin’s chest.

Rin exploded out of the guardhouse, hearing the door bang against the wall behind him as he shot along the walkway of the stadium. Clutching Gou’s letter, he sprinted with fire under his feet.

Tora straightened when he leaped onto the platform, immediately sensing something amiss. Rin slammed himself into the saddle, told her where to go, and they took off in a flurry of heated air.

Rin stowed the reigns, throwing his body forward to duck his head behind the wind shield on the saddle and take hold of the leather straps in front. Chest flush against the seat, he gave three hard tugs on the handles.

*Fly as fast as you can.*
They sped over Sano like a red comet.

Sousuke kept alert, leaning out of the dinghy as the mellow tide pulled them through a shadowy passageway.

He and Momo had been led onto a ship, taken out into the harbor, and sailed a ways down the lush Samezuka coastline. The ship had let them off at an abandoned dock, where all fifteen fighters were loaded into rowboats and shuttled into this winding maze of sea caves beneath the rocky cliffs.

A grizzled man and his six sons rowed the boats, with a group of imperial archers bringing up the rear, should any of the men attempt some half-baked escape.

Water illuminated the low channels from beneath, rippling over the ceiling and dewy walls. Smaller caves split off along the way and tunneled into complete darkness. Sousuke shut his eyes out of habit. This was the kind of place you went if you had a death wish.

Momo had been oddly quiet since they’d stepped into the boat, and Sousuke felt the kid squirm anxiously beside him, clearing his throat.

“Jinbei, I need to tell you something.”

*Ah. Here it is at last.*

“I know.” Sousuke drew in to listen.

“I…this…” Momo started, checking to see if the others were listening. “I’m here because my older brother tried to murder the Emperor.”

“What?!” Sousuke spun around to face boy.

“He didn’t do it though! I can’t explain it. He can’t explain it!” Momo waved his hands manically in front of him and barreled on. “It would usually be a life imprisonment for someone like him, and everyone thinks he has all the time in the world to prove he’s innocent, but he did it in front of the king of Iwatobi, and he said he’d be burned for it!”

Sousuke sat back with his jaw agape, looking every bit the part of his namesake. It all made sense.

“So you’re here, as his trial.” He finished.

The boy nodded, and twisted the sash at his belt, winding and unwinding it around his fingers. “I’ve been able to do what I like, and say whatever because he’s had my back, no matter what. He’s Guard Captain! So he’s always looked out for me, my whole life. When he was in trouble, I… thought it was time I looked out for him.”

Sousuke knew it had to be something, but he never guessed the kid would be carrying a crime so unbelievably dangerous. Trials were sometimes held in Sano Stadium, where the brave could battle for acquittal. They were never much out of the ordinary, for a match. But an offense like *this*…

“I’m sorry.” Momo looked miserable. “Sorry for dragging you into it.”

“Don’t be,” Sousuke said. “I’d have signed on with you even if you’d told me that from the start. You’re not the only one here because you love someone.”
Interest catching in the kid’s eyes, Momo was about to ask for details, but Sousuke stopped him short.

“Hold on, how is it your brother is Guard Captain, and you’d never held a sword before?”

Sighing heavily, the boy hung his arms over the side of the boat. “I know. I had every opportunity. Sei’s strong, and I mean—I’ve watched fights before, I just…” He blew the air from his cheeks. “I don’t like to hurt things.”

The boatman laughed at that as he rowed. Sousuke didn’t find it the least bit funny.

Voices trickled into the tunnel from an opening ahead.

“Nearly there, boys.” The boatman bared the gaps in his teeth with a mild mix of delight and pity.

Their passage emptied out into a much larger cave. An enthusiastic crowd was already seated in stands hewn from stone beneath its lofty roof, where faint light leaked in through openings in the rock. Echoes from the spectators above bounced off the damp walls, ringing out inside the hollow like a ghostly temple choir. Royal courts of both Samezuka and Iwatobi were seated at a balcony overlooking the dusky grotto. Peering upwards through the shadow, Sousuke searched for Rin, but the prince wasn’t in the stands.

Sousuke deflated, shamefully aware of how much he’d looked forward to seeing him. The prince had said he’d be here, and worry gnawed at his disappointment.

Waves rolled in lazily through the wide cavern mouth from the ocean beyond. It was here that the boat stopped, beside a large, flat arena—an island carved from a stone jutting out of the water. The battered wreck of a ship leaned up against the structure.

At the far end of the cavern, a staircase broke out of the pool, leading up to a statue of the goddess Forgiveness, her arms held out—a mother welcoming her children home.

A murky stretch of dark water about a hundred meters across swirled between the arena and the staircase, quiet and calm.

“There she is!” The boatman tipped his chin to the statue. “Lady Mercy, waiting for you! Swim across the water to her, and you’re free men!”

Sousuke turned to him as the dinghy pulled up beside the platform. “That’s it? No combat? Just…swimming?”

“That’s it!” The man stroked his wiry beard, looking both of them up and down. “Well here’s where I let ya off. Best of luck to ya both.” With a quick bow, the boatman and his sons pushed off and began rowing back toward the passage.

Their eagerness to leave was unsettling.

“THIS IS THE BEST! Jinbei, I won’t have to fight! It’s swimming, I’m a really good swimmer!” Momo was practically bouncing onto the stone field. “I bet I’m even faster than all these guys here!”

It should be a relief. A proper match might not have gone well for Momo, and if they could both
swim, this would be an easy victory. *Too* easy. Sousuke stared over the side at the tenebrous length of water, and a chill crept up his neck.

They waited on the edge as the other men stretched and began shedding their weapons, removing their armor to make the swim. The kid had already lost his helmet. In the heights above, the announcer was charging up the crowd, listing their names.

The drum beats swelled, filling every corner of the hollow.

“Hey!” Momo struck a cocky pose, hollering across the platform to Tsuchi. “I’ll race ya, jerkwad!”

Tsuchi guffawed, dropping his heavy brass helm. “You’re on, kid. The lady’s mine!” Grimacing, the man made an obscene gesture.

With the deafening blow of the horn, the match began.

Tsuchi and four of the men jumped into the water, having stripped their armor the quickest. Momo waved at the crowd. Throwing a last excited grin at Sousuke, he rolled his shoulders and squared up to follow.

“No.” Sousuke grabbed the boy by the belt and pulled him back roughly into place. He raised his eyes to the stands again, to Emperor Akira and the rest of them. “Wait.”

“Wha-?!” Momo squawked.

“*Wait.* What the hell did I tell you about charging in first?”

The kid paused in contemplation. “…Not to?”

Keeping his hand firmly on Momo’s belt, Sousuke watched the five men splash their way toward the staircase. The boy was griping about “losing the race,” but it wasn’t a race, after all. Tsuchi was ahead of the other four, strong arms slapping the surface with graceless, brutish strength.

They were halfway across when the water around the men whirled stronger, only slightly.

Sousuke squinted into the gloom.

Quickly, *silently*, a grey-green shape slithered out of the wet murk and curled over Tsuchi before his stroke finished. With a strangled cry, he was engulfed by the water. Bubbles rose up in the spot where he’d been, followed by an expanding bloom of red.

The other four swimmers realized, but too late. One at a time, they were pulled under the roiling waves as they tried to swim back, until their drowned yells died out, and the pool was empty. Even the spectators had fallen mute in horror, and a weighted quiet hovered in the darkness.

The sea swelled around the island, like something massive was just under the surface, and it was moving.

Five seconds.
Out of the waves behind them, a towering form raised over the arena. Slick with grime that glistened in the low light, thick as the mast of a galley, the long, ghastly fin of a creature hung in the air above. At the flat end of the limb was an array of barbed teeth as long as Sousuke’s forearm. One of the men darted out to fetch his spear, and the fin slammed down with a sickening crunch. The man was dragged screaming across the platform and under the sea, leaving a trail of blood streaked over the rock.

“Jinbei…” Momo had gone stone-still.

Two more fins burst forth, and hell broke loose. Jerking Momo away from the edge, Sousuke forced his sword into the boy’s frozen hands, and picked a long glaive off the ground where one of the others had tossed it aside.

“Stay close, and do what I say.” Without thinking, he stole a glance up at the balcony. Rin was nowhere to be seen, and his heart dropped. He hadn’t realized what a difference it had made, having his best friend watching above him. Sousuke took a long, steadying breath and dipped into the chaos.

_Endeavour: Where are you?_

Clouds slipped in and out of Rin’s line of sight at a dizzying pace. The muscles of his arms burned from holding fast against the force of Tora’s speed.

His uncle had never meant to give Seijuuro a fair trial. He had Gou in the dungeon. The betrayal was a shaft between his ribs. It forced Rin to wonder what else the man had hidden from him. King Serizawa’s conversation in the library flew to the forefront of his mind.

The emperor had sent Momo to _Mercy Grotto_ to be killed by whatever ancient abomination was lurking in the depth, all to prove the strength of his rule to Iwatobi. And somehow, for some reason, Jinbei was there, too. Dread welled up white-hot in Rin’s chest, and he tightened his grip on the leather handles.

_Faster._

_FASTER._

The thing snared its prey by sensing motion. The more you moved, the quicker it found you.

After several more fighters had been skewered and hauled over the edge, Sousuke picked up at least
that much. Crouching huddled together with Momo at the center of the platform, he raked his brain for a course of action. All around them, men scrambled over the stone, now slippery with blood.

“*This is my fault. It’s all my fault.*” Repeating it again and again, Momo pulled at his hair. “Sh-should’ve gone by myself. It’s all my fault.”

“Momo! We’re still alive.” The kid was unresponsive. Desperate, Sousuke shook him hard by the shoulder with his free arm. “What would your brother do?”

The question was a whip to the boy’s back, and Momo snapped up.

Good.

Sousuke grabbed a fistful of the kid’s messy tangerine mop and tugged his head to the left. Another fighter was racing over the stone, hurtling toward the edge; he was veritable bait. “When the thing comes down…” he nudged the sword gripped in Momo’s hand. “Don’t wait for it to hit the ground.”

The water bubbled beneath the rock. “Ready?”

Momo chewed his lip and nodded.

The fin snaked out, raising above its victim, then fell with deceptive speed. Sousuke and Momo skirted in as it slammed down, Momo scoring a deep cut into its flesh with astonishing fervor. Aiming as close to the boy’s slash as he could, Sousuke dug in the blade of his glaive. The creature's blood sprayed out from the gash, tar-black and rancid.

The creature nearly wrenched the weapon out of Sousuke’s hand as the fin retreated, lopsided and almost completely severed at its barbed tip. He grinned through the rush of success.

All was silent for several beats. Only six men were left, of the fifteen that had docked. They waited, heavy pants echoing in the dark hollow. Faint murmurs from the crowd sank downward.

“Maybe that was it?” Momo inched closer, wiping the monster’s grime from his mouth. “You think we got it, and it gave up?”

The creature answered the question before Sousuke could respond. Two of its arms erupted from the water at once, swinging down onto the platform, scattering the remaining fighters. Sousuke stumbled and tripped on the wet floor, pushed back to the the opposite end of the rock.

“MOMO!”

The kid was on the other side, cornered at the edge of the arena as the monster raged. Noise from the crowd above was ringing painfully in Sousuke’s ears. He couldn’t tell if they were screaming in terror, or cheering. Momo kept his feet firmly on the ground.

With terrible speed, the last three men were crushed and hauled into the sea, leaving Sousuke and Momo alone on the platform. The creature was enjoying its prey below, and the calm wouldn’t last. Precious seconds were slipping by. They were the only two left, and the next attack would be the final one—it *had* to be.

There was no way to make it to shore from here alive.

“I…I didn’t think I’d actually last this long.” Momo laughed sadly. His arms were shaking, and he was soaked, dripping with blood both red and black. “At least my beetles will be happy with Nitori. He knows apricots are their favorite.”
Sousuke huffed. “Thinking about your fucking beetles at a time like this.”

He looked sideways at the boy a moment, and thought that if there was something the world needed more of, it was people like Momo. Kindhearted, sincere people, who wanted nothing more than to care for things, and watch them grow.

An idea struck as he threw a last glance over the water to the statue, then to the shipwreck leaning up against the far side of the arena.

“Swim, Momo.”

“Huh?!”

“I’ll draw it around the other end of the rock, and the water will be open. You can make it to the stairs.”

“NO!” The boy’s brow furrowed—angry, pleading. “You come too! We have to go together!”

“We can’t.” Sousuke appreciated the sentiment, but brutal honesty was all he had time for. “We can’t go together. And I can give you a much better chance than you can give me.”

“But you—!”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll catch up.”

Momo shook his head violently. “I don’t believe you!”

“You don’t need to. You’ve got family to save.”

The kid’s face twisted in anguish. “What about you? What about that person you love?”

Through the thick darkness and the din of the crowd, Sousuke’s eyes trailed upward. Rin’s seat was still empty. He swallowed his answer.

“Go when I tell you.”

Below them, the waves churned and lurched. Sousuke scooped up pieces of armor laying strewn about the rock, knocking them together and tossing them across the floor. He sprinted toward the shipwreck as the massive shadow beneath the water crawled, following the commotion. The wreck looked close enough for him jump aboard. With a running start, he launched himself onto the deck.

Curling around the ship, pushing the current up the rocks, the creature finally breached the water.

“GO!!”

Rin heard the cries of the audience, carried on the wind that wailed and whipped over his back. The dark crest of Mercy Grotto was just ahead, and he pleaded to any god who would listen that he wasn’t too late.

Echoes rung louder, floating upward as they soared over the roof of the cavern. Openings in the rock
were too narrow for Tora to fit through, and she growled impatiently.

“You’re not going in there!” Rin scolded her.

There wasn’t enough room for her to fly inside the hollow, and it would be too dangerous to let her climb.

Suddenly, the noise from inside dropped from an earsplitting clamor to a low murmur. The sound was almost sad. Panic coursing through his aching muscles, he made Tora let him off at the nearest entrance to the stands, and tore inside. His skin tingled from the race through the sky, his chest tightening.

From where he was at the top of the walkway, he could see the far end of the cavern. Momo was clambering up the stairs to the dais, trailing seawater down the broken steps. He reached the statue of the Lady and backed around, sinking in her embrace and burying his face in his hands.

Rin hurried around the corner, and his eyes finally landed on the horror below.

Sousuke rolled out of the way as another spiked fin came down on the deck of the ship, dragging across the port side, barbs leaving splintery trenches in the wood on its trip back into the sea. From below, the monster pulled the boat deeper. He’d lost the glaive, after several more deep slashes to the creature’s limbs. It hadn’t been enough. Somewhere at the fringe of his mind, he heard the chants of the crowd cheering for him, yelling his name.

Rin hadn’t come. And perhaps it was better this way. Better that Rin didn’t see him meet a desperate, bloody end in a godforsaken cave.

The stiff crack of planks shot through vibrations in the wood, and Sousuke felt the hull split in half. In seconds, the water would devour the bow.

“JINBEEEI!!”

That voice—

Blinding pain seared through Sousuke’s left leg. Long teeth sank into his flesh, pulling him over the deck and into the depth. White water rushed all around, filling his helmet as the strap dug into his neck, choking the air out of him. With a last surge of strength, he twisted out of the creature’s grasp.

The surface was shimmering overhead—brilliant, and promising. He kicked, but his leg was going numb, and the energy was seeping out of him in deep crimson clouds. There was nowhere to go but down.

He wished there was some way to apologize to Rin for leaving him, and failing him. Sousuke could almost see him now, wild red hair catching the light from above. He reached an arm out to run his fingers through it,

—and a hand tightened around his wrist.
Rin snapped his powerful legs, gripping the other man’s arm like a shark’s bite until they broke the surface. His head was still reeling, the back of his throat burning with salt water after the highest, most reckless dive he’d ever made. Jinbei coughed and gasped beside him, spitting water through the grating of his mask, and the sound was a sweet relief. He had to smile in spite of everything.

The water pitched angrily, and Rin was reminded that they were still easy prey floating in the jaws of the cave.

“Can you swim?!”

“Rin?!” Jinbei tread in place. “You shouldn’t be here!”

Rin rolled his eyes, taking hold of the belt around the man’s chest and hauling him toward the mouth of the cave. He seemed to catch on, and matched Rin’s stroke.

“This is the wrong way!” The man’s voice rang from inside the helmet. “It’ll follow us!”

“I know!” Rin shouted between breaths. “Counting on it!”

Jinbei either trusted him, or didn’t have strength enough left to argue. He hoped it was the former. They swam hard, side by side, toward the open ocean. At any second, Rin expected to feel the deadly scrape of teeth rip him open from below. He glanced to the side.

The fighter was slowing. Red was trailing out from his left leg, and Rin yelped. Hanging back, he took hold of the man’s belt at his waist, kicking forcefully to pull him forward. The current was on their side.

Just a bit farther.

They reached the mouth of the cave as the monster reared out of the water, waves pushing outward from its enormous body. Rin grinned, and stopped swimming.

A high, resonant roar pierced the air, and the sea was set ablaze.

They were a safe distance away, and close enough to feel the heat on their faces. Rin tread with Jinbei, watching Tora pour fire on the creature from above. The thing loosed a nightmarish shriek, as his dragon buried it alive under a crackling stream of flames. It was a marvelous sight.

Rin couldn’t help but laugh, he was so proud of her. He turned to brag a little, because how could he not—

Jinbei had nearly sunk beneath the surface. Frantic, Rin reached around the fighter’s chest to hold his head above water.

“No!” he cried. “Hey! Hey, stay with me.”

At Rin’s call, Tora raced to him, skimming in triumph over the monster’s scorched, sinking remains. She lowered her body into the waves so he could slide easily onto her back. He hauled Jinbei on behind him, draping the man over the saddle.
Tora beat her wings, and lifted out of the water. He could hear the audience exploding with sound in the stands inside the grotto as he directed his dragon to the beach nearby.

“No no no no…”

Jinbei was going to stand victorious in the middle of Sano Stadium, and Rin would meet him, beaming, on the field. His knife would have cut the slave’s collar, while the people cheered, and Rin could share in his joy at finally being free.

And after all of that, Rin would have asked him to stay.

If he would. If he wanted to.

“Hang on!” Rin barked over his shoulder, raw fear clawing at his core. “Don’t you dare die on me!”

They touched down on the shore, and Rin moved Jinbei off Tora’s back and onto the sand as carefully as he could manage. He dropped to his knees beside the man’s injured leg. Two long, jagged gashes had rent his flesh from thigh to shin, deep enough that Rin could see the bone in spots beneath pools of blood. His stomach churned, and he fought to keep the nausea out of his voice.

“Fuck…”

Rin swallowed his sickness, pulling off his wet shirt to tie around the wound.

“Wait.” Breaths coming in shallow, labored pants, Jinbei threw a weak wave toward his good leg. “F-flask…”

Rin tore the boot open with animalistic urgency, and reached inside to pull out a metal container. He twisted the top open and inhaled. The scent stung his nose like hot peppers. It smelled like hope.

“Kaki leaf?! Oh thank the gods.” He’d read about the serum in lessons before. It was banned in Samezuka as a poison, and he had no idea how Jinbei had come by it, but Rin could not have been more thankful he had.

Bolting to the saddle, Rin ripped his waterskin from the leather harness, returning to Jinbei to pour the sieved water over the wound to clean it. Diluted blood seeped onto the sand. He threw the empty pouch to the side and snatched up the flask.

“Ready?” It would be painful. Kaki leaf could work miracles, but from what he’d read, it felt like molten metal on the skin. Rin grasped Jinbei’s hand, clammy and cold in his palm. “Try not to move.”

Rin emptied the contents of the flask down the length Jinbei’s torn leg.

Jinbei’s whole body lurched in agony, and he bit back a scream, squeezing Rin’s hand so hard, the prince felt his knuckles crack. Rin let him, holding tight, steadying the man’s leg while the serum filled the wound. It bubbled, hissing and fizzing as it closed the injury and began to firm.

After a few moments, the liquid hardened into a rubbery seal over the gashes, a sickly green color. Jinbei collapsed back onto the sand, spent, wheezing in choppy gasps. Rin set his hand down and
hurried to unbuckle the belt across the man’s heaving chest.

“Breathe.” Rin worked open the clasp and pulled the strap loose. “Tora, come closer! Keep him warm.”

Minding her tail, Tora curled herself around the two of them, stretching a wing protectively over her partner, and cocooning them in the heat rolling off of her body.

Smile strained with concern, Rin rubbed the man’s left shoulder a few times before leaning in to remove his armor. With as much gentleness as haste would allow, Rin slid off the spaulders.

The black sleeve underneath had shifted askew, and his eye caught something.

A dark patch of skin peeked out from under the fabric. Thick and sinewy—a burn scar. Rin pulled the sleeve all the way down.

The air hooked in his lungs.

Rin knew every twist of this scar—every rootlike ridge of flesh, even after six years, he knew.

It can’t be.

It couldn’t possibly be.

He had to be sure. Hands trembling, he bent to untie the chinstrap of Jinbei’s helmet.

Sousuke caught the sounds of seagulls, and waves, and Rin’s voice swirling together in some far-off chamber. His left leg felt like he’d dipped the whole thing in a vat of acid. There were quick hands on his arm, coaxing his armor off, and the breeze felt amazing on his shoulder. Fingers were at his chin next, slipping under the tie.

Then the metal shifted around his head, and Sousuke’s eyes snapped open. He jolted up onto his elbows.

“Wait, Rin—!”

Everything was red.

Rin was in front of him, wet hair plastered to his cheeks, bathed in the crimson glow of a dragon’s wing, eyes wide, face frozen in shock.

Time slowed to a halt, and hung suspended. The roar of the ocean, and the wind across the cliffs went quiet while the world around them dimmed and crumbled.

All Sousuke could do was sit there, exposed, terrified, spellbound under Rin’s gaze.
“Sousuke….”

The sound was a fragile whisper, but it carried clearly in the tented space beneath Tora’s wing. Hearing his real name from Rin’s mouth sent a shudder down his back.

“You’re alive. It’s…it’s you…”

Sousuke watched as awe, then hurt, and then understanding passed over his friend’s features.

Cautiously, Rin reached his arm out to brush his fingers from Sousuke’s temple to his chin, like he was making sure he was real. Sousuke’s jaw locked, neck going rigid as Rin’s hand lingered. He could almost hear the man’s mind racing and slotting pieces together.

Trapped in Rin’s eyes, Sousuke saw the light flicker, and something in them steeled. The prince drew back.

Suddenly aware of the clamor outside, Sousuke heard the crowd pouring onto the beach as voices began circling down from the rocks. With a husky growl, Tora peeked her head inside, asking. Rin nodded yes, and she lifted her wing.

Hard sun had scattered the gloom, beating mercilessly down on the sand. Sousuke squinted to see the citizens and royalty of Samezuka and Iwatobi gathered there watching them, waiting. Rin drew a knife from his belt. Taking the soaked leather of Sousuke’s collar between his fingers, he brought the blade up and deftly cut the threads of the fastener.

Cool air tickled Sousuke’s neck as the prince pulled the collar off.

Rin stood and faced the people, the king of Iwatobi, and the Emperor. The lean muscles of his back flexed and glistened as he raised his arm high, clutching the worn scrap of leather like it was a token of victory.

Voice booming loud and sure, Rin shouted up to the cliffs.

“I, Matsuoka Rin, hereby lay claim to my birthright! I am the Emperor.”

Sousuke counted the crashes of two waves on the shore. There was one cry, followed by another. And then the cheers were deafening.
The sea’s rhythmic swaying was a kind comfort.

Sousuke realized he’d almost forgotten the sensation, sitting in the cabin on the way back to the capital. It reminded him of home.

Iwatobi ships had windows, and he could watch the birds from here as they dipped and bowed over low crests. Cleaned, leg dressed in linen, bound to a wooden splint, Sousuke sat halfway down the bed. Bruises were beginning to flower on his back and arms, and he was so tired, he could probably fall asleep like this, leaning up against the windowsill. His limbs were weak, leaden with fatigue and the enormity of his failure.

Momo had made it to the statue, and was headed home to his brother, Sousuke was infinitely relieved to hear. But Rin had plunged off a cliff into the clutches of a monster to pull him from the deep, and he didn’t think he could ever forgive himself for that.

He was Yamazaki Sousuke again, and Rin was now the Emperor of Samezuka. The threats these things entailed were undoubtably ahead.

The corridor creaked, and the narrow door to his cabin opened and shut.

Rin walked up beside the small table, leaning himself against the wall across from the bed. He was in dry clothes—a plain white linen tunic, the same as Sousuke’s. It made his rich hair stand out all the more, like a dahlia in a bed of lilies. The tiny cabin felt even smaller with Rin inside, their closeness sending glowing prickles over Sousuke’s skin.

Rin’s eyes flicked to the bed. “Is your leg ok?”

“Yeah.”

Crossing one foot over the other, Rin pinned his focus on the pine floorboards. Sousuke sat up as best he could. He deserved whatever was coming.

“Why.” Rin kept his tone perfectly taught and even. “Why did you hide from me?”

“Rin, I—” Sousuke started. “If I tell you, you’ll be angry.”

“Oh I’m already plenty angry.” Scowling, Rin pulled his arms into his body.

Sousuke winced, coiling away from the flare. He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t dreamed about explaining it all to Rin. He’d imagined apologizing for running away—saying how sorry he was for never telling Rin what he wanted for his fifteenth birthday. And the Rin in his daydreams had jumped into his arms, overjoyed. Those had been fools’ fantasies, and now that he was here, it felt like trying to talk underwater.

“Your…uncle saw us. Saw you take me to the valley one time.”

Rin was still turned away, but Sousuke knew he was listening. “He sent someone to kill me the night of the festival. And if not me, then you, for keeping an enemy around.”
“You would have been murdered to protect your family’s legacy.” He finished, bracing for a tempest.

But Rin only shifted calmly against the wall. “Who told you this?”

Golden irises in the dark of night flashed in Sousuke’s memory. “Someone who would know.”

Sun from the window didn’t quite reach Rin’s side of the cabin, and Sousuke wished he would come nearer. In the shallow shadow, Rin tensed, then let his body sag with a sad sort of resignation. “I wouldn’t believe it. But after today, I…figured it must’ve been something like that.”

Letting quiet sink between them for a minute, Sousuke watched Rin pull up the desk chair and drop into it heavily.

“So then what?” Rin kept his eyes trained on the wood grains, folding his arms over the backrest.

“I hid in Sano.”

“Great job hiding. You sure know how to keep a low profile, Jinbei,” Rin seethed. “Wait a second, did Kisumi know this whole time? What am I saying, of course he fucking knew.”

There was a stinging bite to Rin’s words, but he had reason to be bitter. Sousuke owed Rin as much of the truth as he could give. “The plan was to go free and—protect you…in secret.”

“Kchh.”

Leaning forward sent hot stabs of pain up Sousuke’s leg, but he just needed Rin to see him. “I never wanted to leave you.”

Finally, Rin raised his head to look, and Sousuke had never felt so bare. There was nothing to hide the open adoration on his face—the same expression that had been there waiting for Rin under the helmet all this time. Scar exposed where his shirt was slipping down, hands unsteady in his lap, heart collapsing, Sousuke hoped his best friend would understand.

Whatever Rin saw there made him blink hard, his eyes watering. “You….you should’ve come back. I would have done something about my uncle.”

“I couldn’t put you in danger.”

Hissing through his teeth, Rin slammed his palm on the cabin wall. “Put me in danger?” You let me think you were dead! For six years! Do you have any idea what that did to me?! Sousuke, I lo—”

His mouth snapped shut. “I was devastated.”

“I’m so sorry, Rin. I thought about you all the time. Not a day went by when I didn’t miss you. I did…what I had to.” He knew how flimsy that sounded. How much more Rin deserved.

“I should be mad at you right now. And you are going to tell me everything.” Rin rose from the chair, stepping into the light flooding from the window. His voice gave. “But I’m just so fucking happy you’re alive.”

The storm broke, and Rin’s defense fell to pieces. Sousuke scooted closer to the wall to give him room as he settled onto the mattress on his knees, taking Sousuke’s face in both his hands. Moving his fingers delicately over his friend’s cheeks, under his tired eyes, Rin sighed. His teary smile was a burst of dawn through the clouds.
“Look at you,” he whispered, his expression dusted with disbelief, but impossibly bright. Rin slid a hand down around the back of Sousuke’s neck. “You’re alive. I can’t believe I found you.”

Sousuke brought his arm around to press Rin closer, and they eased sideways onto the bed. Inhaling a lungful of Rin’s familiar scent was almost overwhelming, as the memories came rushing back: Stretching out in the grass of the palace courtyard with Rin’s head on his stomach, leaning into each other on a sun-warmed rock, watching the sky. He was here in Sousuke’s arms, as amazing and breathtakingly beautiful as he’d been the night they’d danced together under the flame of a lone lantern.

“Rin, I missed you so much.”

Tears were leaking from the corners of Rin’s eyes, and Sousuke was about to tease him for it, until he felt the wetness on the pillow and realized he was crying, too.

“Sou” Rin clung to him, and fisted his fingers around the fabric of his shirt like he never wanted to let go. “Gods, you almost…when that thing pulled you under…I’d have lost you again and never even known.”

“You didn’t know it was me.” Sousuke frowned, puzzled. “And you still…Why?”

Rin stilled, a peach-pink flush warming his cheeks in answer. He buried his face into Sousuke’s shoulder. With a soft sob, he slipped his hand between them to rest on Sousuke’s heart, closing his eyes in gratitude for every pulsing beat.

Stroking Rin’s back, Sousuke let his own happiness leave wet trails over his cheeks. “Rin.” Sousuke reached down and hooked his finger tenderly under Rin’s chin, tilting his head up. He smiled slowly, and honestly. “Thank you for saving my life.”

Rin took a sharp breath and squeezed him almost tight enough that it hurt. Sousuke wouldn’t have cared if it did.

He lost track of how long they lay there, silent, faces close, taking each other in from across the pillow. His eyes traced Rin’s sharp mouth, and fine jaw, resting on the ruby of his irises, thin around the growing dark of his pupils. There was so much to say, but all of it could wait.

In a couple of hours, they would be docked at the capital harbor, and Rin would be ruler of the largest empire in the known world. Yet here in the stillness of a small cabin awash in afternoon sun, rocking in the cradle of the sea, he was just Rin: a starry-eyed boy in plain white, who cried too often, and loved too much, who was looking at Sousuke like he was a dream come true.

Sousuke had no idea what he’d done to be worthy of this.

Exhaustion was bearing down on him, and his eyelids grew heavier each time he forced them open, but he struggled to keep awake. If he slept now, this might all be over, and Rin would be gone. The man seemed to notice, cracking a tiny, sweet grin. He released Sousuke’s shirt to glide one hand up his spine and gently scratch the crown of his head. Melting under Rin’s touch, he gave up the fight. As he drifted off, he thought he felt the mattress dip, and a faint pressure on his cheek.

Chapter End Notes
A brief history of Mercy Grotto:

The cavern surrounds a deep underwater pit that once housed a variety of very large, often dangerous fish. In the early days of the empire, it was frequently used for trials, built to accommodate a ruler and an audience. If you made it across, it was believed that the gods were on your side.

However, some three centuries ago, -that- monster took up residence in the pit. The survivors of trials dwindled to zero, and the emperor at the time ruled it unfair, moving trials by combat to land from then on. This would be common knowledge to anyone well enough versed in Samezuka geography and history, but less so to those who don’t read much (Momo lmao), or outsiders from other regions (Sousuke).

Also, if you’d like an idea of what the monster looks like, it’s a weird mix of a kraken and an isonade.

Thanks for reading!

Next chapter: Makoto takes his test in the forest, and Rin and Sousuke get to know each other (again). Possibly worth noting—this the last T-rated chapter. ;;;
Together

Chapter Summary

Makoto and Haru share a last night together before Makoto’s test begins while Rin and Sousuke reconnect.

Chapter Notes

*As I mentioned in the footnote of the previous update, the rating has gone up to account for some spicy content this chapter. ;;;

P-please don’t look at me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Good luck charms were strung outside of Haru and Makoto’s house, swinging from twine cords that bowed with the collective well-wishes of adoring neighbors and friends. There were so many of them, Haru thought for one silly moment that the roof might cave in.

It was the first moon of the season, and tomorrow, Makoto would be leaving on the most important trip of his life.

The eve of Makoto’s Guardian test was winding to a calm close, and visitors were gathering their children, leaving their gifts as the cook fire dimmed. Makoto was just around the side of the yard, his head wreathed in a crown of golden maple leaves. He was radiant, surrounded by classmates and several enamored youngsters. Fondness fluttered up from Haru’s chest to his ears as he watched a little girl loop a chain of clovers around his lover’s wrist.

Regardless of what they thought of Haru, the people of Aomori loved Makoto—this he knew beyond doubt. And how could they not? The scared little boy Haru had lived with for fourteen years had matured into a strong, handsome, indescribably compassionate young man. He tutored the children when they went scouting, cut firewood for the old woman down the road, and stopped to play with the shrine cats every morning. Whenever Haru decided he couldn’t possibly love Makoto more, his heart swelled, and stretched itself wider.

“Going to be a hard couple weeks for us, isn’t it?”

Haru felt Mrs. Tachibana step up beside him, her presence a grounding steadiness at his back.

Lying to her would be a waste of breath. “Yes.”

“We’ll all just have to be strong together.” She unfolded her arms to place a kind hand on his shoulder. “If you get lonely, Haru, you come right home and see us.”

“I will.” Haru nodded. He meant it.
Dusky clouds were rolling over the forest, and Haru could taste moisture in the muggy air. It was going to rain soon.

He watched an elderly couple from near the lake hang a charm up on a low string of twine. The fisherman and his wife.

“Tell him good luck for us as well,” the man chuckled, eyes wrinkled in crows’ feet at the corners. “I remember when he was no taller than a pine sprout! Such a talkative kid. The both of you have grown so fast.”

Small talk didn’t come as easily to Haru as it did to Makoto. And though he didn’t want to seem off-putting, friendliness was a struggle more often than not. Still, it was worth putting out the effort.

“Thank you.” Haru gave the couple a curt bow. “I’ll tell him.”

The sky above rumbled, and finally burst. A drop of rain fell on the steps to the door. Then another, and another, pattering down through gaps between the trees in wet pearls. One of them rolled onto Haru’s cheek, clinging to his jaw.

The old couple flinched as if stung by nettles, and Haru didn’t miss it. Subtly as they could manage, they had both looked away.

Cerulean scales were beginning to bloom on Haru’s face in the water’s wake. More rain tickled his forehead, and he blinked, knowing his irises were brightening and expanding to engulf the whites of his eyes. He met Makoto’s gaze from across the yard.

I’m going inside.

He didn’t wait for Makoto to acknowledge, leaving the fisherman with another brief nod, and making for the porch in long, restive strides.

Haru cracked open the door to the house, slipped inside, and shut it behind him with a comforting clatter.

Happy as he’d been to come home to the forest, residents of Aomori didn’t all share the same favorable opinion of him as their friends did. There was no metal brandished in his face the second time, but the rooted fear of him had never completely worn off. Hints of it still rattled in people’s voices when he shopped at the market, or gave directions to pilgrims from the capital.

He couldn’t say he faulted them for it, either.

The other sirens swam, hunted, killed, fought, and tunneled like roaches through the dank underbelly of Moyajima. Fueled by hatred and a sickening thirst for murder, they were the purest form of cruelty alive. The luminescent blue of their eyes made widows and orphans, and plagued the nightmares of humans on every shore.

The same blue shone in Haru’s own eyes, that vile power lurking dormant. It would take more than one peace-loving shoreborn to erode thousands of year’s worth of terror, he supposed.

Haru let his clothes drop to the floor in a pile where he stood, and padded over to the bathtub in the corner, toeing into the cool water, and deflating into liquid bliss.

The bright blue glass pendant Kurou had given him floated at his neck, bobbing in shallow ripples.
He took it between his webbed thumb and forefinger, rolling the sphere and watching the faint slosh of seawater inside.

The sea was a part of him, in a way he was certain had nothing to do with being a siren. He missed the pull of the waves, and the silent, unhinged freedom of the open ocean.

But each time that longing clawed at his heart, he remembered that the taste of salt water would never compare to the sweet savor of Makoto’s mouth. Being with him was a freedom of its own sort—the surety that Haru could love, with all of himself.

Makoto loved him back, just as ardently. Haru had come to accept that they were a pair—matched, and fated to stay this way, side by side, for life.

Haru knew this. He did. Yet sometimes, when he was reminded of how different they were—he thought he might have been selfish to return. Haru had left the den, and the others behind. It was a shadow he was happy to bury in the tomb of his past. Though somewhere lodged deep down, was the fear that he’d brought that darkness back with him.

He leaned against the wall of the tub, sinking down to let the water tickle his chin, then swallow the rest of him. Stretching a pale arm toward the surface, he spread his hand so that the webbing caught the light from the hearth.

He wanted Makoto to hurry and come home.

_____

Makoto was tired and teary-eyed after saying his goodbyes to Ren and Ran, and his parents. They had so much confidence in him—they always had. For their sake, he could convince himself that he was ready for tomorrow.

He hung his cloak on the rack near the door as he entered the house, searching for Haru with a kindling fervor.

There was no movement in the living room. Makoto was about to check behind the wall to their bed, when he caught the slight rippling of water in the tub, and a grin broke over his face. Stealing around the edge of the bath, he stretched an arm out, clasping his fingers over Haru’s spread hand.

“Haru-chan.”

Haru’s eyes snapped open underwater to look up at him, and Makoto waved. The siren scooted back and sat up out of the water, shaking out his hair.

“Haaaru-chan. Thank you for putting up with the neighbors for so long.” Makoto giggled.

A tight pout firmed Haru’s pretty mouth.

Makoto knew it wasn’t always easy for Haru to spend time at gatherings. He was quiet, and found socializing arduous. Despite that, Haru always tried, and Makoto appreciated it more than he could describe. Affection swelling, Makoto leaned in to nuzzle Haru’s neck, lips grazing over the scales at
the boy’s nape.

Haru stiffened at his touch, angling his head away.

In the six years they had been lovers, Haru had never once given himself to Makoto with his scales on. He would say that he didn’t want to get the sheets wet, or that it might not feel quite as good, but Makoto knew the real reason: Haru was ashamed.

Makoto had tried countless times to tell Haru that it made no difference what he was, or where he’d come from—he was still the kindest, most talented, beautiful person Makoto had been fortunate enough to know.

“Haru?” Makoto back pricked with concern. “Did someone say something to you? If they did, tell me who, and I’ll have a word with them.”

“No. It’s nothing.” Haru cut in. “Just wait a bit, and I’ll dry off.”

Makoto nudged the side of Haru’s head, sliding his hand down Haru’s chest. The siren drew in a shivery breath, and Makoto felt his desire stir. His fingers trailed around and under the water to tenderly stroke Haru’s side. “You don’t need to.”

When his hand found the slick patch of scales at Haru’s ribs, the boy shied away.

“I want to be dry.”

Haru rose from the tub, water running in ribbons down the tight planes of his body. He stood, waiting, as Makoto wrapped a towel over his narrow frame.

Something was bothering him. His eyes were restless, his arms rigid. Makoto wished Haru would open up, but it was best not to push him.

Makoto was more than willing to help Haru wrest his mind from the gloom, and blow away any doubt that he wasn’t the most precious thing in Makoto’s world.

It would be their last night together for a while, after all. He pinned Haru’s arms to his sides under the towel and tugged him close, dusting tiny kisses over Haru’s eye, on his nose, and at the corner of his pursed mouth.

“We don’t have to,” Makoto whispered into Haru’s bangs.

This seemed to bring the siren to attention. “I want to.”

“Are you sure?”

Haru nodded, shaking out stubborn droplets from the tips of his bangs. He was mostly dry now, scales faded completely, and his eyes a deep sapphire. Even Haru’s human eyes were unearthly in color—like no others Makoto had ever come across in Aomori. He’d never seen the ocean, but in his mind, Haru’s irises were tiny windows into its endless expanse. Each time he gazed into them felt like making a new discovery.

Makoto was going to ask once more if Haru was truly in the mood for it, but the siren dragged his head down roughly, and sucked the question off of his tongue.

“Alright.” He grinned onto Haru’s cheek.

Makoto took Haru’s hand, and led him to their bed, seating him neatly on the edge. Haru still
squirmed where he sat, clearly unsettled. Makoto reached into the bedside basket and extracted a strip of wool cloth. Haru’s eyes widened, then snapped shut eagerly. Makoto huffed a quiet laugh, and tied the fabric over his lover’s eyes.

Blindfolding Haru had always been a sure way to help him unwind. It quelled his thoughts, made him focus on feeling. And something about the pure trust that came with stripping away the most dangerous part of him lit the fire of arousal in both of them.

The moment Makoto finished the tie, Haru’s arms went around his neck, bringing him in.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

With Haru unable to see him, Makoto could smile at that as widely and teasingly as he pleased. “You don’t need to worry,” he whispered. “I’ll be back to you soon.”

It wasn’t the only thing on Haru’s mind, but it was a start. Makoto could work with that.

He skimmed his fingertip up Haru’s elegant neck, tilting the siren’s head up and locking their lips together. Whatever warmth was in him, Makoto hoped would spill into Haru like this, and he felt a thrill as the siren reached down his front to tug urgently at the hem of his tunic. Haru was eager tonight.

Makoto broke the kiss to pull his clothes up and over his head. Haru’s hands boldly roamed over rapidly heating skin. Letting the towel slide off, Haru lay back, and opened up beneath him. Makoto’s excitement spiked. Perhaps it was the explorer in him.

Lips skimming lightly down the boy’s throat, Makoto stopped at his collarbone before mouthing down his primrose-pale chest, taking his time like they had all of eternity to spend in this bed.

“Nnnn, ah. Mako—” Haru sighed and shifted on the sheets, hands drifting up to bury themselves in Makoto’s hair, the strands still damp from the rain. His fingers curled, but didn’t tug. Haru had his own tiny, tender ways of spurring his lover on during gentle foreplay, and Makoto treasured all of them.

He ran his hands down Haru’s thighs, humming happily as he felt the muscles relaxing. Haru made an appreciative sound when Makoto’s palms came up to massage his ass, asking, working his legs apart.

“Haruka.” Makoto leaned up to whisper beside Haru’s ear. “You look incredible right now.”

Haru blew air into his face.

Giggling, Makoto bent to kiss his lover’s eyes over the blindfold. Haru was shy with his affections around people they knew, so private time like this was cherished immeasurably. They had the rest of the night, and Makoto planned to use as much of it as possible to show Haru how much he was loved.

Nuzzling back up to Haru’s mouth, Makoto worked his tongue between the boy’s lips, feeling Haru’s fine-boned hands dance over his shoulder blades.

“Taking—too—long.” Haru huffed between kisses.

“Nuh-uh.” Makoto teased. “There’s no such thing as too long with you.”

Haru nipped at his lip like a playful cat, canting his hips upwards.
After a light peck on the nose, Makoto slipped down Haru’s torso again, licking and kissing his way down the line of the siren’s smooth stomach. In the first couple years of their time as lovers, after diligent, affectionate experimentation, Makoto learned that the spots on Haru’s body where his scales appeared were extremely sensitive. Never one to let observations go to waste, Makoto memorized them all. He found the patch of skin at Haru’s lower back, rubbing with one hand as the other traveled lower.

Haru arched in response, his supple form moving like a river’s current. He was already panting beautifully, writhing, and wrinkling the sheets. Makoto drank in the alluring image, his face hot with lust and love, his underclothes growing tighter by the second. But patience had always been a strength of his.

When his mouth finally reached the slim V of Haru’s hips, the boy was hard. Haru’s cock was delicately curved, flushed a pretty pink.

“Makoto, please,” Haru breathed.

It would be a shame not to use the blindfold to his advantage. With a hot breath and a confident grin, Makoto wet his lips and kissed down between his lover’s legs, mouthing at the base of Haru’s shaft.

“Aaaah!” The siren’s thighs squeezed together, pressing at Makoto’s shoulders.

Makoto kept one hand rubbing circles at Haru’s lower back, the other sliding up to cup Haru’s balls, and massage the tender skin, savoring each needy sound Haru made for him. Haru thrashed backward, tossing his dark, damp hair onto the pillow. His heels dug into Makoto’s back desperately.

“Makoto—!”

With his body bared, eyes blinded, and legs fallen easily open, the raw vulnerability Haru was trusting him with felt like the greatest gift Makoto could ever hope to receive.

Muscles coiled with want, Makoto fought to keep his calm. He pulled away, reaching over to the basket on the bed table to flip open the box of slick paste. They were running a bit low, but there was enough for tonight. He coated his fingers in it, tracing his hand down between Haru’s thighs, massaging the sensitive strip of skin just above his entrance. He circled—and pushed inside.

Haru gasped at the breach.

Dutifully, sweetly, with his mouth latched onto Haru’s throat, Makoto loosened his lover. The siren’s grip on his back fumbled, searching for a place to hold on. Makoto registered every brush of his needy hands acutely, drunk with the joy of feeling Haru’s soul stripped bare.

Haru’s hand came up around his head, and pulled him up for an urgent kiss. He missed, landing his spit-slick lips on Makoto’s cheek in his blindness. Makoto swallowed a laugh, and took mercy, pressing their hungry mouths together himself. Haru seized control, licking into Makoto, running his hot tongue over teeth, tangling and tasting every corner of him in all his favorite ways. They moved like this, reaching into each other in a steady, sensual ebb and flow.

Finally, when he deemed Haru ready, Makoto withdrew his hand. He stroked the inside of Haru’s thigh before coating his own length in lubricant, and lining himself up at the foot of the bed.

“Wait.” Haru said, breathless. “I want to see.” He pressed a hand to his arm to still Makoto’s movement. “Want to see you.”

That pulled a small grin over Makoto’s face. He wanted to see, too. With his other hand, he tugged
the blindfold off, and placed it on the bed.

Haru blinked, holding him arrested with desirous eyes. The boy sat up to reach a deft hand down and guide Makoto’s cock inside. He slid in to the hilt easily—his lover practiced, relaxed, and welcoming. The silky pressure around his cock, and the rush of being connected tore a low growl from Makoto’s mouth. He felt Haru tighten at the sound.

“So good, Haruka,” he chanted. “I’m so lucky you’re mine.”

Haru loosed a shaky whine that shot down Makoto’s back, to his hips, driving him in further.

Makoto rocked in and out in slow, circular motions, coaxing labored breaths, and drawn-out moans from wherever Haru kept them hidden away. He was drowning in Haru—the smell of him, and the taste of his skin, sinking to the bottom of a lake and filling his lungs to capacity with the siren’s bewitching voice.

Shifting his hips, and angling his thrusts deeper, Makoto brushed over that spot. Haru whimpered, forgetting himself, and digging his fingernails into Makoto’s shoulders.

Hard as his lover might try to hide his misgivings, Makoto saw through him, clear as a shallow stream. Haru broke himself over things he couldn’t change. He doubted his worth, was blind to his own breathtaking beauty.

He had given up the ocean forever—to be here, in a small cabin in the woods with Makoto.

Makoto couldn’t give Haru the sea. So he’d give him his body, his heart, and all of the happiness the siren gave him. Haru deserved it all.

“Makoto.” Haru yanked him down roughly by the shoulders, straining to keep a frown on his reddened face.

“Yes, Haru?”

“You’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Yes…?”

“So I want to feel you when you’re gone. Tomorrow. And the next day.” Pulling his lover close enough to that he could hiss into ear “And the day after that. Give me something to think about.” With a throaty grunt, Haru bit Makoto’s ear, and lay back, teeth bared.

Makoto didn’t know how he’d thought for any amount of time that he’d been the one running things. Haru’s demand bolted through him, and he drew back, his plans for the next hour dashed like the rain on their rooftop.

He gave Haru what he’d asked for.

Makoto thought Haru looked fragile sometimes—all slender limbs and soft skin—but it was nights like this that reminded Makoto he definitely wasn’t. Makoto built up the pace, driving hard into Haru, pounding him into the bed, wits skirting the edge of control. Sweat was gathering at his neck, and dripped off his collarbone onto Haru’s heaving chest.

Haru gave every inch as good as he received. He wrapped his legs around Makoto’s waist, matching his rhythm, their synchronization spun from a lifetime of intimacy. Through the craze of his lust, Makoto kept his aim sure, hitting that spot inside every time he thrust in, giving his lover as much
pleasure as was possible for him to give. Haru’s cries pitched higher and higher, until he was screaming.

Makoto was glad they’d built their house with a generous cushion of seclusion.

With Haru shouting his name shameless and filthy, flexing around his cock, Makoto felt utterly consumed, as they climbed faster, closer to the summit. This was Makoto’s favorite part.

They drew back, and with soft eyes, parted lips, and silence, exchanged three words.

Makoto inhaled, filling his chest with Haru’s passion, and the heady heat of sex. He slammed forward a final time, deep.

We’re together. We’ll always be together.

Haru came with a shrill cry, back arching, and arms pulling Makoto’s hair until his head bowed into the siren’s neck. Nothing in the world could overcome him like the sight and sound of Haru’s ecstasy—the gorgeous mess of him as he surrendered to love entirely. Makoto followed barely a second later, with Haru’s beautiful name wrenched out of the back of his throat.

For a minute, they were still, breathing hard, limbs going slack.

In a colossal show of effort, Makoto heaved himself up. Gently, he eased out of Haru, and wiped them clean, then noisily fell onto the bed.

Makoto and Haru floated on waves in the aftermath, panting in a happy, sated heap on top of the sheets. Outside, the storm was beating down on the house, rattling the wooden charms.

“Good thing I fixed that leak.” Makoto sighed into Haru’s inky hair, stroking the siren’s leg with his knuckles.

“Hm.”

They were quiet for a while longer, both of them blissfully warding off the waking world.

“Haru, do you want to tell me what was bothering you earlier?”

There was a small shift in Haru’s weight as he snuggled closer. “Mmmm I forgot,” he mumbled.

Makoto could sense Haru falling asleep from where the boy’s back was fitted against him. Before he did, there was one thing Makoto had wanted to ask.

“Haru.” He said, brushing the black strands back from his lover’s ear. “When I, if I pass my test, I’ll have to travel a lot, as a Guardian. When I’m on patrol, I’ll have to live somewhere else for months at a time, I’ll be gone…”

Haru twitched, then rolled onto his side to lock Makoto in fathomless indigo. “I know. You told me that.”

“I just wanted to make sure that you—I mean I’m giving you a chance to change your mind about staying with me when I go. I know you like it here closer to the lake, and you like the house—”
“Makoto.” Haru’s tone was firm and final. “Where you go, I go. That’s how it is.”

“Okay, Haru-chan.”

There was a small, buzzing cluster of people gathered at the head of the trail to see Makoto off at dawn. Haru waited in the short grass with their family, selfishly clinging to each minute that drew his lover’s departure nearer. Their mother was raised up on her toes, embracing her son, and placing a tiny flower in his hair from her garden. Mr. Tachibana hurriedly checked Makoto’s bag for the third time, making sure he had all the tools he would need.

The rain had come and gone, leaving the ground fresh, soft, and sodden. Haru nodded a greeting at a lone weaver spider, her lacy web beaded with droplets that sparkled in the dappled light. Burnished golds brushed against verdant greens at the crisp start of autumn.

Haru had dragged himself out of bed that morning by the waist of Makoto’s pants. He could admit now that he would chase his lover’s kind warmth wherever it went.

They had exchanged goodbyes in private, with their lips, and hands, leaned in with their foreheads together. Even so, Makoto stopped in front of Haru to say it one more time.

“See you soon, Haru-chan.” He stood tall in Haru’s view, framed by the giant, painted white gate at the head of the path.

“Yeah.” Haru ran his quick fingers lightly up the length Makoto’s staff, over the images he’d lovingly carved into the wood.

*I’ll be with you.*

Makoto smiled, fond and excited. “I won’t forget.”

He dipped down and pecked Haru on the cheek before turning on his heel and starting for the muddy trail. It hadn’t been nearly enough.

Ran and Ren, with a few of the other young neighbors, sang, and tossed the petals of ivory flowers over the entrance. Makoto strode through them, laughing through the flurry, as the petals fluttered in the air, and stuck to his hair. He stopped a moment, just under the gate.

It loomed high above him, ancient and imposing. With a final huff, Makoto bowed, and walked beneath it.

Haru kept his eyes trained on Makoto’s wide, sturdy back until his lover disappeared behind the girth of a hemlock.

Over a decade of training had led Makoto to this day, and Haru had no doubt in his mind that he would come back with the forest’s power coursing through his blood. Though Makoto never seemed to think much of himself, he was stronger in body, and more observant than any person in Aomori. He noticed when the jays cawed louder before a storm, and picked up on the whims of the breeze—just as he noticed when Haru’s cloak was unlaced, or his nerves were on edge. Makoto would make
an excellent Guardian.

Haru waved goodbye to his family, promising to be there for dinner. With heavy limbs, and an already impatient heart, Haru began the walk back to the house, keeping his shoes clear of the most inviting puddles. Their lovemaking the night before left his ass aching, and his cheeks warmed at the memory.

*It will have to last me.*

Suddenly, he really wanted another bath.

He’d barely taken three steps, when something stopped him in his tracks.

A shock of cold crawled down his chest and settled like tar in his stomach, sending gooseprickles over his arms. He whipped around.

Everyone had returned home.

Alone on the damp dirt path, Haru’s unease pressed in around him. The air grew thick, and for a passing moment, hard to breathe.

A blade of sun cut through the branches, and the feeling burned away like morning mist.

Haru glanced back down the trail.

_____  

Makoto loved the smell of the woods after it rained. The trees and springy underbrush sang with life renewed. It amazed him that this place—older than humans could fathom, still flowered with things young and lush, as changing as it was eternal.

Aomori’s magic tied every tree in the forest together. It pulsed in their branches, and in the earth, winding beneath the ground like veins of living silver. Makoto could feel the power in his fingers—giving, taking, protecting.

Lifting his head up toward the canopy, Makoto filled his lungs with the essence of the forest, and continued down the path of his destiny.

Haru and the rest of his family were behind him. They were waiting for him, and depending on him.

The test to become a Guardian of Aomori was simple in objective: All one had to do was follow the trail of magic in the earth to the spot where the Blue Tear was hidden away, deep in the thick of the woods.

Though once you left the safe circle of the settlement, the forest itself grew wild. No two paths to the Tear were the same, and Makoto would have to find his own.
He was as eager as he was anxious.

The journey ahead would not be an easy one. Makoto had an imagination like a crawling vine of ivy: vibrant, enduring, and occasionally, suffocating. As a kid, all it took was one ghost story, and he would be huddled up sleepless against Haru for nights on end. The mention of a troll, or a one-eyed ogre just outside the woods would have him checking over his shoulder every time the birds got too quiet.

It was the kind of senseless fear kids were supposed to leave behind with their first set of teeth. But here he was, twenty-one summers old, and still haunted by the images of evils he’d never seen. When the sun went down, and the darkness closed in, he would look off through the tree trunks, and picture horrors creeping out of the shadows. The harder he thought about them, the more difficult it was to keep moving.

Makoto wondered why, of all people, the Cat had selected a person like him to hold one of the most important positions in Iwatobi. Guardians were fearless defenders, and he was anything but. The forest spirit must have mistaken him for another, he was sure.

Mistake or not, this future was still his.

He checked the clouds before setting off, noting their leisurely southward crawl.

The trail of Aomori’s magic was strong beneath his feet. It snaked in line with the beaten path, tracing between the thickest, oldest trees. Makoto followed it, one foot in front of the next, excitement building with each push forward.

Morning wore away, but the canopy’s shade kept the road cool and damp. A chorus of chickadees sang out from the branches above, joined by a steady hum of insects, and Makoto was glad for their company. Hopping over streams and runnels, he gauged the shrubs, and growth of moss patches on wet rock, letting the forest lead him gently north—deeper into the center.

Afternoon was waning. There were still a few hours of daylight left, but he’d have to start keeping an eye out for a spot to camp.

Stopping at the top of a low climb, Makoto felt a familiar shiver.

He peered back the way he’d come, down the fern-lined empty trail.

He’d spent the better part of the day occupied with his tracking, but the tingle of attention at the nape of his neck was unmistakable.

There was someone watching him.

Someone he knew.

“Haru-chan.” Makoto called out behind him. “I know you’re there.”

There was a long pause, and then a sigh. Shrubs rustled just off the road, and Haru moved like water, sliding around a wide root onto the path.

“You followed me?” Makoto thought he should sound angry, but he’d never been good at pretending
—especially with Haru.

“I was worried.” Haru frowned, looking completely unapologetic. “Makoto, I…I felt something strange. Back at the gate. Something dark.”

Makoto winced.

There was no easy way to explain it.

As they’d both grown older, and Makoto had attuned himself better to the flow of magic in the natural world, he began to *sense* Haru in a way he couldn’t before. It didn’t happen all the time. But occasionally when Haru approached him, he felt an icy shiver slither to the bottom of his stomach.

The sensation had scared him at first, and he’d kept it from his lover. Time rolled on, and he noticed less and less. It was a part of being with Haru, and if that was the case, he would happily weave it into his life.

“Haru-chan, that’s…it’s you.” Makoto shifted his weight onto the staff, sagging under his guilt. He’d meant to keep this to himself as long as possible. It was one more thing for the siren to feel bad about, and Makoto didn’t want that. “Sometimes when you come near, it feels…like that chill you get after a gulp of water that’s too cold.”

Haru’s face twisted in horror.

Already regretting his admission, Makoto snatched Haru’s hand. He feared for a moment that Haru would yank it back, but he only watched, curious.

“It’s not your fault! I know it’s not. But it’s because, ah…”

“—of what I am?”

“It doesn’t bother me. I love *everything about you*, Haru.” He drew Haru’s hand up tenderly, spreading the siren’s fingers, and touching his lips to each patch of blue skin between them. Haru sucked in a tiny breath, and flicked his face to the side to hide the dusting of pink on his nose.

“If that’s the case, then why haven’t I felt it before now?”

“I don’t know, Haru. But it’s nothing to get scared over.”

“You should have told me.” Haru scowled. “Still, I don’t like it. I’m coming with you.”

“What!”

“Fine,” Haru said. “Then I’ll walk home by myself. It’ll be night soon.”

“No!” Siren or not, the idea of Haru wandering around lost in the woods was too terrifying to imagine. Makoto folded with embarrassing ease. “Alright. You can come along with me.”

Haru perked up in an instant. It was so cute, Makoto had to stop himself from laughing. His shirt tightened when Haru grabbed a handful of his collar and tugged him into a victorious kiss. Smiling into Haru’s mouth, he wound an arm around the siren’s trim waist and brought him closer. Haru’s skin was always so wonderfully cool at first contact.
Before the heat flared too high, he broke away. Haru chased his lips, landing a last impatient peck on the bottom of his jaw.

Testing tradition shouldn’t taste this sweet.

Makoto had long since resigned to the fact that Haru could bend and mold him any way he wished with no more than a few softly-spoken words. Though happy as he’d be to have Haru along, there was something still gnawing at the foundation of his confidence.

“Did you plan to go after me all along?”

Makoto had a tough enough time believing he’d be fit to fill the role of a Guardian. But Haru had always had faith. He’d been so sure Haru thought he could do it…

“If I planned on it, I wouldn’t be sore.”

Makoto stopped walking, mouth agape, a hot flush spreading over his entire face. Haru brushed past him with a blank expression and a noticeably stiff back.
The council meeting had drudged on for three mind-numbing hours, and Rin had never been more ready to leave a place.

Listening to questions, mediating disputes—it was hardly the stuff of childhood fantasies. A part of him wanted to call it off now, because he was the Emperor, and who was going to scold him for it? But he had claimed the position with the strength of his own resolution, and would fulfill it with everything he had.

It was late by the time Rin had finished dinner with the military counselors, and dismissed them. Exhausted, he let out a stale sigh as soon as the tall brass doors to the reception hall screeched into place behind him.

His uncle Akira had sat across the long table from him, silently assessing his every move. Rin had felt the man’s exacting gaze on him the entire evening, heavy and sharp, hanging over his head like an executioner’s blade.

Though cruel, and unforgivable to Rin, nothing his uncle had done broke any of Samezuka’s laws. Rin wished he could be angry—wished it were as simple as furious condemnation—but he found that mostly what he felt was sad.

It was the familiar, gutting pain of losing a family member. And gods knew he had few enough of them left.

“Done for the day?”

Gou was waiting in the hall, hair loosely tied, wiry arms folded over her chest, her foot tapping on the tile to sieve off her excess energy. She was a welcomed sight. Rin let his shoulders drop, meeting her beside the marble column and starting toward the royal quarters.

He had gone himself to release her from her imprisonment immediately upon his return, and Seijuurou was pardoned without incident. Momo had lawfully won his brother’s freedom.

They walked in companionable silence through the lavish galleries and waiting rooms. Everything in this palace had been built up, won and wrought by their ancestors. Within these firelit stony halls and chambers were the stories of every Matsuoka since the birth of the empire. Someday, it would house the two of theirs as well. The enormity of it all made Rin’s head spin.

“I’m really proud of you.” Gou nudged him with her elbow.

“There may not be much to be proud of, ever.

“Well.” She started. “Word’s getting out that you torched an ancient sea giant. That’s certainly endearing you to the crowd at large.”

“Yeah?” Rin couldn’t deny it was incredibly encouraging to hear that.

“Yep! And you personally rescued a publicly-adored champion.”
He prickled at the reminder.

“Speaking of whom…” Gou laced her fingers together innocently behind her back. “I dropped by to see him earlier.”

“That’s good.” Keeping composed abruptly became a conscious effort for Rin. “How is he?”


Rushing around the halls of the palace the rest of the day, Rin hadn’t had time to let the earlier events truly sink in until now. Sousuke, his Sousuke, had fought his way through hell, back to him. Everything he’d ever watched Jinbei do, all that had happened in the last few days, was crashing over him in a dizzying flood of understanding.

Rin’s anticipation climbed with each step up the stairs. It took everything in him not to break into a run. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do, or say, or where things were supposed to go from here. There was so much he’d missed—so much he didn’t know about Sousuke now. The trench of six long years was wide and unknown, its depth hidden beneath a layer of shadow.

Rin’s lone pillar of certainty in all of the madness, was that he had fallen in love with the same man twice.

How Sousuke felt, though, remained a mystery just out of his reach. He’d fostered affection for Rin once, when they were kids, but there was no reason he still would.

“So what are you gonna do?” Gou piped. There was no demand in her voice—just bubbling curiosity.

“About what.”

“You know what.”

“Nothing.” Rin did his best to sound unaffected. “He needs rest, and I’m not going to bother him with…something like that, when he’s stuck in bed.”

The princess hummed. She nodded good-night at the sentries as they entered the royals’ private wing of the palace. Gou had that look on her face, like she was about to prove to Rin yet again that yes, she was always right, but seemed to think better of it.

Flames swayed and licked in the toothy jaw-shaped sconces they passed. Rin counted two, three, four, and his door was just ahead.

“Before today,” he said, “before he was Jinbei, before he ran away—he was my best friend. And I just…want to see if he still is. You know?”

“I get it.” Gou nodded in that selfless, knowing way that reminded Rin so painfully of their mother.

The door to his bedchamber was open wide enough for Rin to walk through, but he halted where he stood.

Tora had snaked her head through the balcony entrance, resting her jaw on the ground. Sousuke was on the mattress, propped up against the headboard with a book forgotten in his lap, stroking the top of her snout while she rumbled in contented bliss. His dark hair was bed-mussed, and a lazy smile
was curving his lips. Rin’s heart stuttered.

He hadn’t realized how long he’d been staring until Gou clicked her tongue beside him. She was folding her lip over a grin.

“That’s…I wasn’t—!”

“Good night, brother. I hope you sort things out.” With a quick pat on the small of Rin’s back, she skipped down the hall toward her own chamber.

“Rin?”

Bright eyes raised to meet his from the bed across the room, widening slightly in surprise, then going soft. They were different from the ones in his memories. Colder. But still familiar, and still able to melt him down like nothing else could. Rin stepped forward into his bedchamber almost involuntarily. It was as if his body was drawn in by some force of magnetism he didn’t know he’d yielded to.

“Hey.” Rin answered hoarsely.

Sousuke visibly relaxed as Rin approached, running his hand over the small, beadlike scales of the dragon’s head. “She remembered me.” He said. “And she got big.”

“Of course she did. You’re not the only one who’s buffed up in six years.” Rin chuckled, reaching down to scratch under her ear. “And of course she’d remember you. She missed you, too.”

Tora shot a stream of warm air from her nose, and tipped sideways to encourage the pampering, but Rin tapped her on the neck.

“Oi! No rolling over in my room!”

The last time she’d done it, Rin had to explain to Gou why her favorite tea set now looked like clay patchwork. “Come on, you know better.”

With a miffed growl, Tora scooted her rear backward on the balcony. She touched Sousuke’s arm with her snout once, nudging a laugh out of him— before drawing her head out the door.

Rin had grown alongside his dragon since the day she hatched, and he supposed that made it easy to overlook her majesty. He watched her flex her wings and take off with renewed appreciation as Sousuke marveled quietly beside him.

“Congratulations, Rin.”

“Huh?”

Sousuke was beaming up at him. “I said, Congratulations….or, you know. Something.”

“O-oh. Right.” Rin had heard that said in varying capacities at least a dozen times today, but hearing them from Sousuke sent a blast of heat through his body. “…Thanks.”

Rin was suddenly unsure of what to do with himself. He shuffled around, and made his way to the wardrobe to change, too aware of Sousuke’s keen attention on him.

“Have you talked to your uncle yet?” Sousuke straightened, in the way that told Rin he was
A cool tension swirled in the air at that, the energy in Rin’s room shifting.

Of course Sousuke would want to know. Rin untied his robe, and pulled it off, feeling increasingly naked in more ways than one. He wished he had more to tell.

“No.” he answered. “I don’t…think I’m ready to yet. He’s…he’s waiting. Watching me.”

Something icy and dark, eerily unreadable, passed over Sousuke’s hard features, but it was gone fast enough to make Rin doubt he’d seen it at all.

“So, how are you feeling?” Rin hacked through the silence with a blunt axe.

Sousuke gave him a pained smile that didn’t quite reach his weary, half-lidded eyes. He’d thrown the sheet over his torn leg. *Hiding it,* Rin noted with a pang of guilt.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Their reunion in the ship cabin earlier in the day had been floating above Rin’s thoughts all evening, and the memory broke over him again in full force. Their closeness then had been instinctual. But now that they were here, together, the enduring emotion was making his skin hot.

Sousuke set the book aside, and coughed. “You uh, put me in your bed.”

“Yeah. I did.” The decision seemed obvious at the time, but Sousuke saying it aloud had Rin rubbing at his wrist bashfully. “It’s one of the safest places in the palace. And I can…you know. Keep an eye on you.”

“…Oh.”

Rin watched Sousuke fumble to pull at a collar that was no longer there. His fingers slipped clumsily over bare skin.

The quiet was growing heavier by the second.

Sousuke scooted forward, and an item caught Rin’s eye. The leather sheath of a dagger peeked out from beneath his friend’s pillow.

Their time apart had shaped more than Sousuke’s body. He’d been tough as a boy, but now he was *deadly.* Rin had borne witness to that himself.

That trench had never felt deeper.

The light Sousuke had once was almost gone—carved out of him, and ground into blood-soaked sand by the heel of battle until only sparks remained.

But few as they were, those sparks were still there. Rin had seen them—honest and undimmed in the bed of the ship cabin. He would cup them in his palms and nurse them like a garden. No matter how long it took him, he would put the stars back in Sousuke’s eyes, one by one. They could do it for each other.

Rin saw no reason he shouldn’t start now. Washed and dressed in his nightclothes, he eased himself onto the far edge of the bed.
“Sousuke.”

“Hm?”

“Good night.” Rin grinned wide, holding his dancing flame up to the wall of ice.

Sousuke’s frown faltered. He smiled back, and hung his head, ears a pleasing shade of pink.

Now that their heightened emotions had ebbed, and the bed afforded them both ample space, Rin couldn’t think of a good enough excuse to sink back into Sousuke’s arms. With a twinge of regret, he slid under the covers on the other side, blowing out the candle, and leaving a cowardly gap between them.

Sousuke fell asleep almost immediately, leaving Rin to lie awake and wrestle with reality.

Yesterday, he’d been a lovestruck prince, waiting to watch Jinbei win his freedom. Tonight he was Emperor of Samezuka, sharing his bed with the friend he thought he had lost forever.

Rin sensed the creeping stranglehold of grief in his throat, and shifted on his side to stare at the man’s dark silhouette. Sousuke was here with him—scarred, cut up, and bruised—but alive, looking like he’d fallen straight out of Rin’s loftiest, most wishful daydreams. It left him reeling.

Rin wanted to pull him in again—to feel his solid heat, and the thrum of his heart. The longing made Rin’s muscles twitch, but he didn’t know how to ask.

He threw an arm out across the expanse of empty mattress, stretching as far as he could reach.

Sousuke was alone when a hot gleam of daylight roused him, and he sat up, groaning and groggy.

He’d hoped to wake up with Rin, even if he was far at the opposite end of the bed. The Emperor’s mornings were doubtlessly busy.

Rin was out there in the palace, unprotected, unknowing, at the mercy of that woman, and the wrath of a tyrant. Sousuke’s sides clenched with sickening, mounting frustration. He’d fought so hard to be there with Rin. Instead he was stuck here, a dead weight on the Emperor’s already burdened shoulders.

He growled aloud and glared at his bandaged leg in rank disgust. It was his choice to fight in that trial, and he’d been indescribably glad to see Momo home alive, but the feeling of uselessness still crushed his brittle spirit into the dirt. Something innate, stained into ever fiber of him, was repulsed by it.

All he could do was sit here, stewing, and wait for Rin to come back.

The numbing salve the doctor had applied the day before was wearing off, and the bone-deep stinging in his thigh was starting to get uncomfortable. After roughly throwing back a cup of water, he glanced around.

Sousuke had been in Rin’s bedroom dozens of times before, but he’d never paid much attention to
the details.

The chamber was warm and cozy in a way that was pleasantly at odds with its size. Tapestries covered the stone walls, their metallic threads twinkling where sun hit them. Candles were placed on every surface, dyed, and scented with citrus peel.

At the far end of the room was an open doorway to his wardrobe, and an ornate folding screen. A sakura tree sprawled across the panels, inlaid with pastel pink and abalone.

There was a mirror flanked by bottles of perfumes and glass jars of herbs. Rin had smelled so nice that night in the Sano training yard. It seemed he’d picked up a taste for finery. Absently, Sousuke wondered what other things Rin had come to like—what else he’d missed of his best friend’s life.

A fireplace sat empty on his side of the room, a sofa, and Rin’s thick, ornamented desk on the other. The desk was laden with parchment and stacked books, all straight and neat. Sousuke knew Rin was fond of old adventure stories, and—though he would gnash his teeth if made to admit it—love poem anthologies.

Sousuke hadn’t understood the appeal of them when he was younger. He’d failed to see how a person pining at the window for a paramour made for good reading. Though looking back in on his own story, he thought of how long he’d spent wanting—and how strongly his love for Rin had shaped the turns of his life. Maybe he’d been the romantic one in the end.

By evening, Sousuke sat waist-deep in poetry compilations. He was pulled from his reading by the sound of feet clacking on the tile outside.

Many feet. He heaved his legs off the bed, hurrying to stand.

A buoyant flurry of voices was bubbling in the lofty hallway, nearing the chamber. Seconds later, the door was swinging open, and Rin was in the room, smiling and out of breath as if he’d sprinted to get there first.

“Sou, you’ve got visitors.”

“…Visitors?”

Before Rin could respond, a callow figure was stumbling into the doorway. Bouncing on his toes, brimming with enthusiasm, was Momotarou. His eyes lit like candles when they landed on Sousuke.

“JINBEI!!”

Momo bounded past Rin, nearly tripping himself on the edge of a rug.

“YOU MADE IT!!” With the force and coordination of an oversized puppy, Momo barreled into Sousuke, circling his arms around his middle and trapping him in an embrace that was far stronger than Sousuke was ready for. The boy’s joy was infectious, and Sousuke’s arms moved on their own, squeezing him back.

“What do you know? Guess you are a good swimmer.” Sousuke’s chest swelled with pride.

Momo hung back, glowing. There was a scrape under his eye, scratches on his hands, and blotched bruises darkening his elbows and forearms. But the boy was whole, and after all he’d been through, still light with an innocence resilient and unspoiled.
It had been worth the risk.

Momo seemed to catch sight of the bandage beneath Sousuke’s robe, and the laughter died out.

“Your—”

Sousuke flicked him on the back of the neck, and the boy snapped back up with a pout.

Gou, her handmaiden, Chigusa, and Rin’s mousy assistant, Nitori filed in quietly behind Rin, carrying bouquets of flowers from the Mikoshiba orchard. Another voice was making itself heard from the hallway.

Booming, and *big*.

“*MOMO*!! Is that that him?! Is this the *guy*?!”

A large hand was on Momo’s shoulder, and Sousuke felt the boy’s mass pried off of his chest.

He found himself staring across into wide, electric pools of gold he never thought he’d see again.

“You! You’re….” The man had grown slightly taller, and broader, but the same flaming red hair still spiked up from his forehead the way it had that night he’d tugged a knife out of his belt, and saved Sousuke’s life. Sousuke couldn’t believe he’d missed the similarities in Momo.

They scanned each other up and down like a pair of curious wolves. The man’s attention flicked to the scar on Sousuke’s shoulder, and back to his face, body shocked still with disbelief.

Sousuke was completely at a loss for what to do next.

At last, breaking into a broad, sunny grin, the golden-eyed man threw his head back, and barked a laugh so loud, it scared the birds off of Rin’s balcony. When he turned back to Sousuke, he was shining with gratitude.

“Thank you.” The man croaked, his voice cracking. “Thank you.”

Bone-crushing shows of affection ran in the family, it seemed. His arms went over Sousuke’s shoulders, hauling him in, holding on so tightly, getting enough air became a challenge. The man rocked back, and Sousuke’s heels lifted off the ground.

“You…too.” Sousuke wheezed into the man’s ear. “Thanks for…what you did.”

“Oh, you’ve definitely repaid me for that,” the man let Sousuke down gently, and wiped at his cheeks with the heel of his palm. “And then some.”

Gou sidled up and rested a hand on the tall man’s back. “This is Seijuuro, my betrothed. I’m glad you two have met already.”

“You two!” Rin barked. “Careful with him!”

The younger Mikoshiba released Sousuke—only to reach out and bodily pull Rin down to join them. The Emperor looked ready to scold the boy, but was finding it impossible to stay angry.

Gou popped up like a tulip bud, cheery and laughing beside Rin, and he relented.
“Chigusa! Nitori!” She shouted across the room. “Get over here!”

The two assistants wriggled in under Rin and Seijuuro,—Nitori loosing a string of heartfelt apologies—until all seven of them were huddled in a cramped, lopsided semblance of a circle. One could only imagine what they looked like should someone walk in.

Sousuke’s head was wedged into Seijuuro’s neck, and Momo was bumping against the bruises on his arm, but he was so thoroughly happy, he couldn’t spare enough thought to mind. This was a different kind of excitement—a new feeling that he hadn’t encountered before. It wasn’t the nerve-searing rush of battle, nor was it the aching exhilaration of loving Rin—it was the feeling of being connected. He was a part of something amazing, and it was shared.

Swept into the center of this whirlpool of emotion, Sousuke let himself tighten his hold on the brothers, and dip his face in with this strange group of friends and family that had brought each other back together.

Gou and Chigusa were bickering playfully with the Mikoshibas, and Sousuke let the sounds encircle him, searching out Rin in the giddy, perfect mess.

Rin was already looking his way with the brightest smile Sousuke had ever seen on his flushed face. He stole the rest of Sousuke’s breath as easily as ever.

The group broke apart eventually, standing near the fireplace to piece their story together, starting all the way at the beginning.

Rin retold their part, and Sousuke was glad to let him. All eyes were trained on Rin, as they always should be, Sousuke believed. He spoke with so much feeling—drawing people in, throwing himself open, and sharing the wealth of his passion with everyone listening. The dips and swells of his voice were enthralling, his presence magnetic. It was like being helplessly swept up into the wind, and Sousuke couldn’t look away.

Sousuke couldn’t have said before what made an inspiring leader. And maybe he still couldn’t put it into words, but he could say for certain that whatever it was, was shining right here in front of him.

Unburying the past was stirring up memories that lodged in Rin’s throat. It was pure reaction that brought Sousuke’s hand up to rest between Rin’s shoulder blades, soothing the storm, and easing the quake from his voice. Rin breathed in deep, and leaned closer.

The half-charred wood in Rin’s fireplace was burning low when Gou finally suggested they take their leave.

There was another round of tight (very tight) embraces, and vows to see one another soon. Sousuke had locked himself into a personal tour of Momo’s insect house as soon as his leg healed.

Seijuuro gave Sousuke a parting smack on the shoulder as he turned to go. “You’d better be at our wedding, you got it?!”

He strode out arm-in-arm with Gou, sneaking a wink at Rin before shutting the door behind him.
The excitement in the chamber floated down with errant specks of dust as the group left.

Wood was crackling in the hearth, steady and comfortable. Sousuke felt both drained, and peacefully full.

“So,” Rin huffed. “how does it feel to be the newest Mikoshiba brother?”

“It feels like having cracked ribs.”

Snickering, Rin fixed him with an unabashed, affectionate expression that not even his teeth could sharpen. It felt something like fondness.

No. Something else. Maybe—

“Sou, you’re pale as a sheet!” Rin rushed forward.

“Huh?”

“You were standing the whole time! The doctor said to keep off your feet!”

Pain in Sousuke’s leg surged with a vengeance as he came down from the high. He sank backward onto the bed. Despite his best effort to keep the weight off his left side, blood pooling downward hadn’t done much to lessen the piercing throb. Rin was with him in a sweep of black silk.

“Moron!” Rin knelt and lifted Sousuke’s leg up onto the bed, sliding a cushion beneath it, cradling his shin in the pads of his palms. The careful attention sent warm sparks to Sousuke’s fingertips.

“Look at it…” Rin ground his teeth, brow drawn, as he ran his hand around the swollen limb.

“Sorry.” Sousuke laughed. “It’s not that bad.”

“Bullshit,” Rin growled. “Lay back.” He shoved at Sousuke’s shoulders until he gave up, and fell onto the pillow. “Why the hell were you even standing in the first place?”

Sousuke chose not to give him an answer.

Rin didn’t seem to expect one. There was a lingering sorrow in the way he glanced down at Sousuke’s injury, and back up to his eyes. He rolled his sleeves back with purpose.

Tenderly, like Sousuke was something treasured, Rin stroked his fingers over the linen wrapping. His touch was butterfly-light. Sousuke resisted the urge to flex his knee, shivering at the quiet intensity of Rin’s care.

“Rin, it’s fine. Don’t bother—”

“—Shut up.”

Rin worked his hands over the thick of Sousuke’s calf and up his thigh, massaging the muscle, encouraging the flow of his blood.

Sousuke groaned through gritted teeth at the relief as he dissolved, grateful and boneless in Rin’s hands. He watched as his best friend took his time, mindful of every knead and twitch of Rin’s fingertips.

Rin’s shirt was bunching up around his waist, baring an expanse of perfect skin and muscle from collar to stomach, and Sousuke wondered if it felt as smooth, and firm as it looked. Hair was falling
over Rin’s gorgeous eyes, his expression hard and focused.

That razor-sharp ruby gaze cut sideways, and caught Sousuke staring.

“What.” A pretty flush was painting its way over Rin’s cheeks, spreading up to his hairline.

“Nothing.” Sousuke said. “I was just… just thinking, you haven’t changed much.”

Rin snorted, but the shadow had long since lifted. His mouth curled into a grin—faint, but hopeful.

“Neither have you.”

Sousuke’s days began to shape themselves into a pattern.

He watched Rin leave the room in the morning with a wave and a promise.

Later, the doctor would come in to check his leg, and replace the linen wrapping. It was healing as well as one could hope, she told him.

Just not nearly fast enough.

King Serizawa was being hosted in the eastern wing of the palace, and the Hazuki sorceress was at large. Thinking about it made him miserable. When his restiveness welled up, Sousuke would heave himself off the bed, crossing his bad leg over his good one to lose himself in repetitious exercise. His palm yearned for the grip of a weapon.

Tora would spread her wings on the balcony in the afternoon, sunning herself like some unholy big cormorant. Rin’s dragon may have shot up in size, but her inquisitive, affectionate demeanor remained astoundingly intact. Sousuke was infinitely grateful that she’d been here in Rin’s darkest hours—loyal and constant.

Gou stopped by to keep him company, too. It was her bold rebellion enacted from within a prison cell that had led Rin to him and Momo. He was grateful, and frankly, still floored by how mature she’d grown. The princess was wise and resourceful beyond her years, yet she still crackled with that same Matsuoka fire.

In the evening, Rin would return to his chamber—weary, but cheerful. When he lumbered through the doorway, his chest rose and his complexion would brighten in an instant, like a morning glory greeting the sunshine. It was beautiful to see. Sousuke wished he could take some amount of credit for it, but that was hoping for far too much.

If Rin was early enough, they had dinner together on the sofa. They had hot tea before bed, talking and trading stories until Sousuke forced Rin to crawl under the covers and rest. Though when the candles were put out, they lay awake, whispering in the dark, until one of them dropped off to sleep.
One night after another, the two of them began filling in the cracks and corners of the expanse that had yawned open in their years apart.

Rin would lay out a day’s worth of worries, and Sousuke did his best to lighten the load for him. He told Sousuke about the dragons in the Valley, and his riding—how he could stand in the saddle now, if they weren’t flying too fast. And he could certainly go fast. Gou was set to be married in the spring. He was scared for it, but so proud—Sousuke could tell with each loving word he spoke.

Rin had spent so long in pain. He’d been frustrated, crippled by doubt, and fiercely lonely. It made Sousuke’s chest ache to learn how long he’d suffered.

Sousuke was less inclined to talk about his life, though he supposed it was only fair he did. Wringing his scarred wrists, Sousuke recounted his time in combat school, how he’d met Kisumi, and trained himself on his own. It had never seemed like much, but Rin treated each story like a gift.

Rin demanded to hear about every victory in the arena, even if he’d already seen them all. And he wanted to know about Sousuke’s losses, too—the nights he’d spent homesick and choking on anger, facing ahead with nothing but a wasteland at the end of the road. Rin would lean in to listen, leaving Sousuke feeling fragile and transparent as cracked glass under his full attention.

It was frightening and freeing all at once, and Sousuke was again left staggered by the magnitude of how much Rin cared. Where his own heart ran a hard, narrow course, the sea of Rin’s love was
A pillow came down on his face, and he definitely deserved it.

“You fucking promised me!” Rin snarled. There was no real bite to it. Only a bitter trace of disappointment. “You’ve had enough time.”
“I know.” Sousuke pushed the pillow off. “I know that. Just…give me a bit more?”

“Fine. But I’m still holding you to it.” Rin grumbled. “It better be fucking good.”

Sousuke felt Rin’s knee knock his thigh under the covers.

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Rin hovered his quill over the blank sheet of parchment flattened on his desk. He loved writing, but speeches had never been his prose of choice.

Midday sun was streaming into his room from the open balcony doors, and the fall breeze was cool and encouraging. He was meeting in the afternoon with several nobles from Sano to discuss irrigation maintenance, so he thought he’d come get at least some of his address written while he waited.

The first week of Rin’s rule as emperor had been taxing. There were so many decisions hinging on his judgment, choices that affected the lives of thousands—and he didn’t feel ready to make any of them.

Before the council, the nobles, his uncle, and his citizens, Rin couldn’t show even a blink of his own insecurities. It was hard enough to be taken seriously as things were: He was young, impetuous, and lacked the undaunted ferocity that people had respected his uncle for. There was an ever-present sentiment that he didn’t deserve to be there; he could pick up that much in the courteous half-smiles tossed his way from the corners of every room.

He was completely out of his depth. But he supposed that just meant he’d have to swim harder.

At least, no matter how toilsome his duties were, he had something precious to come back to.

“Can’t think of an introduction?” Sousuke craned over him, sonorous voice smoothing a shudder down Rin’s back.

Sousuke could move around now, with the aid of a pair of wooden crutches. He’d been eager to have some mobility again, though Rin could tell it still hurt him to keep upright for too long.

All things considered, Rin was thrilled that the wound was healing well. There was a mile-long list of things he wanted to show Sousuke, and places to take him, once the splint was off. His mind ran wild with anticipation whenever he thought about it.

But in order to spend serious time with Sousuke, he’d have to finish his own work first.

Rin groaned and collapsed against the backrest of his chair. “This is the speech, Sou. I’ve got a few minutes to prove to people I’m serious about this, and fire them up. It’s not easy.”

“You have a while. Two months at least, for word to get out to every territory, and the magistrates to roll in for the coronation.” Swinging his bandaged leg out in front of him, Sousuke made his way to the edge of Rin’s sofa, and lowered himself carefully.
He rolled the ache from the crutches out of his shoulders, screwing his eyes shut, and tilting his head back with a long, rumbling exhale. A bead of sweat slipped from his hairline over his throat. Rin chased it with captive eyes into the deep cut of his chest until it disappeared beneath his shirt. The sight was heating Rin’s blood, and pulling it downward with frightening urgency.

The past week was turning Rin inside-out, driving him half crazy for his best friend.

Growing closer to Sousuke, rekindling their friendship, had Rin’s heart soaring. And with that friendship came the desire for something more. Every night in bed, he imagined what it would be like to run his hands up Sousuke’s powerful body, then around the back of his neck—to cradle his head, look him straight-on, and watch the fire catch.

He curled his lip in to wet it with his tongue. This was distracting.

Rin kneaded his forehead, sensing the pinch of a headache on the horizon.

Sousuke coughed into a fist and cleared his throat. “I’ve uh, I got something, then. For the opening.”

“Oh yeah?” Interest piqued, Rin twisted around in his seat. “Let’s hear it.”

Drawing himself up, pushing out his strong chest, Sousuke lorded over his audience of cushions at the end of the couch.

“People of Samezuka.” He swept an arm out for emphasis, and Rin felt a grin prickle at his cheeks. “It is my great honor to accept rulership of this magnificent empire. I am your new Emperor, Matsuoka Rin.”

Sousuke paused, stone-faced.

“….It’s a girly name….but I’m definitely a boy.”

Rin’s jaw fell open. He met Sousuke’s eyes, twinkling with humor, lips pursed to force down a smile. For a long moment, they simply sat there, charging the silence.

“Oh I don’t fucking think so.” The chair scraped and squeaked as Rin pushed out of it, and crossed the rug to the sofa in three long strides.

Sousuke erupted into laughter when Rin crashed into him and wrestled him down onto the pillows.

“Why the hell do you remember that!??”

“It was one of the first things you ever said to me.” The bastard could hardly get a breath in. “It was so funny, how could I forget?”

“You fucker!”

Joy was bubbling up from Rin’s core, irrepressible, bursting into bloom like the first blossoms of spring after winter’s frost. Sousuke threw his arms up in defense, but Rin grabbed them, and pinned them over his head. The two of them hung there, giggling, Rin stretched over Sousuke and laughing through a snarl.

Sousuke was pushing him, teasing him, lighting withered wicks inside of him that flickered to life and sparkled like firecrackers in the streets at midnight.

The sensation hit like a waterfall.
An overpowering surge was slowing them down, and building them up. Their laughter quieted, smiles loosening. Rin became imminently aware of how close he was to Sousuke’s face. He stared down into wide eyes vivid and so clear, fixed on him with unguarded awe.

This was his Sousuke, as he’d always been, and Rin loved him.

There were only a few breaths between them, crackling with energy and uncertainty.

Sousuke’s pulse was racing at his wrists. His face was perfectly still, but Rin caught the way his throat worked beneath the strong ridge of his jaw. The lower Rin dipped, the more enticing Sousuke became.

Rin had always liked the shape of his lips.

There was a shrill squeak, and the telltale sound of feet scuffling from the doorway.

Rin snapped his head up, and Sousuke peered beneath his arms across the chamber.

“Ai, it’s fine. You can come in.” Rin pulled away slowly, trying to will the heat from his face, and the needles of irritation from his voice. He knew the boy couldn’t be blamed for it, but Ai had the worst timing.

Nitori shuffled inside, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“P-Prin—ahh, Your Grace!” Nitori stuttered. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, but your guests arrived early, and you said to tell you immediately.”

Rin relinquished his grip, trailing his fingers a few inches down Sousuke’s forearm, relishing the way it made the man’s elbow jerk.

“See you tonight.” Rin rocked backward, holding onto the sight he was leaving behind for as long as he possibly could, until he reached the doorway, and whisked out of the chamber.

Gou and Seijuuro made their way through the palace, heading to the Mikoshiba house. Seijuuro had been taking breaks in his patrols to check on Momo during the day, and bring him food and other small things he enjoyed. The boy seemed fine, but after the horror he’d lived through, Seijuuro wanted to make completely sure.

Gou loved that about him.
Rin passed them in the hall at a cross-section, storming toward the reception hall. He didn’t even notice them. His face was flushed, hair sticking out of place, and Ai was fluttering behind him with an expression like he wanted the floor tiles to open up and devour him whole.

The princess had several guesses as to what that was about.

Seijuuro chuckled beside her, and bent down to whisper into her ear.

"I have a theory, Gou." His whispers were easily as loud as most people's speaking voices. “I think your brother and his friend might have a thing for each other. A more-than-friends type of thing."

Gou stopped walking, and blinked up at him.

Seijuuro was smirking, smug and expectant.

Giggles stirred in her throat, threatening to escape. She trapped them in her cheeks, and schooled her voice into something that sounded like genuine surprise.

“Really?”

“Yeah! Noticed the other day. I’m onto something, huh?” He winked.

Gou hit her limit. She sprinted ahead, cackling into the vaulted ceiling.

“What?!” Seijuuro jogged after her, and his honest confusion was endearing beyond words.

“What’s so funny?!!”

She ran under the marbled archway, leading out into one of the palace’s lounge chambers, Seijuuro affectionately on her heels. Colorful patterns laid into the tiles formed a straight path ahead, leading into a walkway lofted above the lounge.

Gou spared a look downward over the balustrade. The chamber was grand and opulent, with high ceilings, and rows of delicately wrought hanging lanterns over tables and plush sofas. The room was built to leave a lasting impression on any of the palace’s guests.

A few of them were seated there presently.

King Serizawa was with his Guard Captain, Kirishima, poring over a record book the size of a small table. In a cluster of chairs a short distance away, were three women—sisters, if Gou remembered correctly—studying quietly on their own. Kirishima was seated squarely between Serizawa and the three of them, so close to his king, their legs nearly touched.

Serizawa lifted his gaze from the page he was reading, and met Gou’s hardened crimson across the vast chamber. He was well within earshot of a greeting, if she were to shout. But she remembered Iwatobian custom frowned upon that sort of thing.

He smiled at her, polite and gentle.

The princess returned the gesture, making sure her eyes crinkled at the corners. That was what smiles were supposed to do. She curtseyed, and continued over the walkway.

“Gou, is something wrong?” Seijuuro may be dense when it came to reading most people, but he was well-attuned to her.

“Don’t you think it’s odd?” She glanced up at him, not slowing her pace.
He frowned, waiting for her to answer his question unasked.

Gou took his cue. “Serizawa comes here, hell-bent on speaking to my brother.” She started down the flight of shallow stairs, steps light and quick with pent-up unease. “Uncle Akira is attacked. And the next thing you know, Rin’s on the throne.”

Seijuurou parted his lips to argue.

“—I know how you feel about my uncle, Sei.” She raised a hushing finger in his direction. “But an attack on him was still an attack on our family.”

Gou dropped her arms, and reached out to take Seijuurou’s hand, feeling the warmth of it through his glove. “It would have got you killed.”

He gave her fingers a light squeeze. “So…what are you saying?”

“I’m saying it’s worth looking into.” Gou reached the foot of the stairs, stepping into the looming shadow of a carved jade dragon. “Because if the Silver King thinks he can make pawns of us, he’s severely mistaken.”

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Sousuke leaned up against the balcony doorway, shifting on his right foot, taking in the distant crawl of the capital at twilight. It shone over the palace wall, the busiest streets carving blazing paths through the shadow.

He’d thought for a moment that Rin was going to kiss him that afternoon. The intent had seemed plain enough, whether or not Sousuke could truly bring himself to believe it. Rin had done it once in Sano. Although, Rin flirting with a champion pit fighter didn’t mean he liked Sousuke.

The flash of Rin’s petrified face on the night Sousuke ran away from him resurfaced with new vigor, searing behind his eyelids. Even if Rin seemed to have forgiven him for that misstep, the shattering sting of rejection ran deep.

“Mister Jinbei, sir? I have a letter.”

Sousuke looked inside to see Nitori Aichirou making his way across the bedroom.

“Just ‘Sousuke’ is fine.”

“Y-yes, of course.”

The boy held out a sealed roll of parchment. Rin’s assistant was growing increasingly comfortable around him, Sousuke noticed. He was willing to bet Momo had something to do with that.

“Rin’s getting changed.” Sousuke said. “He’ll be done soon.”

“Actually, it’s for you, Sousuke…sir.” Nitori handed him the letter.

He took it with a question on his face.
“From one of your admirers, I’m told,” The boy retreated, tucking his hands into his sleeves. “It’s been passed along, so I did not see the sender myself, but they asked that it be given to you personally.”

It wasn’t the first time Sousuke had received letters from people who’d found something to appreciate about his exploits in the arena over the years. There had been a regular stream of them, actually. As much as he liked to hear some of the kind things people wrote, he couldn’t bring himself to care what most thought of him. Managing them had been bothersome, so Kisumi had thankfully had them all sent to Shigino Manor. His sponsor seemed to enjoy reading them more than he ever would have.

Rin’s sparkling laugh rose up from the corner of the room. He unclasped the sash at his waist, and shrugged off his robe, tossing it over the side of the changing screen.

Nitori gasped, shielding his eyes. He bid them a brisk good-night, and scuttled out of the chamber.

“Open it, Sou!”

Sousuke turned it over once. Crisp and unmarked. He cracked the wax seal and unrolled the stiff parchment. The pungent smell of lavender assaulted him as it unfurled.

In the middle of the page, letters penned in a neat, clear hand were scrawled in rich purple ink:

*Found you!*

It was signed with nothing but the imprinted kiss of a woman’s lips, stained berry-red on the paper. Hands steady, Sousuke pulled out the rest of the parchment.

A strand of maroon hair, the length of his hand, slid from the letter into his lap.

Nauseating waves of dread roiled in his gut, and narrowed his vision to Rin’s single hair, blood drumming behind his ears.

He knew exactly who it was from. And exactly what she was after.

The bounce of Rin scrambling onto the mattress jerked Sousuke back into awareness. Rin snatched the parchment out of his hand with a giggle.

“Rin, wait—!”

“Oh come on, Jinbei. Is it good? Is someone asking for your hand in marriage?” He flattened the paper on the covers, and Sousuke’s insides flipped.

Rin’s expression hardened. After checking the parchment up and down, he released the edge, letting it curl back.

“It’s blank.”

Sousuke leaned in to check for himself. Only the lips remained on the page.

Rin brought the paper up to his face, and took a long drag of the perfume. His mouth pressed into a thin line as recognition set in, eyes going sharp. Rin held the letter aloft by his nails like it was
dripping with venom. He watched it there a moment, unmoving.

Then tore it in half.

“Rin?”

“That letter was from an Iwatobi sorceress.”

Sousuke sat up in abject shock.

“I met her in the library.” Rin took the parchment shreds, dipping them in a candle until the paper caught, and dropping them into the fireplace. “And I just got this...feeling from her, and her sisters. All three of them.”

_You have no idea._

“After what happened with Seijuurou, I…” He swallowed. “I don’t know the story, but Serizawa doesn’t seem to trust them, and neither do I.”

“They must want something from me.” Rin ran an anxious hand past his ear, watching the parchment blacken and surrender to the fire. “What could they fucking want?”

His wrist jittered. “Using you to…”

Sousuke had to marvel at the objective comedy of the situation. He’d laugh if he was less terrified.

“It’s probably nothing, Rin. Trust me, I’ve received weirder mail.” Sousuke pulled the covers back in reassuring invitation. “Sentries are outside. You should get some rest.”

The last thing he wanted was Rin investigating the Hazuki sisters, but it was looking like an increasingly inevitable outcome.

Sousuke rolled back to put out the last candle, and settled into his spot. Reluctant, chewing on the inside of his cheek, Rin joined him under the sheets.

Their knuckles brushed. Sousuke had no room to move his arm, but the contact of Rin’s skin was both a comfort, and a torturous shard of heaven. His arms flexed with the unbearable urge to take hold of his best friend, and Rin seemed just as rattled.

They lay restless, watching the sliver of moonlight splashed onto the tapestries. It could have been five minutes, or fifty, Sousuke couldn’t tell.

At his side, Rin was awake, fear rolling off of him like clouds of steam. Rin was strung tight with misplaced worry for _him_, and Sousuke wasn’t sure if that made him happy, or miserable.

Unable to stop himself, he turned inward.

“Rin—”

“Sou—”

They started in unison.

Sousuke stared across the gap in their pillows at the shape of Rin, unmoving in the dark. Rin’s intensity was firing back at him, and maybe, _maybe_ they needed the same thing.

Wordless, Rin rose up onto his elbow, pushing his pillow out of the way, and Sousuke understood.
He pulled his own out between them, and extended an arm. Easily, instinctively, Rin ducked in, and lowered his head onto Sousuke’s shoulder.

The wash of relief was almost instantaneous.

Rin snuggled eagerly into Sousuke’s side, draping a protective arm over his middle, hand gliding up his ribs. He loved the way Rin’s hair felt on the raised skin of his scar. The Emperor’s silk night clothes were so thin, Sousuke could feel the heat of his body through the fabric.

Sousuke burned madly with the desire for even more of him.

Reckless, waiting to be shoved off, rejected—he moved his hand from where it was curled around Rin’s shoulder. He ran it downward, rubbing his thumb in tender circles over the muscled ridges of Rin’s side, and into the dip of his waist.

There was a short pause, and then Rin breathed a loud, sleepy, pleased sound. The noise tickled Sousuke’s ears, and melted his bones like hot wax.

He sucked in a shaky breath at the brush of fingers on his chest.

Rin was sliding a hand in through the front of his shirt.

Lightly, Rin pushed the hem open, gliding beneath the wrap until he reached skin. His hand was clammy and cautious. Sousuke closed his throat over a sharp gasp, holding the air in his lungs as Rin explored, finally resting his palm where Sousuke’s blood beat the strongest.

Oh.

Wrapped in each other, they let the tension unwind itself. Rin hummed another low, contented sigh that breezed over Sousuke’s collarbone.

He shouldn’t. He really shouldn’t. The pull was like its own force of gravity. Sousuke angled his face downward to plant a kiss to the top of Rin’s head, breathing in his scent, mixed with traces of flowery myrrh. If he was quiet enough, if he held his breath, maybe—Rin wouldn’t notice.

His lips made a tiny, slick sound when he lifted away, and Sousuke was caught.

Rin hiccuped. The sound excited Sousuke as much as it scared him.

An apology formed in his mouth, but Rin’s hand remained where it was. Rin twisted, raising his head.

The skin of Sousuke’s scar was less sensitive than the rest of him. It was thick, and slightly numbed —like it had been welded on, but had never quite belonged.

Rin pressed his lips to it, and the nerves flared to life. His mouth was soft and wet, his touch tired and messy, barely there.

He did it again, and again.

Sousuke clenched his jaw shut, heartbeat spinning out of control. He was paralyzed, terrified any movement would ruin it all, whatever this was.

One, two, three more times. The final kiss was lasting and sweet, with the smallest prick of Rin’s front teeth. When he was done, he dropped his head back down, nuzzling into the base of Sousuke’s neck.
“Rin?”

“Tomorrow.” Rin murmured into his chest. “Tomorrow…”

Within seconds, Rin’s body went loose, sinking under the spell of sleep.

He was heavy, and hot, and perfect. The weight of him was the most natural thing Sousuke had ever felt in his life. They were two lost halves of a puzzle, fit into place and locked together in the center of Rin’s bed.

Sousuke’s thoughts were flying in circles, tying themselves in clouded knots.

He would never have Rin’s love in the same way his best friend would always have his. He knew that, and yet… The way Rin was wrapping around him, pressing so impossibly close—was forcing him to rethink all he’d been sure of.

He craned his head back, letting the flock of his questions float somewhere else—and closed his eyes, “tomorrow” ringing in his ears.

Sousuke jolted awake.

The room was pitch black, as though the windows were covered, and the starlight shut out. Rin was still deeply asleep, sprawled on top of his chest, and snoring lightly.

A sound reached his ears from the door to the hallway: scratching, sifting, pooling.

Sand.

Sand pouring in through the crack above the door.

Sousuke cradled Rin tighter, and snaked his hand under his pillow, fingers closing around the cool grip of his dagger.

Chapter End Notes

The lube Makoto and Haru use is oil and tororo-jiru, a mashed yam paste. Haru makes it himself. :) You can eat it as a soup too, but please uh…make a separate batch.
The Cat and the Bird

Chapter Summary

Sousuke and Rin deal with visitors, while Makoto and Haru continue their journey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Rin.”

“Rin, wake up.”

Sousuke felt something mumbled into his shirt.

Across the room, sand was spilling onto stone in a smooth hiss.

“Get up.”

Rin stirred. “Sousuke…? ’Sit morning? S’dark…”

A loud, splintering crack rent the air, and Rin startled alert. Sousuke sensed the frantic jump in his pulse, his muscles tensing in the grip on his arm.

“What is that?” The mattress dipped as Rin pushed himself up. “Shit, it’s them, isn’t it? It’s that woman.” He swallowed hard, breaths quickening when he heard the hinges squeak. “We have to hide you.”

“No, Rin, you don’t—”

“Wait in the closet. I’ll handle this.” Rin leaped off the bed, slinging Sousuke’s arm over his shoulders, and hauling him to his feet.

Sousuke shoved him off. There wasn’t time. “It’s me they’re here for. You need to leave.”

A beat of silence passed as Rin placed the pieces. He lunged.

“What in the hell—” His fist twisted into Sousuke’s shirt. “—are you not telling me?”

Metal screeched as silt worked its way into the lock.

“I’ll explain it all later, but you have to get outside. Call for Tora, and go anywhere else.”

“You think I’d fucking leave you here?”

“I’ll be fine,” Sousuke said.

Rin sounded about ready to give him a black eye.

“Please.”
Rin snarled. Then, to Sousuke’s complete surprise, he strode over to the balcony doors, unhooking the latch, and nudging them open with a foot. Sousuke hoped for one divine moment that Rin had made the wise decision for once—that he was going to listen. Moonlight sliced through the gloom onto Rin’s silhouette, catching in defiant red, and that hope left him in equal parts adoration and fear. Rin kept the door ajar, storming over to his wall, and taking hold of his two long knives, one in each hand.

“Rin, no. I’m begging you to go.”
A simmering glower sent in Sousuke’s direction told him the argument was over.

He recalled that single strand of red hair on paper, and didn’t think he’d ever come so close to panic before a fight.

Clack.

The last lock holding Rin’s doors bent, and the wood creaked apart.

Rin swooped behind his folding screens.

Straightening, flattening the dagger against his thigh, Sousuke forced icy arrows of dread down his throat and into the ground. Cool air from the hallway hit him full in the face, rank with the stink of smoke and lavender perfume.

“Good evening.”

The voice was smooth, and dripping sugar-sweet, soft in the unlit stillness of Rin’s room.

“Did you get my letter?” A candle flame flicked alive, illuminating the pearly, porcelain complexion of Hazuki Kyo. “I thought it was pretty clever.”

Sousuke only hardened his expression in response.

“You’re a difficult man to find, you know.” She toed into the room on soundless feet. I was looking everywhere for days. And here you were all along, holed up in the Emperor’s bedroom…”

This time, the sorceress had brought her two sisters with her, and they hung back, the dancing light glinting in their gemlike magenta eyes. The smallest was straw-blond with round cheeks, and a syrupy smile that bared a gap in her front teeth. She was biting her bottom lip, bouncing on her toes like a sparrow. Behind her was a stern woman with ochre locks braided evenly down one side of her neck. She leaned into the doorframe, throwing most of her lanky form into shadow. Both of the other girls seemed ready to let their sister do the talking.

Kyo opened her hand, leaving the candle dish to float there unattended. Bathed in its glow, she looked even more dangerous than she had under the stars on the palace wall. Though tonight there was something off about her—something savage.

“Shigino’s a resourceful bastard, isn’t he?” She purred. “Wouldn’t have guessed his bodyguard was also his champion.” Her lips curved into a rakish smirk. “And the Emperor of Samezuka’s childhood sweetheart. What a story.”

Sousuke tuned his senses to Rin’s presence behind the folding panels, swearing on his life to do anything for any god, if Rin would just keep himself hidden.

“Where is our brave young liege, by the way?”
“He’s out riding his dragon.” Sousuke tipped his head toward the open balcony door. “Won’t be back until after dawn.”

“Is that so?” Kyo pressed her full lips into a pout. “Pity. I was really planning on him being here. This would go a lot quicker if he were.”

Sousuke’s fingers twitched against his weapon. “What do you want?”

“Nothing you can’t do without.” Her manners fell flat, and she circled the bedside. “You’re gonna tell me where Shigino flew off to.”

“Why do you need him?” Sousuke kept his voice level, reflecting the steel of her stare, even as it hurt him not to glance to the side at Rin.

The sorceress flicked her thin wrist, and the pile of sand near the doorway converged. It molded itself into a long, sifting whip, slithering over the rugs toward Sousuke. He didn’t dare break his stare with the Hazuki woman, but he felt the hardened mass wind around his left leg like a hungry python—and constrict. It spiraled upward with excruciating force. Sousuke tightened his throat to keep from making any sound that might draw Rin out.

“I don’t know,” He managed.

“Really? Funny, you two seemed like good friends.”

“We don’t know each other that well. I was an investment, not a friend. He doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Hmmm.” She leered through curled lashes. “Let’s just make sure, then.”

Kyo pushed outward with the thick of her palm, and Sousuke was flung across the room. His back struck the wall hard beside Rin’s table. One of the iron sconces unwound with a tinny scrape, curling around his wrist, locking him there.

Shit.

Rin moved faster than Sousuke could see. There was a shrill cry, and the sorceress spun around. Rin’s teeth were a sharp glint of white as he bared them, livid, anger steaming from him in waves of heat. Sousuke had never seen him like this before.

Fierce crimson irises ignited in the candlelight. “Release him now, and get the fuck out.”

His long blade was at the throat of the youngest sister. She was stone-still, terrified.

“Ah, what a nice surprise,” Kyo sang.

A low, rumbling growl tore from somewhere deep in Rin’s chest. “Let him go, or she dies right here.”

“Oh? Go ahead then, Your Highness.” She snickered. “Do it. See what happens.”

“Kyo!” By the door, the last sister pushed off the wall, bristling, incredulous, with one arm out.

“It’s fine, Shun. He won’t.”

Merciless metal was at the smallest girl’s neck. Her breaths came in fast and short. One sure cut,
it could be over. She couldn’t have been much older than Gou, Sousuke thought. Rin tightened his jaw, his stroke hovering over thin skin.

“Khh—”

He paused, and that moment of indecision was enough.

The knife fell out of his hand with a clatter as he was hurled to the ground at Sousuke’s feet. He coughed, knocked breathless by the blow. Solid sandstone closed over his legs, and around his wrists, pinning him flat on his back.

Kyo clicked her fingernails, disappointed. “I knew it. All those sharp teeth, and no bite.”

Sousuke thrashed against the metal ring. “I’ll fucking gut you like a fish.”

The sorceress laughed.

“Finally, we can get somewhere.” She arced an arm out to the wall, tearing out a large slab of stone. It hovered over Rin, the blade-sharp, craggy edge of it in line with his head.

Rin stilled, cursing and squeezing his eyes shut.

“NO!” Sousuke’s voice came out cracked and strangled.

Terror wrapped in frenzied wrath ripped through the length of him, coiling his muscles, and locking his eyes on his target. He flashed through half a dozen ways to kill her.

“What happens to him is entirely up to you.” The sorceress folded her arms with brutal certainty.

“So, about my question earlier.”

Whatever the woman was after, Sousuke could tell by the way she moved—vicious, unstable, like a wounded predator—that she would be willing to do anything to get it.

“Oh, and you can try to lie if you want.” She sneered. “But like I said, it’s all up to you.”

The cracks in Sousuke’s armor split wide, and broke him down. He loved Rin him so much.

“Please.” He shattered, slackening against the bind. “Please don’t.”

“Aaaahh. There we go.” Wickedness was smeared over her mad grin, and she kept the rock floating where it was. “Speak up, handsome.”

“The forest.” A sick loathing churned in Sousuke’s gut. “Kisumi told me he was going to a forest.”

It was about as vague an answer as there could be, but the woman’s face washed over with understanding.

“Was that all?” She dangled the rock lower. Rin’s breath hitched.

“And something about a cat!” It came out in a terrified rush as he pulled madly against the restraint. “That’s everything I know. Now leave Rin out of this.”

Hazuki Shun raised an eyebrow, severe, watching her sister for a response.

The room was so quiet, Sousuke could have heard a feather fall.
Kyo’s ruthless gaze raked over him, to Rin, then back—before she spoke.

“Alright.” She curled her fingers. “I believe you.”

Iron shaped itself back into the wall fixture, and Sousuke was down on his knees the second his arm was free. He seized his dagger off the rug, and ground it into the base of Rin’s stony bind. It wouldn’t budge.

“No!” Rin shook his head, eyes darting to the stone overhead, pleading. “Leave it, Sousuke!”

“Though honey, you did lie to me once tonight. And this little spitfire could be trouble…”

Above them, the sharp slab of cut rock hung unmoved, a guillotine waiting for release. Sousuke’s reflexes made his decision for him. He heaved himself on top of Rin, caging Rin’s head beneath. The Emperor’s teeth were clenched hard over a cry.

“Sousuke, don’t!” Rin’s back arched off the floor with a desperate jerk. “Get away! Fucking leave it!”

“Sis…?” The youngest girl piped. “He told us. We’re going to back to Iwatobi now, right?”

Sousuke turned to see unbound madness blazing in Kyo’s eyes.

“SOU, GET OFF!”

The stone dropped.

In that fraction of a moment, Sousuke wondered where on his back it would pierce. And if he would die in an instant, or have a few spare seconds to tell Rin the secret he’d guarded in his heart more fiercely than any other.

His breath stilled in frozen lungs.

But the impact never came.

Inches above them, the rock hovered, suspended in dusty air.

“It’s been a trying night. There’s no need to be excessive, Kyo.”

Hazuki Shun slipped lightly into the moon beam. She knelt, dissolving Rin’s binds, and pushing the stone back into its place on the wall as if it were no heavier than a layer of bread dough.

“We have what we wanted.” She slid a sidelong look down at Rin. Stare fixed on him, the sorceress brought a hand to Sousuke’s bad leg. In one smooth stroke, she trailed her palm over the length of the wrecked, sand-crusted linen wrapping. He flinched at the utter strangeness of it. Quick as she’d come, Shun rose and joined her sisters at the door without another word.

Kyo rolled her eyes, tongue kneading the inside of her cheek. “Fine.” She turned to Rin and Sousuke to blow them a careless kiss.

“I can be patient.”

Rin’s door ground shut, and the darkness lifted. Starlight trickled in from the balcony window, the sky outside a misty predawn violet.

Sousuke let his head fall onto Rin’s shoulder as he held himself there, gasping, forcing his wild
heartbeat under control.

“Fuck…” Rin’s voice wavered on the edge of a sob, and he heaved his arms around Sousuke’s neck. Sousuke’s elbows buckled, and the strength leached out of him. He lay over Rin like a blanket, his friend’s hoarse exhales loud in his ear. Rin’s hold on Sousuke’s shoulders, and the damp heat of his skin was blessed proof that he was still here.

“Damn it, Sousuke. Fucking damn it.”

Sousuke shuddered each time air hitched in Rin’s throat, both of them struggling to come down. He craned back. “Rin. Are you alright?”

Rin’s face was a mess. He choked on his answer, and dragged Sousuke back, clinging to him as though trying desperately to hold together something broken.

*I put him in danger.*

*Again.*

And on top of it all, he had led a powerful enemy to one of his oldest, truest friends.

They curled into a tangle on the wool rug, Sousuke’s arm over Rin’s shoulders, hand cradling the crown of his head. Stray grains of sand had stuck into the silky red locks, and Sousuke combed them out with his fingers to keep his mind present.

Wordless and weary, they waited for daybreak to drench the Samezuka horizon.

Rin shut the door to Gou’s bedchamber, taking Sousuke by the arm to bring him down the hall toward his private garden. He was in dire need of the morning air.

Sousuke was walking. Rin stole a glance downward at his best friend’s leg. The wrapping was gone, and nothing was left of the wound save two long scars. Hazuki Shun had done it—healed skin and muscle through the fabric in a few short seconds. Rin recognized a gift of gratitude when he saw one. Sousuke went silently, his expression vacant. His body moved slow, but easily in any direction Rin led him—like he didn’t care where he ended up.

*He’s just drained. Tired,* Rin told himself.

Sousuke had his glassy purple orb in his other hand, rolling it absently with his thumb, trying to reach their friend, an entire ocean away. Rin couldn’t imagine how he must feel.

Locked in his sister’s room, hands cupped over steamy bowls of spice tea, they’d listened while Sousuke had told them both everything. The night at the banquet—Kisumi and his wings, the sorceress and her monster on the wall—things Rin wouldn’t believe if he didn’t trust Sousuke more than the sureness of sunrise. Gou had nodded along, tapping her nails on her knees. It was all concerning, though none of them could say for certain to what degree. Nothing was solid enough to act upon before the public.

Rin was bursting with questions, ready to take the matter to King Serizawa, and hear what the hell he had to say for himself. But Gou was against it.

“Serizawa likely knows all of this already. They *serve* him, Rin,” she warned. “I have a feeling the
king of Iwatobi isn’t the man you want him to be.”

Wobbling under the strain, Rin leaned up against Sousuke while they walked.

“I’ve had the crown for ten days.” He sighed. “All of this in my first ten fucking days. I have no idea how I’m gonna do this.”

Rin brought Sousuke out to the small vista, where he would come to read sometimes, and watch dragons skim the Samezuka skyline. It was lush, and private—a refuge from the constant bustle. He swiped clusters of white lilac blooms off one of the benches, and eased them both down. Sousuke’s gaze wandered over the city, his lips tight, eyes distant, like he was seeing something behind them Rin couldn’t. His empty stare rested on a red star over the mountains, twinkling faint, and alone.

“Hey.” Rin bumped his shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

A pause.

“Fine. Please don’t worry.”

“Of course I worry about you! You were going to—!” Rin growled. “So stupid, Sou. I wish you hadn’t done that.”

Sousuke’s hand was resting loosely on his leg. It would be easy for Rin to slip his own into it, and he wanted to—but found himself wondering if he should. His memory steered back to the night before —how they’d fallen asleep wrapped in each other. Heat flushed in his face.

They needed to talk.

Rin scooped up a pile of ivory flowers. Autumn lilacs were supposed to bring good fortune to any who cared for them, and if he could pick a time to bank on that luck, it would have to be now. Today, Rin was ready. He’d come too close to death, too close to losing Sousuke, too many times. There wasn’t a shred of doubt left in him—he was in love, and every moment Sousuke lived without knowing that was precious time wasted. Rin brightened with the dawn on his cheeks, and gathered his courage like wind in his sails.

“Rin.” Sousuke drew away, and met his gaze at last. “I can’t stay with you.”

Rin’s hand went slack, the lilac blossoms fluttering forgotten to the grass.

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A single spot of red blinked amidst curling clouds. It sat far off in a patch of sky between branches overhead. The Dragon’s Eye—a star that shone ceaselessly, day and night. It pointed the way east to a burning land, rife with war. And today, it helped Makoto toward the end of his journey.

Humming quietly, he set a steady pace, just ahead of Haru. He halted to run his hand around the width of a fir, closing his eyes, and pressing the plane of his palm into the bark as though checking a pulse. If the trail of magic ran too deep aground, Makoto could find it in the trees.

They had long since left the road behind, cutting across a wide thicket of underbrush. Travel was
slow, but Makoto’s spirit was light with the thrill of adventure, and the warmth of someone to share it with. He pushed his staff out to bend back a sprig that hung in their path, and stood aside for Haru to walk beneath it. Once the Tear at the end of the trail granted him his power, the plants would recognize him, and this sort of thing would go far smoother, he hoped.

Haru chased a blue butterfly into a sunny glade ahead. The grass was up to the siren’s waist, and he pushed gracefully through the field with his arm outstretched to graze the tops of each blade. Brightness dripped over his inky hair, and down his narrow shoulders. Makoto watched from the shade for a moment. Sometimes he couldn’t believe someone so breathtaking was his. These last eight days were a taste of the rest of their lives, Makoto realized with a jump. He wondered if Haru was happy like this.

“Makoto. You’re not watching the trail.”

He followed Haru into the open air, laughing.

The rest of the day they spent dipping into the glen, stopping to wash and swim in a stream that ran cold, and clear as glass.
It’s close.

An eagle glided above the vale on dark wings, soaring, surveying the forest below. From here, he was hardly larger than a dragonfly, but Makoto knew each of his wings stretched longer than his own height. Eagles would be allies in his lifelong watch, once this test was complete.

He ran his fingertips fondly over Haru’s carvings.

“Don’t stand so close to the edge.” Haru padded up to him, dried and dressed. He tugged on Makoto’s sleeve to bring him in.

“Sorry, Haru-chan.”

Haru caught sight of the great bird as it rose with an updraft. “It would be nice to fly.”

“Really?” Makoto giggled.

“Yeah.” Haru shrugged. “He looks very…free.”

Scanning the rocky height, Makoto spotted something he’d missed on their way in from the other side. Carved into the cliff face, and built up over the ledge, was a weathered sandstone tower. Figures and patterns on its facade were worn smooth, grass sprouting from every crease and cranny. It lay wrapped up in tree roots and moss, as if the forest was folding it back into the land.

“We could stay there tonight.” Haru adjusted his pack, and nudged Makoto for approval. “All temples have travelers’ rooms, right?”

Makoto squinted, searching for any sign of the Aomori sacred emblem. “Sure…”

Cautious and curious, they approached the facade. There was no white gate over the entrance, nor any outdoor shrines. Temples were usually kept up by monks and migrants, but this building looked like it hadn’t been used in decades. A pair of dragons loomed before the door, menacing wardens sculpted from a red-veined rock Makoto had never come across before. Their angry snarls faced outward, and he nodded to their majesty as he and Haru passed between them.

“I don’t know what this is, Haru-chan, but it’s not a temple.”

“Hello?”

Makoto’s voice sang back to him from the reaches of an empty chamber.

“No one here, huh…” He ducked under a vine to pass through the doorway, carrying his staff aloft in front of him.

“Good,” Haru huffed.

The inside was warm, bright, and airy, but shielded from the gusts that crashed up the cliffside. They stepped into a domed rotunda. Tiles fanned out in flowering patterns from a dais in the center. Tall, spiked sconces circled the perimeter, and Makoto tried to imagine what this place would look like lit up, wreathed in fire. He tipped his head upward with a quiet gasp. No building in Aomori had a ceiling this high.
There was just enough daylight left, cutting in through the open lookout, to reveal timeworn murals on the walls. Paint was chipped, and crumbled in patches, but Makoto could make out the shapes of flames, leathered wings, and human warriors with flowing red hair and jaws full of pointed teeth.

He shivered. “Incredible…”

Haru set his gear down, and joined Makoto beside one of the murals. He ran pale fingers over the weathered fresco, silent in awe.

“I’ve never painted with a color like that before.” Haru stopped before the figure of a man with sharp eyes a deep jewel carmine. “I wouldn’t even know how to make it.”

They had dinner, searing the fish over a fire pit nestled in an apse near the balcony. There was an echoing sound that thrummed through the space—air whistling through hollowed holes in the rock walls. It was musical, and soothing, like the structure was an ancient ocarina for the wind itself to play.

Dusk was dimming the sky, and Makoto unlated their deerskin bedroll on a spot of clean tile. Haru had been a ball of restless energy since they’d found this place. There was unmistakable heat in the siren’s gaze, trailing down Makoto’s back as he stretched to lay out their blanket.

“Here?” he laughed, stumbling to his feet.

Haru’s quick hands darted to the tie at his waist. “It’s been over a week.”

“Haru, we can’t.”

“Why not?” Undeterred, fingers nimbly working the knot open, Haru blew Makoto’s bangs out of his face. “You said it’s not a temple.”

“Well yes, but—”

“Then, it’s fine.” Haru plunged beneath Makoto’s waistband without another idle second.

“Aaahh! Wait! We don’t know what this place is.” Makoto threw a look over his shoulder to the open entrance. “And there’s no door. Someone might come!”

“Hopefully us.”

“Haru.” Makoto grasped Haru by the wrists, and eased his arms down with patient restraint.

“We really shouldn’t.”

Midnight blue eyes rolled up at Makoto, swimming with want, and that perfect mouth pressed into the tiniest pout.

Makoto had Haru hoisted up onto a broken slab of stone, slim legs wrapped around his waist, hands in his tunic, breathing hard in his ear. He’d forgotten where they were, and why he’d ever been against this in the first place.

“What’s got into you tonight?” Makoto breathed. He kissed a rapidly reddening ear.

And got a rough stroke in retaliation.
Wind snaked through the rock, louder now, with more force. The notes drove Haru’s hips forward, and, *no this wasn’t a temple.*

Air from the cliff was sounding in the dome, filling the chamber.

Makoto paused.

“What is it?” Haru leaned away, brow furrowed. The corners of his mouth were spit-shined, his expression still hungry.

“The wind…” Makoto said. “It’s not coming from the cliffs anymore. It’s…blowing from inside.”

Haru’s puzzling frown was the last thing Makoto saw before the space was flooded with light.

Hot, and radiant, like the bloom of a giant paper lantern, it lit up in the center beside the dais.

Haru ducked his face into Makoto’s chest to shield his eyes. A tornado of embers swirled where the light hit, and when they settled, a lone bird was perched on the rock. Impossibly long ivory feathers swept out from its wings and tail, framing its swanlike neck with a fiery glimmer.

Makoto’s mouth fell open.

The creature hadn’t spotted them. Stretching once, it wrapped its wings around its lithe body. When they unfolded, the bird was no more. In its place, was a man.

He looked like a man, though his features were almost too supernal to belong to a human. A long face, peony pink hair, and keen eyes that were sharp as cuts of amethyst. His wings flexed lazily, catching the scant sunlight, and holding it captive. The stranger brushed dirt off his sleeves, gold jewelry on his wrists jingling with every swipe of his hands.

“I can’t believe she let the place grow over...It’s only been, what seventy years?”

Makoto could do nothing but watch, and Haru peeked around his shoulder.

The visitor's scrutiny traveled up the walls, and around the chamber--

Makoto felt the pierce of his gaze like a whip of wind. The man’s attention wandered to Haru perched on the stone slab, then *down,* and his eyebrows shot up behind rosy curls.

Awareness came barreling back.

Makoto yelped, snapping his arms out of Haru’s tunic.

“Well, hello!” The man’s voice was buoyant with amusement.

Makoto had to reach down, and scramble to pry Haru’s hands out of his pants himself, barely managing not to choke on his own tongue.

“No, no, don’t stop on my account!” The man leapt down over the side of the dais. “By all means, finish up! I’ll wait outside! Just sort of yell my way when you’re done!”

Makoto could hear himself screaming inside his own skull, his face burning like a sun. Tucking his tunic back into place, he bowed in apology, too mortified to string a sentence together. Haru pursed his lips with a prick of frustration. Lilting laughter chimed upward, bouncing around the lofty ceiling.

The man bounded over to them. “Name’s Kisumi!”
A strange name. “…Kisumi?”

“Well, since you asked!” The spirit sprang forward, and landed a quick peck on Makoto’s cheek.

He jumped, hand flying to his face. His skin tingled where the spirit’s lips had been. Makoto had never seen Haru’s killing stare, but it probably looked something like this.

“I’m Tachibana Makoto. This is Tachibana Haruka.” Makoto bowed.

“A pleasure!” Kisumi made to throw a friendly arm over Haru, but the siren ducked deftly out of the way.

“I don’t like being touched.” Haru’s expression was flat.

“Really?” Kisumi smirked, twinkling with mischief. “You seemed fine with it a minute ago.”

“Aaaaahh!” Makoto waved his free hand in a flurry, like he could fan the subject away forever. “I-Is there something we can help you with, Kisumi? What’s brought you to Aomori?”

The man brought a thoughtful hand up to his chin. “I take it you’re familiar with your forest’s spirit, yes?”

“That’s her!” Kisumi nodded, his feathered earrings swinging with his enthusiasm. “Gatekeeper of Iwatobi.” He grinned, and swept a hand up toward himself with a grand flourish. “Samezuka has one, too.”

Makoto stood stunned as Kisumi skipped around him, and back up to the dais.

“And I actually did come to do something here. So if you’ll both excuse me—”

The last traces of day caught in his wings, and stray fringes of his hair.

“You two might want to stand in the middle of the room.” He dusted his hands together. With no further warning, Kisumi slammed his hand onto the tablet in front of him.

His wings flexed again, and the chamber roared. Molten white and gold blazed through every design on the ground, snaking up the length of the torches.

Makoto curled an arm around Haru, guarding him close.

One by one, fanning outward, the giant torches lit themselves, their basins full to bursting with fire. The ring of them closed, overwhelming the chamber with dazzling light. Relief figures on the ceiling swirled in the ripples of heat steaming upward. Flames crackled and swayed to the wind’s tune in the hollows, throwing shadows onto the ground out from the center in brilliant rays.

Kisumi drew his hand back, and stretched. “Aaahh, it feels good to do that.”

Haru scowled. “What was that for?”

“You’ll see!” The bird spirit glided down from the pedestal, and twirled past Makoto toward the lookout.

“She’ll be here soon.”
The fires settled into a calm flicker beneath the dim veil of night. Makoto was asleep on his side, arms outstretched, and waiting for Haru. It made the skin on the siren’s back tingle with longing, but he couldn’t join his lover yet. Not when a suspicious stranger was sitting just a few steps away.

The spirit was deep in thought, quiet for the first time since they’d met him. He must have felt Haru’s exacting attention, and perked up.

“So,” he said. “Shoreborn, hmm?”

Haru’s skin prickled.

“Oh, it’s not a problem. I felt you the second I got here.” He waved a dismissive hand. “And I don’t want to be rude, but I am dying to know your story. What’s got you out here, so far from home? In such… unconventional company?”

Haru shrugged, sieving his memories for a way to tell his tale in the shortest way possible. “I was given here as a ward, when I was a kid. And I decided to stay.”

He peered at Makoto as the man shifted in his sleep. When he turned back to Kisumi, a satisfied grin was splitting the spirit’s face.

“You’re that boy! I’ve heard of you, Haruka! A lot of people have. Didn’t know you came back. That’s…I never would have thought…”

“Hm.”

“Do you know where you’re from, then?” Kisumi asked, leaning in. “Where you were born, I mean. Sometimes they remember where they took you.”

Haru tipped backward to maintain his buffer of space. “Some place in Samezuka.”

“Oh!” The spirit stirred with interest. “Where?”

“I don’t know.” Haru picked a twig off the ground, twirling it in idle fingers. “I went to see it, several years ago, and there was nothing left to see. It was all burned, or…something.”

The spirit bent even closer, and searched Haru’s face. His focused energy made him nervous.

“I see it. I see it!”

“Sshh.”

“Sorry.” Kisumi was giddy over some kind of private joke. “It’s just…The hair, the eyes… Of course you’re from Tokitsu!” He chuckled.

“Be quiet. Makoto is sleeping.”

The spirit held his finger to his lips in surrender. “Did you get a chance to talk with anybody, when you were there?”

Haru thought back to that shore. Bleak, blackened, empty.

“There was no one. Kurou said the people all died.”
“Hmm. They did die.” Sympathy pulled at the spirit’s delicate mouth. “But not all of them.”

Haru shot up straight.

“If you want, Haru, I have a dear friend back in Sano I can introduce you to someday.”

“You know a survivor?”

Kisumi’s laughter puffed behind his knuckles. “If there was one word I’d use to describe him, it might be that. Because ‘lovesick fool’ is two words. Anyway, I know he misses it sometimes. So if you ever feel like learning what sort of life you might’ve had as a human, I’m sure he could tell you all about it. It’d probably be good for both of you.”

Haru had no regrets about the choice he’d made, and the events that led him here, to the man he loved. But he still found himself nodding with irrepressible enthusiasm. “What’s his—”

The ring of torches dimmed suddenly, snuffing out all but the faintest glow of light. Haru’s scales slicked over his arms, and his hand flew protectively to Makoto’s back.

“Oh,” said Kisumi. “ Took her long enough.”

Haru followed the tilt of the spirit’s chin. Grass rustled around the frame of the entrance, a breeze whistling through the walls from a new direction. There was something padding down the roots, around the lowest branches.

White. A cat no larger than the shrine cats Haru had grown up with, but blindingly white, like the moon at its peak.

“Haru-chan…?” Makoto sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He blinked once, twice, then he was stumbling to his knees.

There was flash of light, rustling the leaves on every branch. A young woman was standing where the cat been. She was petite, with full hips, and a kind face. Her eyes were soft and gentle—like Makoto’s. But where his were bright with wonder, hers were heavy—steeped in the wisdom of many human lifetimes.

“Haru that’s—!” Makoto’s whisper tickled Haru’s ear. He let himself be enveloped in Makoto’s nervous arms.

The woman spotted them huddled on the ground, awestruck, and nodded sweetly. Haru squeezed his lover’s arm.

Kisumi was already striding across the chamber with his arms thrown wide. “Miho!” He ducked in and kissed the woman’s cheek, light and fast before her hand came up to swat at him. “It’s been too long!”

She hummed. “And who’s fault is that? Remind me again, which of us flies?”

The bird spirit stuttered.

“Your human enterprises keep you busy, no doubt.”

Haru watched the pair embrace each other and trade insults like old friends. He could feel the excitement humming through Makoto’s body, hugged flush against him.

“No one back home will believe this, Haru.”
“Ren might.”

Leaving the spirits to their private discussion, he and Makoto huddled back onto the bedroll. Haru let Makoto hold him a bit tighter than usual, their noses brushing, pulses beating comfortably in tune with one another’s. Though he wasn’t aware of it, Makoto always had a need to cradle Haru near when his emotion spiked. Haru wrapped a contented arm over his waist, happy to share this moment with him.

The spirits deliberated late into the night, voices rising and falling like the tide.

“Your human poisons dull the mind.” The Cat’s melodic voice floated into the roof. “This is not possible. It was an illusion.”

Kisumi loosed his frustration in a drawn-out growl. “You think I can’t tell what an illusion feels like? Look, not that I hadn’t been drinking…but I know what saw!” A torch nearby flared with the spirit’s temper. “It was a damned real monster. It shook the ground, it breathed.”

The Cat was unconvinced. “I don’t care how powerful this woman’s magic is, a human cannot produce the essence life. No one can. Listen to yourself.”

“I know how crazy it sounds, but I swear that’s what happened!”

The Cat’s impatience leaked out in a sigh, and their voices dropped as they argued to and fro in whispers.

Hazy echoes and comfortable heat from the fires eased Haru into a dreamless sleep.

He woke to Makoto’s voice. It must have been late. The sky outside was still pitch dark, though the torches burned steady.

“K-Kisumi?” Makoto called across the space. “I don’t mean to interrupt your conversation. I’m very sorry. But there’s—a light? In your pocket…”

Haru twisted around in bed to see the spirit hop backward, and plunge a hand into his robe. “Oh, my!” Lightly, between his thumb and forefinger, he held up a small, translucent orb. It pulsed purple with an urgent rhythm. The spirit’s mood soured.

“Things are worse than I thought.”

Minutes later, Haru stood with Makoto, watching Kisumi’s orb flashing beside the dais.

“That friend I was telling you about, Haru—this is a thing I use to call him when I need him.” Kisumi raised the orb up to his face, so that its light blinked bright in his irises. “He’s warning me.”

Makoto edged inward. “How do you know your friend isn’t asking for help?”

“That’s not something he does.”

Kisumi’s features drew taught, and the swift loss of his humor hit Haru with a wave of unease. He dropped the stone back into his pocket, and trotted to the lookout. The woods beyond were a dense cover of shadow.

“The two of you should head out.”

“I can’t say.” The spirit spun back, his figure stark alabaster against the night outside. “Someone is looking for me, and it’s very important that they don’t find me. This is the first place in the forest they’d look. So it’s best if you were on the road.” He paused. “Actually, it’s best if you were in Aomori Shrine. I’ll take you there.”

“No! I—I have to find it,” Makoto pleaded. “We’re close to it, I can tell.”

Kisumi shook his head. “Not a smart idea.”

“Hmm, but you are quite near.” The Cat stepped closer. Her presence was a divine draft of calm. “Very well. Finish your trial, young one.”


“Wait! What about Haru?” Makoto’s arm tightened around Haru’s waist. “Will he be able to…? Since he’s a…”

“He will. If he enters with you.” The woman nodded at their linked hands, and smiled. “You already have the right idea.”

She brought a delicate hand up to cup Makoto’s jaw. “You were one of the easiest choices I ever made, Tachibana Makoto.”

In a few short minutes, Makoto and Haru packed and shouldered their things. Brumal night air crept under their clothes the moment they stepped outside, biting after the blissful warmth of the torchlit beacon. Kisumi had insisted on at least flying them down the cliff. Flashing into the valley wrapped in a spirit’s magic was the most peculiar sensation Haru had ever felt—though it was over quick enough to forget.

“You know where to go,” Kisumi said. “Wait for us there.”

“We will. I promise.” Makoto called after the spirit. “It was nice to meet you!”

The bird grinned in their direction. “Same to you both, Makoto. Haruka.” He stretched his wings wide with a wink. “Be seeing you soon.”

The sky was still lightless, and fog lay thick as smoke on the ground ahead. Ancient trees loomed out of the grey like ghostly columns raised from the underworld. Makoto shivered, and Haru could tell his entire body was drawn tight, breath quaking with every clouded exhale. Makoto never traveled at night.

Haru tapped him on the wrist, weaving his thin fingers between Makoto’s large ones, and grasping tight.

“My hand’s cold.” He stared flatly forward.

Makoto’s grateful laugh left his mouth in a misty puff. “I’m glad you’re with me, Haru.”

They were virtually blind more than twenty paces in any direction. Haru knew this place must be beautiful in the daylight. But in the dead hours of night, it was a setting sprung straight out of Makoto’s nightmares. Haru’s thoughts circled back to the same shallow regret.
A cut of clarity through the gloom, Makoto walked forward with a determination that made Haru’s heart flutter. The tap of his staff on damp ground was a soothing beat—the music of happier trails.

An hour or so passed, quiet, and calm. The soft rush of a river came from somewhere nearby behind the curtain of murk. Suddenly, Makoto halted at the sight of a shape just ahead. He led Haru into a small grove, and approached something straight and tall planted firmly in the earth.

“It’s a staff.”

He was right. The carved staff of a Guardian was stuck squarely into the soil. Around its base, traces of thin roots were beginning to grow outward into the grass.

Haru crept up to see it for himself. “It’s like yours. What’s it doing here?”

“When a Guardian dies, their staff remains.” Makoto looked on with a note of sorrow. “It will take root, and grow from where they lay to rest. While their spirit returns to the forest.”

He circled the mound, lowering his own staff. “One of them died here.” He knelt, brushing the roots with careful fingers. “Recently.”

“Very recently. A few days ago, even.” Makoto lay his staff across his lap and began to say a few words in reverent prayer, thanking his fallen comrade for their vigilance.

Haru studied the surrounding area. Some of the plants were wilted, burned in a circle. The grass grew taller, and greener in spots. Makoto told him that a Guardian’s power often left traces like that after using the magic in the earth. But there was no blood, and no sign of a fight.

Strange...

Keeping close, Haru skirted back toward the path, beyond a tall, jutting stone slick with wet moss. There was a tiny clearing blanketed by short grass, rimmed by reeds.

And two more staffs.

His breath shorted. “Makoto, we need to keep moving. We have to get to the Shrine.”

“Wait, Haru-chan. I’m almost done.”

“No, we shouldn’t stay here.”

The mellow air current changed direction.

Scarcely a whisper of it sifted beneath the canopy to where Haru stood over Makoto on the empty trail, but it was enough.

Makoto went rigid. He could sense it, smell it hanging rotten in the mist, though his brow furrowed with question.

The stench closed frigid fingers around Haru’s heart.

“Makoto, look at the ground.”

“Haru?”
“Look down, *right now.*”

The cold spell Haru had felt earlier worked its way into his bones. It was a cold unlike any biting wind, or iced-over snow. It came from the *inside,* wringing, clamping down on every beating organ.

“H-Haru...”

Haru firmed their hands together.

Thankfully, Makoto didn’t need to be told twice. He jerked Haru with him, and leaped ahead for the trail.

And then Haru heard them: Hisses hungry and murderous rattled in the air, swirling in the fog. *Voices he knew.* They seemed to come from everywhere, and Haru could see the instant effect they had on Makoto. His arm shook, fighting the force of manic fear, moving his body when all it wanted to do was freeze, and wait for death.

“What are they?!” Makoto bit out.

“Sirens,” Haru whispered. “*The others.*”

Trees closed in around them as they ran, space shrinking, the forest swallowing them whole into a grey unknown. The unknown was a safe refuge from what slithered through the brush behind them, *after them,* and Haru clung harder to Makoto’s palm.

“Keep your eyes down!” Haru panted.

*So this is a hunt.*

This is what it was like to be prey, a mouse caught helpless in the clutches of a hawk. He’d only once left the den to watch the others massacre humans. And of all the times, of all the *humans*—

He could hear them screeching like rusted iron hinges, their voices raspy and shrill:

“No.” Haru was certain. “They’re not like me. And they didn’t come here to talk.”

He threw a glance backward. Shadowy shapes were moving in the gloom, darker as they closed the space between.

*Blue.* Eyes were flashing up the trail at them, savage, unblinking. Haru snagged his own gaze on a pair of them, and the sting needleed in the back of his head. Forcing back tears, he stumbled forward, all of his trust in Makoto’s lead. If Makoto caught even *one* of them out of the corner of his vision, he was dead. The thought racked Haru’s insides with raw panic.

Makoto could outrun them. He was fast on foot, and he knew the way. Haru twisted his hand in his lover’s hold. If anything, he could keep one or two at bay long enough for Makoto to escape.
Makoto sensed the intent before Haru so much as loosened his fingers, tightening grip over Haru’s wrist. They were lost. Blood thundering behind his ears, Makoto sprinted into the gloom, pulling Haru with him—and he was lost. Cries rent the air behind them, all around them, and it was so hard to tell how close the monsters were when every sound caught in the fog like flies in a cloudy web. Tracing the earth’s magic took a level of concentration Makoto was nowhere near capable of in this state. He tried. Again, and again, he searched for threads of it in the soil, but he and Haru were moving too fast, his jagged nerves shocking his body like lightning at every bone-rending shriek. Panic prevailed. Makoto’s thoughts raced unhinged. It was all he could manage to keep his limbs from locking up, and his heart from stopping altogether. Because this. This was what he’d imagined in his darkest daydreams. Years of telling himself it would never happen, that he was silly to be afraid of the unseen, crumbled in his wake as he tugged his lover by the hand into the dark—aimless, blind, with death screaming at their heels. Haru was holding tight with the strength of his unwavering faith, and Makoto was leading him nowhere. Makoto tried again, raking the ground for the trail, but another cry shook him to the core, and he dropped the trace. “Makoto!” Haru wheezed. “How—How far?” He couldn’t tell Haru a lie. “I don’t know!” “What?!” “Haru, I can’t—” Makoto dug his heels into the ground abruptly, and Haru crashed headfirst into his back. He threw an arm out to steady them both, balancing on the precipice over a ravine so steep, the bottom was buried in mist. He could hear the slow rush of the river below, but how far down… “We have to jump!” Haru’s voice was thick with anguish. “There’s water at the bottom; I’ll pull us. Just tell me where to go.” The spitting hisses were creeping louder. Makoto whipped his head away from the trail, squeezing his eyes shut. Somehow, he always knew he would go this way. Afraid. A failure. “MAKOTO!!” His eyes fluttered open to meet brilliant blue—a familiar hue that he lost himself in every single day. It was dangerous, but it was Haru. Haru was still here.
As long as they had each other, for Haru’s sake, he wouldn’t give up. It took half a nod for the siren to read him, and squeeze their palms flush. Makoto dove forward, and locked their mouths together—rough, desperate, grateful. Haru groaned into his throat, and kissed back with the force of a wave crashing against mountains.

“Together?” Haru whispered.

“Always together.”

They jumped.

Makoto’s stomach pitched in freefall. He gripped Haru’s forearm, all of his focus on the boy’s slim wrist, the pulse he could feel there, thrumming. However he landed, no matter what, Makoto would keep hold of him. He remembered who he was, then. Who he wanted to be.

They say in books that sorcerers command magic. They take what they can, and do as they will. But Guardians ask.

And the earth gives.

Hurtling through the brume, the river roaring below, Makoto held his breath, gripped his staff, and asked.

They hit the water’s surface, and the whistle of air was cut off in a gulp of silence as the impact exploded through their bodies. It took several seconds after for Makoto to simply hurt. He opened his eyes underwater, and saw the silvery mist between white, bubbling crests, high over his head. Every bit of skin stung, the space between his eyes throbbing.

Haru’s irises were lucent and haunting in the churning water. Beautiful.

Hands still locked together like they’d been carved from one single block of wood, they kicked until cold air and the spray of restless water hit them.

And suddenly, the water gave Makoto his answer. The trail was back. He could find it, feel it, flowing all around them in the river. Its current pulled insistent, an unstoppable power that they rode while the shrieks of sirens were left to the night, fading in the distance.

“The river, Haru.” Makoto almost laughed. “It’s taking us there!”

Haru, somehow, looked like he believed it.

The current evened out, carrying them gently, swiftly. Its water was far from warm, but Makoto readily welcomed this brand of cold over the one they’d just escaped.

Staff resting on the surface in one hand, Haru’s clasped in the other. Makoto let the river lead. Night was deathly quiet, shores on either side veiled by fog that looked thick enough to cut with an axe. Wisps of it swirled up at the sandbanks.

The sirens’ voices were far behind, but Haru’s fingers still twitched.

“Don’t look at the shore.” His voice was low, and clear. “Or the water. Close your eyes.”

“Haru, I think we’re safe. I don’t hear them anymore.”
“Please.” Haru squeezed his hand under the water, and Makoto could feel the siren’s muscles still tense as a drawn bowstring. “They can swim faster than they run.”

“Oh, Haru-chan.”

Trusting in the current, and in Haru swimming out in front, Makoto let himself be swept through darkness.

That couldn’t be it. Haru knew, it wasn’t over.

The others never came ashore like this. Beaches, ships, and caves were the only places they ever ventured above water, so to come here...

How they’d made it so far aground, Haru couldn’t say. There had to be a reason.

Currents were pulling at the water, rippling the surface so that it was hard to spot any movement below. He dipped beneath to check.

At the bottom of the river, in calm water, the floor was alive with movement. Carp twice the length of their bed back home were swimming around each other, bodies twisting and sliding past one another with a kick of strong tails. Their crescent scales glowed faintly, bluish silver, and some flecked with gold around their thick girth. Haru wished Makoto could see them.

He may not have Makoto’s abilities, but even Haru could sense the change. The atmosphere was charged, growing, like a breathing being, as they neared the heart of Iwatobi’s power.

After a long, silent stretch, the depth gave way to a gravelly shore. They trudged heavily up the embankment on shaky legs, panting for breath. Exhausted, Haru tipped against Makoto, who wound a strong arm around his middle, and took as much of his weight as he could.

“We’re here.” Haru shook his hair out.

Makoto smiled, eyes still dutifully shut. “I know.”

Haru wasn’t sure what he expected the most important building in the land to look like, but it wasn’t this.

Aomori Shrine was no more than a narrow doorway, tucked into a tall rock, overgrown with vines and wildflowers. Trees grew in a perfect circle around the entrance. They were unlike any others Haru had seen in his fourteen years here. Tall, wide, with bark that was marbled and incandescent, as though the plants had starlight for blood. Even in the gloom, he could tell their leaves were a deep, rich sapphire.

Upon closer inspection, patterns on the bark looked like images—flowers, houses, people—symbols of a person’s story. Symbols that, Haru was sure, had once been carved.

“You should see this.” Haru whispered in Makoto’s ear. The white spirit gate lofted over the road in front of them. He threw a glance over his shoulder.

“Here’s the…” Haru started. “Where I might not be able to follow you.”

Makoto took the lead this time, lacing his fingers with Haru’s as they approached. “You can if I can.”
He bowed his head, and they passed beneath. Haru had steeled himself, preparing for the worst. A
demon couldn’t possibly enter the most sacred place in Iwatobi—

But he did. And he walked in a humble guest.

The front of the shrine was clear of mist, and Haru snuck a final look at the treetops, their shapes a
reverent crown around the moon, before plunging through the doorway.

That modest exterior belied an inner hall so beautiful, Haru could barely believe it was real.

Makoto opened his eyes at last, raising his head to take it in. A path sloped down from the door,
trailing underground, and they made their way forward, driven on by a comforting, inexplicable pull
of being welcomed.

Hauyne lanterns shaped like lotus blooms lined the dirt path, but there was no room in them for fire.
Instead, lilies sprouted from their stony confines, petals yawning open when Makoto approached.
Each flower glowed in shades of blue, bathing the walls and rounded ceiling in soft light.

The shrine had no openings to the outside, yet the air was fresh, like a rain-soaked garden before
dawn. The sound of water trickling was sweet in their ears.

Roots reached into the earth from above, weaving like lace over the wall, and across the grass-grown
floor to a platform in the center of the shrine.

Makoto stilled as he sucked in a breath.

“There it is, Haru.” His voice rocked on the edge of laughter, crackling with anticipation. “It’s
beautiful.”

Makoto descended the rest of the way in an dazzled trance. He led Haru to circle the dais with him—
to behold the living core of Iwatobi.

The stone rested on a pedestal. It was no bigger than a water pitcher—smooth, and curved like a
bead of dew. Light pulsed in the center of it, and Haru understood now why people and spirits alike
devoted their lives to its safety. It glowed in a kaleidoscope of stars, making no sound, but humming
with a melody like the bubble of streams and the swells of waves.

“Amazing.” Haru gaped.

Makoto smiled down at him, the Tear’s magic twinkling in his irises. That light had always belonged
there, Haru was sure.

He gave Makoto’s hand a gentle, proud squeeze, laughing a little when he felt it returned.

A gravelly hiss from somewhere in the forest brought them crashing back to the present.

Haru shuddered. “They’re here. Right outside the gate.”

Makoto let Haru’s hand slide out of his grip, standing tall over the Tear, raising his staff high. “They
can’t get in.”

The sounds were chilling, even in the safety of the sanctuary.

“Still.” Haru slipped back onto the path. “I’ll watch the door.”
“Haru…”

“Just to be sure.” Haru lifted himself up on a root, and kissed Makoto’s cheek to seal his resolve. “I’ll wait for you. Finish your test, Makoto.”

Murmurs of Makoto’s prayer song sounded around the shrine, and Haru wished the music could ease the creep of dread in his veins. Makoto’s voice always did that for him, but tonight…

Tonight, evil was waiting at their door.

*They can’t come in. They can’t come in.*

Haru spun the words over and over like a windmill in his head. He believed Makoto, and he believed the Cat. But some small, nagging part of him didn’t.

*They can’t come in.*

The sharp tingling of his scales flushed over Haru’s arms and back, racing up his jaw and past his ears. Whatever he’d felt at the trailhead back home—that piercing, penetrating chill—was back, and stronger.

Haru felt him in the air.

Like a gathering of shadows, looming, darkening the doorway, was a form Haru hoped he’d never lay eyes upon again.

“Hello, Haruka.” Kurou breathed a raspy, spiteful laugh. “How have you been?”

A hellish grin cracked the siren leader’s sallow face—an ivory slash beneath dank locks of hair that hung dripping down his scaled back. His sharpened blade of human bone flashed in his left hand, grazing the tips of grass as he strode forward, careless, over the sacred path.

“Demons can’t enter.” Haru edged sideways, blocking the way to the platform.

“No, they can’t. Only if a chosen one welcomes them in.” Kurou snarled a laugh. “And for that, I thank you.”

*No…*

Haru’s hand trailed numbly up to the pendant at his throat—his only memento of the ocean he left behind. It broke off with a snap, and he flung it to the ground. Colored glass shattered, salt water soaking into soil.

Perched on the moss, shining silver, was one of Kurou’s scales.

Makoto circled the platform, running through verses in his head, singing softly as the Tear’s power
flowed up the length of his staff and into his veins. It felt cool, like a stream over his bare feet in the summertime. This was a gift, Makoto remembered. And he would receive it with utmost humility.

The Tear’s serenity was warding off the monsters’ chill, Makoto knew. Their evil had no sway within the ring of trees outside.

And yet Makoto sensed it, crawling inward—a noxious blight on the hallowed ground. Sharper—so strong that he had to stop moving.

“Haru? Do you feel…” Makoto spun around-
-to find Haru staring across at the Lord of Demons.

“Shut your eyes!” Haru barked. Fear festered low in the hall, wrapping around every living thing as the siren leader approached.

Makoto clenched his weapon, and did as his lover said. He kept one hand steady, the pulse of magic uninterrupted before him even as terror clung thick to the walls of his lungs.

Almost…

“Move aside, Haruka.”

“No.”

“You think the humans will forgive you for tonight?”

Kurou was bulling forward, inch by inch, Haru stumbling back with each advance.

“It was you, not me.”

“Will they care?”

Even to another siren, the presence of their leader was completely overpowering. It grew harder to breathe with every heavy step the creature took forward.

“You’ve done me a great favor. And for that, I am more than willing to leave you here. To let this human live, so he can keep you leashed like a pet for the rest of your wasted days…”

“But if he stands in my way, I can promise you nothing.”

Haru rooted himself there.

An angry rattling sound gnarred from Kurou’s thick chest. “The young are such fools.”

Haru had no words for him. He narrowed the passage of his throat and bared his teeth, pushing his voice out in a way he had never let himself do before. A hiss raw, hoarse, seeped in fury and desperation pierced the air of the shrine. Throwing is arms out to block the way, Haru bent forward to challenge the siren leader to a fight he wasn’t going to win.

Kurou gave him an answering growl, and squared his shoulders for an easy victory.
“Truly a shame.”

The pupils of Kurou’s eyes constricted, and Haru had all of a second before the only thing he knew was agony.

Locking that gaze with his own, he pushed back with every ounce of his will. Kurou couldn’t get through, he couldn’t. Fighting him felt like staring into a ravenous sun—blinding pain, being skinned from the inside, swallowing dry ice. He strained against the urge to pull away, choking as he felt that power begin to crush its frigid claws over his life force.

Digging his heels into the moss, he battled for it back.

This was for his family, and for Ikuya, happy somewhere in the big city far from here. It was for Makoto, and he would never stand down.

Somewhere, the man he loved was screaming for him, his sweet voice miles away.

Darkness leaked around the edges of his vision.

The last thing he saw was a beautiful, consuming ray of white and green.

Wet grass.

The crisp scent young ferns, and damp soil.

Swooping songs of birds in the treetops, and the unending chirring of insects.

Haru’s head pounded with a dull ache, and his throat was raw, and scratchy.

He blinked his eyes open.

He was on the bedroll, under their tattered canvas covering.

“Ooh! Look who’s back with us!” A familiar voice chirped from nearby, and Haru’s view sharpened into focus.

Kisumi was crouching beside him. His hair was matted, fine robes torn and stained in spots, but the spirit’s face was bright with unmistakable relief. “Makoto! He’s awake!”

There was a dull thump as firewood was dumped on soft dirt, and then Makoto was falling to his knees at Haru’s side. Haru could have cried right there, he was so happy to see him.

“Haru! You’re alright. Gods, I was so worried.” He cupped Haru’s cheek tenderly, and the emotion directed at him was so intense, Haru had to stop himself from hiding his face in the pillow.

“So was I.”

Blue leaves peeked over the canopy not far away. They were near Aomori Shrine. Though Haru could feel no vigor in the late morning atmosphere.

“What happened?” Haru glanced around.
“Aah, don’t sit up too fast!” Makoto helped him up with a solid arm at his back.

“A lot happened,” Kisumi said.

Haru took the cup of water Makoto handed him, and drained it gratefully. “Where’s Kurou?”

“He ran.” Expression solemn, Makoto rose up on his knees.

From where Haru gazed up at him, he was tall against the clear sky. There was something different about him—his presence was overflowing, his body surging with power.

“But he did what the sirens came to do.” With leaden limbs, Makoto reached into his bag, and dropped something on the grass beside Haru’s lap. Smooth, and crystal clear, but empty.

“It’s dead. The Tear is dead.” Makoto sank to run his fingers over the leaden shell of a stone. “He tore the life from it. And I couldn’t see him. I…couldn’t stop him.”

Haru nudged the Tear to one side, stunned. It’s light was gone, and it was so quiet. His insides ached in a way he couldn’t describe. The loss left him hollow somehow—drained, and sad. One glance at Makoto told him that his lover felt it, too.

“What happens now?” Haru asked in the spirit’s direction.

Kisumi sat with his head buried in his hands, staring at the ground between his feet.

“The Tear was the heart of Iwatobi.” He spoke slower, his voice dragging. “It controlled the magic in the earth, the flow of its blood. And without it, a new force will have sway over where that magic goes.”

Haru leaned in. “Like what?”

Kisumi let out a heavy breath. “Like who. And the answer is, people who should never have access to that much power.”

Getting answers out of this man was like wringing a dry rock. “What about the Cat? Won’t she be able to…”

Makoto’s expression twisted with grief, and he angled his face away. Kisumi fixed a scowl on the ground, working down pain Haru caught in the tightness of his brow.

“She’s gone.”


Shame was swirling deep in Makoto’s voice, sinking into his spirit, darkening his eyes. It broke Haru’s heart to see it.

“You couldn’t have done any more than you did. It wasn’t your fault.” Haru thumbed at the spot on his chest, where his seawater pendant once rested. He’d been an instrument in the sirens’ plans from the beginning.

Haru loved this place, his home, where he’d wanted more than anything to belong. And now—

“Haru-chan.” Makoto pried his hand away, and brought it to his lips, speaking through a careful touch:
“It’s not your fault, either.”

“We’re going to fix this. Together.” He kissed the stretches skin between Haru’s fingers, one at a time. “Kisumi says there’s a way.”

“There is! Which is why we’re leaving!” Kisumi piped, shooting up from his seat. A smile suddenly sparkled across his cheeks. Haru wanted to hit him.

“I’ve already agreed, Haru.” Makoto’s green flashed sure, and determined.

“See?” The spirit hopped into the sun, and flexed his back. “There’s lots to tell you both. And a long way to go. So let’s talk more on the road, yes?”

Haru straightened, Makoto’s hand still at his back. “Where are we going?”

Kisumi let his wings unfold with the next casual stretch of his arms.

“Samezuka.”

________________________

Rin sat in the council room, slumped in his lofty chair, watching the hall empty as the meeting adjourned. People and colors, voices rolling in and out in bleary waves—it was like floating through someone else’s dream—detached, numb.

“I can’t stay with you.”

Under the table, in the rich folds of his robe, Rin closed his hand over the only thing keeping him lucid:

a tattered, worn, strap of leather.

When he needed it, he would take it with him—holding the collar curled up in his palm. The scent of his best friend had faded over time. But the leather was soft, and when Rin brushed the surface, he could almost imagine the tickle of Sousuke’s hairline on his fingertips, his skin always so warm after a day in the sun.

Though he never looked at it. The rough inscription he’d made as a child was a sore wound, even now. Especially now.

Sousuke hadn’t said where he’d be going, or when, or if he had any kind of plan at all. He’d just decided to leave.

He had disappeared to the practice yard that morning, while Rin remained on the bench, early breeze blowing straight through him, unsaid words cold on his tongue. It was nearly evening now, and Rin hadn’t seen him since.
Ai was in front of the chair.

The boy’s mouth was moving, and there were sounds coming out of it, Rin could tell. His assistant’s frazzled hands were everywhere, and he looked especially apologetic for whatever this was about.

“Ai.” Rin kneaded his temple. “Slower, please. And with less words. It’s been a fucking long day.”

“S-sorry, Your Highness!” The boy snapped to attention, inhaling deep.

“Sousuke-san is leaving.”

Panting for breath, robe askew, Rin skidded to a stop in the hallway to his bedchamber.

He wasn’t a moment too early. Sousuke was dressed in travel clothes: a dark, simple hanten over his shirt, and the bag of his belongings slung over one shoulder.

His eyes were distant and dulled.

“Ai says your leaving now.” Rin scanned him up and down, gathering the answer for himself.

Sousuke let silence hang for a moment, gaze roaming the ground at Rin’s feet.

“I am.”


A shudder ran down his middle at how deep that cut him.

“I left you a letter on your desk.” Sousuke blinked hard, and turned away, hiking his bag up higher. “It explains it…better than I could say in person. You can read it later, once I’m gone.”

“A letter?” Seething, sweat glistening at his neck, Rin bared his hurt in a look that made Sousuke stumble a step backward.

He collected himself, shuffling on heavy feet. “I won’t go too far. I’ll be here for you, Rin. When you need me. I just can’t be…with you. This is the way I’d planned to do things from the start.”

Rin widened his stance in the center of the room, making Sousuke swerve around him to reach the exit. “This is because of last night.”

Sousuke stiffened, and it was all the response Rin needed.

“Don’t you fucking dare blame yourself for that.”

“I’m not blaming myself.” Sousuke ran a tired hand through his hair. “But the woman wouldn’t have come if I wasn’t here. She’d never have even bothered with you.”

Rin’s temper flared, but Sousuke held him at bay with a shaky palm.

“You wouldn’t have risked your life at Momo’s trial. Or made a target of yourself in your own home.”

Rin growled. “Those were all choices that I made!”
“But you wouldn’t have made them if I hadn’t come back! It’s dangerous for you if I stay!” Sousuke was fighting to keep his voice from shattering. “It always has been. I hid all that time for a reason. And it’s clear I should have remained that way. I just—”

Sousuke flicked his gaze upward, sparkling blue beneath coal-dark lashes, and Rin’s ire stuttered out. Sorrow shone hot with something fathomless and indescribable. He brought his hand near, and as natural as anything, Rin let his eyelids fall shut to welcome its touch on his cheek.

“I’m sorry for everything.” Sousuke withdrew.

“Goodbye, Rin.”

He had disappeared around the bend before Rin’s thoughts could catch up.

“Wait!” Rin hurtled into the hallway after him.

Sousuke was already nearing the staircase. He answered Rin’s crazed glare with another silent apology, and then the bastard took off running.

“Sousuke!” Cursing under his breath, blowing past the sentries, Rin dashed after him. Sousuke was faster than anyone who’d spent so long in bed had any right to be.

Rin kicked off the beaded slippers that slowed him on slick tile, beating barefooted around a sharp corner. Sousuke was gaining distance. He rounded into another narrow passage—retracing all of the paths Rin knew he remembered.

“Sousuke!” Rin pleaded between gasps. “Come back!”

Rin followed on his heels, chasing the back of Sousuke’s coat and hard beat of his footfalls.

The situation was unearthing a memory Rin had spent six years clinging to, even while he tried to bury it beneath sunsets and sakura petals. Sousuke’s back as he fled into the night was the last glimpse of him Rin thought he would ever see. Petrified, Rin had just watched as the darkness devoured him, the boy never knowing how much Rin had wanted him to stay.

He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

The fabric of his shirt was too heavy. Rin unlaced the tie, and let the robe slide off his shoulders to the ground, startling a gasp from several court members as he barreled half dressed through the hall.

The staircase emptied into a grand vaulted arcade. Sousuke charged straight through it, along the current of a mosaic seascape laid over the wall on one side. Petals of light cut between the lofty columns from the open side, licking over his back in golden flashes.

As teens, they would race down this corridor, one end to the other, as fast as they could. Rin could almost feel the ghosts of their past rushing over his arm with the breeze, urging him on. He wouldn’t let them go. Energy flared through Rin’s legs, and he surged forward.

Rin knew he was faster in the short run. He always had been. A burst of fireworks, a shooting star—Rin was an explosion of speed and power, and he beat Sousuke at sprints almost every time. But Sousuke burned steady. He could keep going, tireless, until Rin’s legs failed him.

If Rin fell behind, he would never catch up.

The longer this went on, the steeper his chances of catching Sousuke plummeted. Ahead of him,
Sousuke sped up and pulled away, his broad back slipping farther out of reach.

Rin’s push wasn’t enough. Sousuke was nearly across the arcade. Rin was losing him.

The burn of fatigue was building up in his muscles, and he could already feel himself surrendering ground.

Despair boiled in his throat with the acid scorch of a defeat he refused to taste twice.

“Sousuke!!” Rin choked. His voice was drowned in a sob, Sousuke’s dark silhouette blurring and bleeding into the tiles as tears spilled over. “Sousuke, please!”

Sousuke stopped.

Rin kept up his maddened pace, riding the momentum to his destination.

The anguish in Sousuke’s face slowed him to a halt, a few short paces away. Sun beat down from the outside, warming Rin’s naked skin.

Sousuke was a still, severe shape in a bar of shadow. Blues and greens from the mosaic ocean reflected like the prism of pool water against the side of his body.

He was cautious, anxious— waiting for Rin to say something.

Rin hadn’t thought this far ahead. He cleared his throat, ignoring the tears rolling down his face in earnest.

“If you want to go, Sou, you can.” Rin panted. “I won’t stop you.”

Sousuke turned to face him, silent, breathing hard.

“You’re not a prisoner here anymore. You’re free now, and you can live however you like.” Rin forced a smile. “I’ve…always wanted that for you.”

He did. Even if it would tear his own heart, broken and love-sodden, from his hollow chest. He drew his arms up, holding himself together.

Sousuke’s full attention was on him, and Rin knew how well he could listen.

“I just want you to know—” he blinked, and held his chin high, “—that with you here—these have been the best days of my life in a long fucking time. And that even if you keep secrets—even if danger hounds us ’til we die, it would all be worth the risk to me.”

“None of it would hurt half as much as losing you again.”

Tears were dripping off the side of his chin, emotion drowning out shame as he stood bare, breath ragged, in the open walkway.

Sousuke fractured, his ice melting, and breaking him apart. “Rin…You don’t know what you’re—”

“I mean it,” Rin said.

“So before you go, I want to ask you one last thing.” Rin met Sousuke’s bewildered look with solid certainty.

“Will you fly with me?”
Sousuke gaped. “You—you can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am. Right now.”

“I doubt that’s allowed.”

“Actually, it is.” Rin glowed with a faint smirk. “And even if it wasn’t, I’d ask you anyway.”

“Rin—”

“Because it’s something I’ve wanted to do with you for a long time. And I…” Rin took a small step closer. “Last night, I told you I had something to say.”

Sousuke flinched with a sting of surprise, a faint pink blooming on his cheeks. “I remember.”

Rin breathed a fluttery laugh. “So…instead of talking about it, will you let me show you?”

He extended his hand to his best friend.

Sousuke peered warily at Rin’s palm as it waited, open and flushed with promise. Rin was every bit as scared as Sousuke looked. If he recoiled now, Rin knew the wound would never heal.

Then slowly, Sousuke dragged his own hand into the slat of sunlight to take it.

“Alright.”

The rough heat of his palm became the axis of Rin’s entire world. He tugged, and Sousuke let himself be led from the shade.

“I guess this might count as a goodbye,” Sousuke said.

“If…you want it to.”

Sousuke slipped his hand out of Rin’s grasp, only to drop his bag, and shrug off his light hanten. Rin’s gaze followed golden sunlight as it poured over bronzed arms. A gentle weight on his shoulders told him the coat was being wrapped around his bare back. It was worn soft, and warm on his skin.

Rin’s nerves were catching up with him, and he was close enough to feel the heat of their chase radiating from Sousuke’s body. He couldn’t look his best friend in the face with his own so raw.

A steady thumb wiped under Rin’s eyes.

Rin laughed despite himself, his relief was so overwhelming. He raised his head again to see Sousuke there, strong and present, all around him.

“Don’t cry, Rin. Please.”

“M’not crying,” Rin croaked. He kicked a knee out to nudge Sousuke’s thigh.

A smile curled the corners of Sousuke’s mouth—fond, if still a bit unsure. Rin’s heart beat a little quicker with the need to make him sure. He cupped his fingers over Sousuke’s hand, bringing it down, and reclaiming it in a grip that tightened with his kindling anticipation.

He turned to face the horizon when a beckoning breeze sighed over them, ruffling their hair. The sky was calling.
Rin beamed with a grin from ear to ear.

“Come with me, Sou.”

He pulled,

and Sousuke followed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about updates being sort of far-between lately. Work has been tying me up. :( But hopefully things will quiet down, and I do want to finish this story, SO.

Also, I am very excited to share the next chapter. :)

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Sousuke lets Rin take him for a ride.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The pull of Rin’s hand was like a rip current: strong, unpredictable, and inescapable. Sousuke was willing to let it lead him anywhere.

Rin bounded down a wide flight of shallow stairs, his tears freshly dried on flushed cheeks. He was still barefoot, and the balls of his feet tapped on smooth marble with each hurried step.

“Come on, come on!” he huffed. His voice leapt upward, and rang out in the empty main hall.

Sousuke’s smile crept wider. “Where are we going, exactly?”

Rin spun on his heel to walk backward. “Up!”

Body humming with energy, he jogged them to a pair of doors, bulling through them to the outside onto the landing balcony. Sousuke noticed a potted vine was still missing on one end. He let himself be tugged along, stumbling to a stop beside Rin on the sunny platform. Nightingales were singing in the garden below, in tune with the throaty choir of frogs along the lagoon bank.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Sou.” Rin rolled his eyes. “I’ve been sure about it for longer than I care to remember.”

He tilted his head up, eyelids slipping shut as the breeze dusted over his bangs. “She’s close.”
One hand still locked in Sousuke’s, Rin sucked in a breath, fixed his fingers to his lips, and loosed a long, piercing whistle. He blew until the sound fettered out, and his lungs were empty. Panting, he looked heavenward, grip tightening.

Twenty seconds passed, and the sky was completely still.

Then thirty.

Just as Sousuke was about slip out of Rin’s hold, a heavy beat sounded from somewhere beyond the palace. His arm jerked reflexively at the approach of an unseen threat, but Rin held fast. A colossal crimson silhouette glided over the ground.

Tora landed nearby with her wings outstretched, full as galley sails. The scales on her back still dazzled the same crimson and violet in the afternoon sun, shifting, layered like a thousand tiny plates of armor. Sousuke raised an arm to shield his face from bellows of warm wind as she steadied herself on the ground.

“Toraaa~!” Rin sang.

The dragon perked up instantly, her cheery answer a warbling fusion of a dolphin’s chirp, and the roar of a bonfire. Her tail dragged side to side, sweeping fallen leaves into messy piles.

Rin skipped up to her, leading Sousuke into the beast’s massive shadow. At fourteen, she was fully grown. And she had certainly grown.

“What’ve you been up to today?” Rin let the dragon nudge him gently with her snout as he approached. “Oh fine, you lazy girl. Don’t tell me.”

Sousuke was not afraid of her, he reminded himself. Tora was Rin’s partner, and she was friendly, and liked him, and Rin was here, but gods above, she was big. And Sousuke knew very well what the big dragons were capable of. Dust settled, and he dropped his gaze to Tora’s claws—curved, and sharp enough to tear him open in one motion. She shook out her neck, and flexed her jaw. A maw of sturdy, razorlike teeth flashed back at him. Dry heat from her body stirred in the air all around her.

Rin squeezed his hand, and peered up, a question in his eyes.

“It’s okay.

Sousuke nodded his reassurance.

Brightening with relief, Rin grinned, and gestured in his direction. “Look who I brought.”

Tora craned over the two of them, curious, blotting out the light. She huffed twice, stretching to sniff at Sousuke’s back. Small bursts of warm air jetted down his shirt. “Hey, there.” He reached to scratch the rough skin just under her chin. “Good to see you, too.”

He felt Rin beaming beside him.

“Did you eat already?” Rin asked her.

She grunted, and clicked her teeth.

“Ahh, that’s good. We’ll be taking it easy today anyway.”

Sousuke looked her up and down again. “What uh, does she eat these days?”
“She flies out east to the wild. Or to the ocean.” Rin ran his open hand along her side. “Seals are her favorite.”

Tora stiffened with excitement at the word, and Rin laughed, scratching her leg in apology. “Prey out in open water’s pretty damn big.”

“I see.”

“Lucky us, the saddle’s still on.” Rin patted the dragon’s chest, where a steel-plated leather strap circled her girth. “I was out earlier, and was sort of in a hurry when I got back.”

He tugged at the belts, checking their tightness, then cleared his throat. “S-Sousuke’s coming with us today, Tora.”

The dragon stilled, one keen violet eye flicking between them. She tilted her head at Rin, in what was unmistakably a question. Rin grumbled, and a deep blush colored his cheeks.

“*No!* ” He grumbled.

“What?” Sousuke raised an eyebrow. “What did she say?”

“Nothing.” Slapping Sousuke’s hand away, he leaped up the dragon’s side, latching onto the saddle’s strap, and climbing.

“It kind of looked like something.”

“Come *on.*”

Sousuke stalled. “What if I’m too heavy?”

“No, Your Highness.” Rolling his shoulders once, Sousuke followed, accepting Rin’s hand again as he hauled him into the seat. The saddle was leather, too. There was a smooth, worn seat, a windshield in the front, and a belt attached with steel rings to the conch that Rin fastened over Sousuke’s waist with practiced efficiency.

“You’ll be fine. I’ve seen you ride horses in the pit before.”

Sousuke’s apprehension must have been more obvious than he thought. “Great. Then you know I’m terrible.”

Rin snorted a laugh. “Yep.”

The belt was fitted to Rin, and stretched to the last notch, it barely went around Sousuke’s middle. It wouldn’t hold the two of them.

“What about you?”

Smirking, Rin sank into the seat, and slid until his back was inches away from Sousuke’s chest.

“I won’t need it. And…” He settled in, scooping up the reigns in eager hands. “…you can hold onto me.”

Sousuke swallowed his fluster. “S-sure.” His hands were clumsy blocks of ice as he brought them up to rest on Rin’s narrow hips. Rin’s lower back arched in response.
Once he was seated, Rin bent and slapped Tora’s neck twice with his left hand. The dragon let out a cloud of steam, and threw out her wings. Sousuke stilled as her muscles flexed and coiled beneath him. If it were possible to sit atop a volcano on the cusp of eruption, he thought it might feel a bit like this.

“Ready?”

“Probably nnotttt—!!”

Tora crouched, and kicked off the ground. Sousuke jolted, clamping his arms around Rin’s waist. The balcony was already shrinking with a few short bursts of height. She raised her head, and they tipped backward, sending Sousuke’s entire world into a sickening tilt.

“Lean forward!” Rin called over his shoulder.

Throwing his weight over Rin’s back, Sousuke shut his eyes for a second. He was moving completely out of his own control, and it was a terrifying sensation.

“You doing ok?” Rin twisted back, and to the side. “Not so bad, right?”

“Yeah.” Sousuke didn’t think he could manage much else.

They straightened out, cleared the palace walls, and a blast of wind hit them full-on. Heat from rooftops and city streets simmered upward as they glided down, and over. Sousuke dared to look past his feet. His stomach rolled over itself.

Samezuka’s capital crawled by beneath them—a colorful, latticed maze of buildings, houses, and bridges. Hulking structures in the guild square looked small enough to step on. They could slide right off the dragon’s flank, and that would be it.

“Calm down, Sou. I told you, you won’t fall.”

Sousuke’s response was automatic. “I’m calm.”

“Uh huh. Your heart’s beating like crazy.”

“What, I—” Sousuke had Rin hugged snugly against his front. He hurried to loosen his hold. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s…” Rin started. “…nevermind.” He paused a moment, then shifted backward.

Ahead of them, the high, steep roof of Samezuka’s Grand Temple stood proud—the tallest structure below the palace. Several much smaller dragons were perched on the slope, tearing at a bloody cow carcass. The temple placed food out for the little ones in the afternoon, Sousuke remembered.

The creatures noticed Rin, and flapped happily up alongside Tora. She slowed so they could keep pace with her. Their scales shone sapphire and emerald green, and they made tiny screeches, trilling with excitement. Sousuke tightened his hold so Rin could lean out and stroke them. A blue one swooped in close enough for Sousuke to touch. Its tail was smooth as snakeskin, the scales still soft.

“They really like you!” Rin settled back into the saddle as the baby dragons peeled away, and flew home. “I never really stopped to think about how odd that was.”

“What was odd about it?”

“I dunno. Dragons tolerate humans, but they don’t really get along. Not with people that aren’t—”
he tapped the points of his teeth.

“Ooh.” Sousuke frowned. There really was nothing special about himself, that he could think of. “Well they love you. That’s pretty clear. And I’m your friend, so maybe I just got special treatment.”

Rin chewed on that thought. “You’re my…” He came to some sort of conclusion, and it flushed his cheeks cherry red.

“What was that?”

Sousuke never got his answer. Suddenly all honed focus, Rin spurred Tora forward. They picked up speed, sailing northeast over the fields toward Sano.

A pinch of pain deep in his ears had Sousuke wincing. It was that feeling he’d get after diving too deep back home—but here, there was no surface to kick up to.

“Rin! My—!”

Rin’s brow raised with recognition. “It’s ok! It happens!” He said. “Just swallow real hard!”

He did. An odd popping sound rang in his head, and the pressure leaked away. After that, Sousuke acclimated without issue to the weightless glide, and drumming beat of the dragon’s wings. Flying was, if he was honest, nice.

“Incredible, right?” Humor floated in Rin’s question, but Sousuke knew he needed a real answer. If this was important to Rin, it was important to him, too.

“Yeah.” He grinned.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Nothing on earth compares to the feeling,” Rin gushed. He sounded dreamy, and far-off. “When we’re flying, it’s like leaving life behind. All the shit that weighs you down can’t reach you up here.”

Sousuke went quiet with concern. “Rin, that’s…”

“Sorry.” A weak smile curved the Emperor’s lips. “Didn’t mean to sink the mood. I guess what I’m getting at is, after last night, we could use a little air. Right now, none of it matters.”

Sailing over the scenery, Sousuke had to agree. Samezuka’s sky was boundless—but at the same time, his world was smaller than it had ever been.

Rin steered Tora expertly above the beautiful bustle of Sano. The trade market, closing for the night, was a stripe of awnings in every hue. Sharp scents of spices swirled with sweet smells from the vineyards and rose gardens that wound up the hillside. The stadium was easily the most prominent landmark in the city, its grand walls throwing a menacing shadow over several blocks. Sousuke craned sideways to glance down. At the bottom of that bowl lay the dismal pit of dirt where his boyhood had died. And closed off beside it, was the fighter compound. There was the longhouse, the training grounds, the patch of grass where he’d spent each day with a weapon in his hand, pining for the man in his lap.

It all seemed insignificant from above, like tiny wooden pieces on the board of a game.
Sousuke leaned in so Rin could hear him. “I used to see you flying over us. Before matches.”

“Hmm.” Rin shifted toward him. “I’d look for you, too.”

“You could see us from here?”

“Not that well.” He shrugged. “But I could always tell where you were, when you practiced in the yard. You liked to clear a big circle around yourself, and I could spot you there at the center, sometimes.”

“I never thought you’d have a reason to watch.”

Rin gave him a light bump with his elbow. “I’ve always been watching.”

A formation of migrating birds soared over the park, just ahead. They flapped in sync, lined in a perfect V. Tora stretched wide, and rode the current to match their shape. It was a thing of poetic beauty, Sousuke mused—two different sets of wings, flying free, sharing the heavens.

Tora snapped forward and caught three of the birds in her deadly jaws. The others scattered as she tossed her head back to devour the prey whole.

*Oh. Okay.*

Rin plucked a feather out of Sousuke’s hair. “You ready for some *real* fun?”

“The fun’s already very real, Rin, thanks.”

Rin leaned backward with a laugh, and slapped his palm on the dragon’s hide. It must have been some sort of command, because Tora whistled, and they started gaining *serious* height. The ocean blurred beneath them, high crests of waves all but lost in an infinite sheet of blue velvet. They rose into a blast of cold—climbing higher, and *higher*. Tora’s body heat, and their pounding exhilaration kept the mounting chill at bay. A flock of clouds floated slow and leisurely in their path, snowy white tinged with afternoon gold around the edges. They were *enormous*—thick, and solid like tufts of cotton heaped high as mountains. Tora was heading straight for them.

“Rin!!” Sousuke had to shout over the wind. “What are you doing!? We’ll hit them!”

Rin snickered and urged the dragon on. A cloud was approaching, *fast*. *They were going to fly right into it.*

*“Idiot!”* Sousuke crashed forward to shield Rin’s head with an arm, braced for the oncoming collision. He squeezed his eyes shut.

*One second.*

*Two.*

*Three…*

Rin was shaking in arms, with *laughter*.

Cracking his eyes open, Sousuke found they were encased in pure white. He reached an arm out,
careful to keep the other firmed around Rin’s waist. It was wet. Chilly, and vapidous like the spray of a waterfall. The faint smell of clean seawater hovered in the mist. Amazed, he watched his hand sifting through it.

Rin chuckled. “Not what you were expecting?”

Sousuke scowled at the back of Rin’s head. “I’m gonna get you back for that.”

Tora exploded out of the cloud bank, tossing her head to shake the wisps from her snout. There were tiny flakes of ice in Rin’s hair, and on his shoulders.

They were well out over the ocean now, and the salt air was cool, and familiar.

“Sousuke! Look!”

Rin was gesturing downward. There was a watery shadow the length of two Iwatobi ships darkening the waves. Sousuke could make out the shape of an oblique head, fins, a wide body. He squinted. That couldn’t be a…

“Hey there!” Rin yelled over the wind. Tora dropped lower, barking a greeting, and spouting a tongue of flames into the space over the water. Its heat rolled back, melting the ice on their clothes.

“Getting late, isn’t it, Shouda-kun!”

Beneath them, the shape breached the ocean with a lazy grumble. Scaled skin, amber eyes, and a mouth curved like a whale’s. The creature blinked, sluggish and gentle, then a geyser of steam and hot water was shooting high into the air from two holes behind its ears. They swerved smoothly around it, Rin reaching a hand out to feel the warm spray before it fell back down to the sea. Sousuke watched the end of the creature’s slick tail slide over the surface, then it was gone—sinking into murky indigo.

“Remember those little silver guys with the thick tails?” Rin scooted back into place.

“The chubby ones that were always waddling around, chewing on algae?”

“Yup! Give ‘em twenty years or so and—”

Sousuke blinked “That?! It was huge!”

Rin leaned hard right, steering Tora closer toward the shore. “They swim out to the ocean when they’re old enough, and then they grow too big to ever come back upriver! S’okay though; there’s more to do out here for them. They keep the unagi numbers under control.”

Sousuke watched with wonder as Rin rode, confident and controlled—sailing the sky like the whole thing belonged to him. Love swelled in his chest.

He looked over his shoulder, but the gargantuan swimming dragon was long gone. “Do they follow you, too?”

“Huh?” Rin craned back to hear him.

“If you rolled out of bed tomorrow, and commanded a group of them to just…crush an entire armada, would they?”

Rin tugged a little on the reigns, and his voice dropped. “I mean…yeah, I guess.” He raised an eyebrow. “But why would we?”
Sousuke puffed a laugh over the top of Rin’s head. He hugged a little tighter, and Rin seemed to forget he’d ever asked.

An imposing form was rearing up into view as they soared along the beach: dark rock hollowed into a tall, rounded arch by water, and the wear of time. It made a high curve over the surf like an enormous, earthen bridge.

Rin hummed with excitement in the saddle, and Sousuke knew this was going exactly where he hoped it wouldn’t.

“Fuck. No.”

“Heehee~” Rin’s low snicker was spiced with mischief. He flattened himself against the saddle, behind the windshield, gripping the two short belts in front. “Lean over me and hang on tight, Sou!”

“We’re not—!” Whatever Sousuke was going to say blew out the back of his skull as the dragon reared upward. Rin tugged on his arms until he fell forward with a hoarse gasp.

Tora snapped her wings hard, tucked them in at her sides, and dove.

Sousuke clenched his jaw, every muscle in his body coiled, as the rock zoomed by close around them. Air whistled above their heads, broken by the windshield. Rin’s exalted yell echoed off the crags for all of a split second as they sailed untouched through the arch in freefall. The dragon spread her wings in time to catch a draft, and glided with a victorious roar, nearly low enough to skim the waves.

“You’re absolutely insane!!”

“We know what we’re doing!” Rin’s hair whipped back in the salty breeze. He was breathing hard, every other exhale a barking cackle. Lightning was still coursing through Sousuke’s blood, and Rin’s laughter had always been contagious.

“Ever the showoff.”

“You are impressed, though, hahaha!”

Shaking his head, Sousuke squeezed once around Rin’s waist, and buried his lips in fine fuchsia.

The touch didn’t go unnoticed. Rin reclined all the way, his back settling flush against Sousuke’s chest, head falling to rest on his shoulder. Tora was soaring lazily above the surf, and Sousuke noticed Rin had left the reigns stowed. The only thing keeping him from sliding off the dragon’s neck into the ocean was Sousuke’s strong hold around his middle.

“Comfortable?”

“Mmm,” Rin sighed, cupping his palms over Sousuke’s knees. “Very.”

Rin seemed satisfied—too satisfied to move himself for any more reckless stunts. And as much as he’d admit to enjoying the thrill, Sousuke was completely okay with that.
They soared along the coast, close enough to shore to see the steep, verdant cliffs, and far enough out to keep their watery cushion of privacy.

Sousuke peered down to see tiny lights in the waves ahead of them. Tora saw them, too. She chirped, and her muscles tensed as she pumped once to close the distance.

“What are those?”

“Suiseizame.” Rin mumbled, as if he’d been on the brink of falling sleep.

As they approached, Sousuke could make out sharp tails, and sleek bodies—sharks. Two extra fins stretched out like fans from the lateral lines of their backs. They jumped over swells, gliding on frilled wings for all of a few seconds, before diving back under. Luminescent patterns flashed along their length, and out to tips of their fins. Glowing, colored trails arced in their wake.

“It’s rare to see them light up, actually.” Rin said. “If you do, it’s supposed to mean that your future is bright.”

“Of course you’d know something like that.”

“Oi.” Rin flicked Sousuke’s knee. “What are you trying to say, huh?”

“Nothing bad.” Sousuke watched the sharks leaping. “I know that it will be, for you.”

Gliding low, Tora battered at the creatures twice. She missed, and in a beat of her wings, they were lost behind her.

Sousuke felt Rin angle his head to look up at him. He kept his eyes trained forward.

“Thank you, Rin. For this.”

“Yeah.”

Sundown was an hour that belonged to Rin. He would sigh at the veil of burnt oranges, and deep magentas, trace clouds like strokes of wet paint with steady hands. It was a time of hope—the sun kissing the horizon with a promise of tomorrow.

And a time of endings.

Rin looked outward, gaze reaching for the edge of an endless plane. He was seated in the saddle facing Sousuke, with the breeze at his back. Night’s first stars blinked alive to crown him against a darkening sky. There was so much fire in him, Sousuke couldn’t imagine how one body contained it all. He was the most beautiful sight Sousuke had ever seen.
An evening chill lofted upward as the sun sank, and Rin shivered, drawing Sousuke’s coat tighter around himself. His mouth drew taught.

“I never really apologized to you.”

Sousuke frowned with “For what?” in the lift of his brow.

“You talk about being trouble for me, but I’ve put you in more danger than anyone else.”

“Rin, that’s not true—”

“I knew I was breaking our laws.” Rin’s face tightened with emotion. “We aren’t supposed to bring others into the Valley, I knew that. Yet I still took you with me. Again and again, and look what happened because of it.”

“I’m sorry.” He slumped his shoulders, defeated. “I’m sorry. It was so selfish of me, Sousuke.”

“No.” Sousuke fixed him with a fond smile. “You weren’t being selfish.”

He shrugged, even as his skin burned under Rin’s stare. “You wanted to share it with me. You like to share the things you love. If something makes you happy, you want it to make others happy, too. I’ve known that since the day I met you. It’s one of the things that I…really like about you.”

Nervous, Sousuke rubbed at his collarbone. “Even though you’re pushy, and loud, and your mouth’s faster than your mind—”
“Hey!” Rin socked him playfully on the arm.

“You’re kind, and brave, and you’ve got a heart so big. I wonder how it fits inside you, sometimes. Samezuka’s lucky to have you.”

_I was lucky to have met you._

Sousuke swallowed thickly, and glanced sideways at the ocean, and ships in the distance. He heard Rin’s unsteady intake of breath over the roll of waves. When Rin finally spoke, his voice was strained, and sad.

“I don’t want you to go.”

Sousuke sighed, hands awkward and restless at his sides. “I have to.”

“You _don’t._”

“You heard the sorceress, Rin. They’re gonna be back,” Sousuke pleaded. “And when they come looking for me, it needs to be only me that they find.”

A gnash of sharp teeth told him Rin was getting frustrated. “I was there, too, you bastard. They said that to _both of us._ What if she was talking about me, huh?” Rin dipped his head to lead Sousuke’s eyes up to his. “They could attack, and I’d be alone.”

Sousuke obeyed, and leveled their gazes—his own cold and ashamed. “I was there in the room last night. And I couldn’t do anything to stop them.”

“You _almost died for me!_” Shaky fists shot up, and twisted in Sousuke’s shirt, jerking him in. “Again.” He almost wished Rin would hit him; it would be less painful than facing his raw despair.

Sousuke turned away. “It’s fine.”

“Like hell it is!!” Rin screamed in his face, shaking him roughly. “Did it even cross your mind that I want to look out for you?!”

Rin truly had not changed.

“Even so,” Sousuke braced himself for a blow. “If something happens, it’s better that it happens to me.”

Indignation twisted Rin’s features. There was a torrent of anger hot on his tongue, a river raging behind a dam.

“Why are you so _impossible?!_ Stop acting like your life isn’t worth anything! Because it’s worth something to _me_, and I can’t—” He paused, taking a breath to force down a sob. “I can’t _stand_ it.”

The grip on Sousuke’s shirt slackened, and Rin looked him over, desperate.

Carefully, Sousuke pried Rin’s fingers off his shirt, bringing their hands down together. Rin snatched his back. Honesty was Sousuke’s only option.

“I don’t think my life’s worthless.” He gave Rin a fond half-smile. “But I would still give it up to keep you safe. Anytime, forever. I’m sorry. I care about you too much for that to ever change.”

Air left Rin in a rush, like he’d been hit with a sack of sand. This was it—Sousuke had finally gone too far. He had tripped—fallen too close to the truth, and there was no climbing back up.
“Sou…”

A strong gust tipped Tora’s wing, and she snapped sharply to right herself. Rin lost his balance. He slipped sideways from the seat, arms flailing wildly for anchor. Sousuke surged forward and caught him, hauling him upright, his chest pounding with so much panic, he thought he might be sick. He locked Rin in a firm hold, and peered over at the water below—at how deadly a fall that might have been.

“Shit…”

They panted into the small, damp space between them. Sousuke traced up Rin’s features, over his pale skin that glowed rosy with the cold. He was close enough to see the glints of gold and tourmaline fuchsia flickering in his irises, as Rin looked at him with something like awe.

Sousuke fumbled for his voice. “Rin…”

Rin arched up and pressed their lips together, sudden and soft.

His quivering exhale fanned over Sousuke’s face.

Then he lifted away, tense and vulnerable. A calm sort of understanding bloomed in the quiet that followed.

“I love you, Rin.”

Rin’s sharp gasp was swallowed whole as Sousuke lunged forward, finding Rin’s open mouth with his own. Rin shuddered, then sighed. His hands flew up to tangle themselves in Sousuke’s hair.

He was kissing back.

Wind roared in Sousuke’s ears, and Rin’s heat seared down his throat and through every drop of his blood like untempered wildfire. He was being burned alive from the inside out in a sweltering storm, and he was sure now that he had waited his whole life for it.

They broke apart, their breaths ragged.

“I love you, too!” Rin shouted into Sousuke’s face over the crash of air as they swooped forward.
There were tears at the corners of his eyes. He leaned in close, cupping one of Sousuke’s chilled ears, and the sky was silenced to a whisper. “I always have.”

Sousuke searched his face, incredulous. There was a happiness radiating from Rin like he’d never seen before. Or maybe he had. Maybe he’d seen it a hundred times, and never recognized it for what it was. Rin dragged him downward again.

They lost height as Tora dropped lower, and the force of it began lifting Rin’s body up off the saddle. Sousuke held him back down with a grunt. Fingers tightening in dark locks, Rin hooked his legs up, and around to secure himself in Sousuke’s lap. Sousuke was sure if Rin wasn’t holding him so strongly, he’d have been blown clean off this plane of being.

Tora’s flight leveled off, and they parted, slowly.

Hair in a flaming, red halo around his head, Rin brought himself back in, brushing his flushed cheeks against Sousuke’s.

Sousuke pressed his mouth to Rin’s ear. He strained to compose himself. “Is that what you wanted to show me?”

There were tears spilling from Rin’s eyes freely, cool on Sousuke’s face.

“Yes,” Rin cried. “Yes, yes.”

Sousuke was sure his heart was beating hard enough to shatter his ribs. He could only tip his head back and laugh, as Rin clung to him tight.

The view was magnificent, flying back to the city. Rin had forgone it entirely, his face turned inward, breaths tickling Sousuke’s neck, and arms looped around his back.

Thankfully, Tora seemed to know the way. Sousuke held the reigns loosely in one hand, keeping the other at Rin’s waist.

They touched down smoothly on the balcony where Sousuke had asked the dragon to land. Rin detached himself with a twinge of regret, and Sousuke’s body already missed the feel of him. Sliding down, they unbuckled the straps around Tora’s middle, and worked the saddle off. She stretched her spine, and swished her long tail.

Rin was on his toes, whispering to her. Sousuke watched them nudge one another affectionately, chest warming at the sight.

*The strongest pair ever.*

“Say goodbye?” Rin tipped his head in Sousuke’s direction.

And then the dragon was rubbing his side, and turning her face to wait for his hand.

He gave in instantly. “Thanks for letting me come along with you, Tora. It was beautiful. Thank you…for everything.”

The dragon blinked—wet, glasslike lid of her eye folding over and back, pupil widening. Sousuke knew she understood. She sniffed, bunting him with the tip her rough snout. Then she knelt, and
took to the air. The thunder of her wings died away over the mountains.

Rin sidled up beside Sousuke, resting a shy hand at his waist.

“Did you…enjoy yourself? It was fun, right?”

Sousuke leaned into him. “It was the most incredible experience I’ve ever had,” he confessed. “…for a few different reasons.”

The arm wrapped around his waist hugged him tighter. Rin turned his face outward, but Sousuke could hear his wide grin through a breathy laugh. He shuffled sideways until he was in front of Sousuke, peering up through his thick lashes, expectant.

Sousuke wanted to continue, too—to make sure this dream was real. But there was one thing he had to know first.

“Rin.”

“Hmm?”

“Did you mean it? What you said up there.”

“What?” Rin’s eyes darkened. “What are you talking about?”

Voice small, Sousuke moved away. “You said ‘always.’ But that’s not true, is it? It couldn’t…have been always.”

Rin’s confusion fell away, his brow knitting as realization soaked in. “Oh. Oh, Sousuke…”

“I don’t know why I did that. Back then, that night I just…I loved you, and I couldn’t believe what happened. It was almost like I’d forgotten how to move.”

Closing the gap, Rin backed Sousuke against the stone balustrade. It was still hot from the day’s sun. “But I should have gone after you. I should’ve told you, right there. And I’m sorry that I let you think for even one night that I didn’t want you.”

Blood was rushing to Sousuke’s cheeks, his blush flooding up to his ears, and down the collar of his shirt, he could feel it. That memory had been a shaft in his side for so long—a vision branded into his soul, banishing any hope of having his love returned. And all at once, Rin had swept it out to sea.

Mind washed blank by the ebb of the tide, all Sousuke could answer was, “That’s okay.”

“It’s not.” Rin knocked his forehead against Sousuke’s chest, hiding his face, and Sousuke almost regretted bringing the past up at all.

“Hey.” He raised Rin’s chin with a gentle hand. “I know now, so…it’s okay. I believe you.”

Grinning, he cuffed Rin softly on the arm. “You’ve paid me back for that kiss, anyway.”

Rin smiled up gratefully, and returned the gesture. A balmy breeze ruffled his hair.

It’s been ‘always’ for me, too.

“By the way…” Rin started, “if we’re keeping score, you’ve only kissed me twice. And I’ve already kissed you four times, not counting last night.”
“What?” Sousuke balked. “I’m pretty sure it’s only been three, Rin.”

“Nope.” He walked two fingers up Sousuke’s chest, and that irresistible flare of a challenge was igniting the air. “Twice just now, once at Sano, and once in that cabin coming home from the trial.”

“I don’t remember that.”

Rin circled around him, already alight with spirit. “You were mostly asleep. Still counts, though.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Fine, then.” Sousuke leaned in, eyes fluttering shut. “Shall I make it even?”

He heard Rin duck backward, and sprint across the balcony toward the arched doorway to his bedroom. “If you want a kiss, you’ll have to come get it!”

Sousuke sighed a little. “Are we twelve years old?”

Rin skitted inside, hollering over his shoulder. “Is that a no?!”

Spark struck tinder, and Sousuke barreled after him through the open door—promptly skidding to a stop.

“This…isn’t your room.”

Sousuke really wanted to give him that kiss.

Rin skipped beside a tail of silk, stuck out his tongue, and disappeared behind it.

“You took us to the laundry hall, Sou. Wrong side of the palace.”

Of course he did.

“Ugh.” Sousuke ran an exasperated hand over his face. Tora must have known the way to Rin’s room. He should have just left it to her. “All the balconies look the same.”

Voice lilting, and eyes soft, Rin whirled around a rich violet sheet. “It’s fine. Anywhere’s fine.”

Sousuke followed the patter of bare feet and soft giggles through rows of linen. Rin’s breath
quickened as he flitted between sheets, and Sousuke chased after him. They wove in and out, nimble and light—a dance of butterflies in a forest.

This day had been a nightmare set aflame, darkness burned away before the light of a lifelong love. Sousuke’s entire universe had been unraveled, and sewn back together in bright, new constellations.

He heard Rin hiding, smug, behind a curtain of silk. Careful to stay out of sight, Sousuke edged up to it, and stalked around the other side. A quiet rustle told him Rin was faced away, looking for him. The corners of his mouth twitched.

Soundless, he grabbed Rin around the middle from behind.

“AH!!”

“Got you.” Sousuke purred in his ear, rocking him side to side as he settled.

“I let you.” Rin twisted around, running his palms up Sousuke’s front to rest at the base of his neck.

“I know.” Sousuke smirked.

Rin pushed up into his chest. The borrowed coat had shifted askew, baring one shoulder completely, and it was entirely too much. Sousuke dove down to capture Rin’s lips at last. This time, his hands were completely free. He kept one at Rin’s back to press him close, bringing the other up to lightly trace down the delicate curve of his jaw. Rin’s exhale stuttered.

Sousuke accepted control, daring to slide his tongue along Rin’s upper lip. Rin made a tiny sound, mouth opening easily for him. He licked over Rin’s front teeth, just grazing the points enough to spike a thrill of pain up his tongue. Sousuke tilted his head, and Rin let him deeper with a pretty moan, curling his fingers into the hem of Sousuke’s shirt. He massaged into Rin’s mouth, aching to taste every inch of it, but happy to take his time. Rin was the love of his long, blood-soaked, miserable life—a brilliant light that he could chase, but never catch. Reach for, but never touch. Now he had starlight burning in his arms, and he would treasure every last moment with him.
He stroked Rin’s tongue with his own in a slow, curling rhythm. Rin was clumsy with something like fear—no, *inexperience*. But he caught on quickly, and his raw enthusiasm knocked Sousuke breathless. Sousuke felt the exact moment Rin’s knees went weak, weight sinking around his neck. He drew back with the faintest tug on Rin’s lower lip.
Rin rolled his gaze upward, eyes half-lidded, dazed, mouth slack and kiss-red. He swayed. Sousuke pecked him on the cheek, and swung down to hook an elbow behind his thighs, swooping him off the ground. Rin squeaked, and clung on to keep balanced—suddenly feverish, and peppering the side of Sousuke’s face with tiny, wet kisses.

Sousuke walked across the chamber with his arms full, the flames in his chest leaping higher at every quiet hum Rin made against him. Linens hung in his way, and he whisked Rin straight through them, silky fabric slipping feather-light over his skin.

"This—" he laughed, twirling Rin around, "—is for earlier."

Rin kicked his legs out—giggling, so dizzy he couldn’t tell wall from ceiling. Sousuke carried him under the clotheslines, beaming, a constant in the center as sunset hues and ribbons of silk blurred behind him. Rin’s back hit soft fabric when Sousuke placed him on a pile of clean cushions, and folded sheets. His world was spinning, head a whirlpool of clouds, and laughter, and love.

Sousuke followed after him, crowding Rin down into the nest of linens. This was his best friend—the stubborn slave boy with a burn on his shoulder. There had been scars on his back, and pain in his eyes when they met, but he could light up Rin’s whole day with one smile. It was the man who had pulled Rin up at his lowest, made him dream again, breathed the life back into his heart—and that heart raced wildly for him.

Rin turned upward to see Sousuke bowed over him, waiting. His irises were bright in the shadows of twilight, lit from the inside like underwater lanterns. Sheets over his head billowed with a draft, and Rin recognized the weightless bliss of falling through sky.

“You...” Sousuke breathed. “You want me.”
It was almost a question. There was still a look of gut-punched disbelief on Sousuke’s face, and there shouldn’t be. Rin rose up to capture his open mouth, and kiss that doubt away forever. “More than anything.”

“Rin…” Sousuke pushed forward, and kissed him back with the strength of a swell breaking against the shore. Rin collapsed, happy to drown.

Sousuke’s coat was still on him. It had kept him warm in the clouds, and the subtle scent of its owner was still on the fabric. They pulled apart to breathe. Arresting his friend’s gaze, Rin brought the hem over his nose, and inhaled. Rose petals. And you.

Sousuke’s face lit with rapture. “You’re amazing, Rin.” He bent down.

The sensation of Sousuke’s hot mouth on his exposed throat had Rin heaving for breath, and curling a leg over the man’s thigh to drag him closer. Rin hadn’t imagined that the day would lead them here. He had never done this before. He hadn’t even come close to intimacy this intense, and now that he was here, falling apart beneath Sousuke, it dawned on him that he wasn’t sure what to do with himself.

Sousuke, on the other hand, clearly did. Before Rin had time to think much on it, deft hands unfastened the coat, and peeled it open. Air whooshed over Rin’s bare stomach, and he tilted his chin up to see Sousuke drink him in with lust-filled eyes, and a slack jaw. Any nagging pangs of jealousy evaporated.

Sousuke’s rough hands were all over him, roaming over every curve and plane of muscle, and Rin blushed hard under the ardent reverence. Any daydream he’d ever had about how this man might feel on him tore to shreds in the wake of reality.

“I love you, Rin. I’ve loved you for so long.”

Every time he said it shot fresh sparks through Rin’s blood. They couldn’t be close enough. Their mouths still sealed, he hauled Sousuke fully into the pile of cushions.

Sousuke rolled to the side as he fell in, panting and smiling.

“Rin.”

“…Yeah?”

“That’s…six. Or seven. I think I’m ahead.”

Rin flashed his teeth in a grin.

“Not for long.”

He sank down to capture Sousuke’s lips again, pouring years of ache, and longing, and passion into his hungry mouth. The pleasure heated his skin, pulsing down between his thighs. Hooking a leg over Sousuke, he rolled his hips in a steady circle, and it felt so unbelievably right.

Sousuke’s moan hummed into the back of Rin’s throat. He cradled Rin’s head, kissing like every time would be his last.

“Stay, Sousuke.” Rin whispered against him. “Stay with me.”
They lost count of their kisses for good.

______________________

Walking back across the palace, Sousuke was sure he had died somewhere, and was strolling through his own fantasy in some divine dimension.

They made their way through long passages to the apartments, circling around to use empty workshop corridors. Rin had wasted no time looping his arm through Sousuke’s, walking so close, it made him stumble every so often. He felt like a drunkard laughing his way home from a tavern in the middle of the night, intoxicated by Rin’s affection.

Sousuke didn’t know how he would live without this.

Eventually, the workshops gave way to the armory, and the upper bridges to the storehouse towers. They would be at Rin’s bedchamber all too soon, where Sousuke’s travel bag was stowed. As much as he wished he could stall the crawl of time, the evening was drawing to a close.

Rin seemed to sense it, too. Silence dragged heavier with every step. His stare wandered off ahead, past the entrance to the library.

“I looked forward to seeing your dumb face all day, you know. Even if you weren’t always happy to see mine.”

“Of course I was.” Sousuke was borderline offended. “You were the only thing I was ever happy about.”

Rin chuckled. “You were such a huge part of my life,” he mused. “I was gonna be Emperor, and you were supposed to be there with me. As a kid, it just never occurred to me that things wouldn’t happen that way.”

They passed into the shadow of a carved archway, and Rin’s voice strained. “Then in one night, you were gone.”

“There was this blank in my future where you would’ve been. And that cut deeper than a blade ever could. It was hard without you. It will be hard without you.”

“If you’d…rather be somewhere else, I’ll wish you the best,” Rin said. “But if you think you’re doing me a favor—that you’re saving me, you’re not.” He glanced up, ruby eyes burning. “Not at all.”

Stunned, Sousuke opened his mouth to say something—he didn’t know what. Rin stopped him with a hand. They were nearly at the royal apartments, breezing by the sentries with a wave.

“Whatever you decide to do, don’t tell me.” Rin kept their arms linked as he climbed the stairs. “If you’re leaving, I don’t want to know right now.”

The door to his chamber was cracked ajar, still splintered from the night before. Rin gave a small tug toward the slit of firelight and turned around, brow lifting in invitation.
“Just…stay the night?”

His eyes fell shut for a kiss, and Sousuke eagerly obliged. Rin sighed, crashing forward against him. Still reeling, his head hazy, Sousuke surrendered.

“Okay.”

They pushed inside, and kicked the door closed.

_________________

Sousuke slipped out of Rin’s arms, and off the bed in the deepest hour of night.

He’d never been one to mind the cold much, but the absence of Rin’s heat was a torture he thought he could die from. He shivered, and crept to the tall window. Outside, the capital of Samezuka was a shadowy sprawl. It couldn’t be too difficult to hide.

Rin’s even breathing stalled, and Sousuke turned immediately. Shifting, Rin mumbled something, and reached out over the vacant side of the bed. The ache to climb back under the covers with him was so overpowering, Sousuke found himself across the room at the bedside again. He’d kissed Rin to sleep, and it was clear in the sad way Rin had whispered his name, what he thought Sousuke would choose.

“It was hard without you.”

His bag sat slouched in the corner beside the desk, packed and ready. All he had to do was slide his arm through the strap, take his things out the door, and go.

A spot of sand still dusted the rug beside it.

Sousuke had grown up with the most lethal creatures in the world lurking just beyond his home. But nothing had ever scared him so much as watching helpless, as that rock hung over Rin’s head. This was for the best. He’d been so sure of it…

“…don’t…”

Skin prickling, Sousuke whipped around. He let out a relieved sigh; Rin was talking in his sleep.

“….suke…”

One pale arm was stretched over Sousuke’s spot, and his face pinched with pain when his hand curled in on an empty sheet.
Sousuke sank onto the bed, head cradled in clammy hands, his heart cracking, and melting down like molten steel. He stole a last glance at the man he loved—the friend this had all been for—and made his decision.

_________________

Rin stirred to the song of doves outside his window, fending off consciousness. He squeezed his eyelids shut, trying to will himself back into dreams that spun with whirls of silk, heated skin, and beating hearts. He knew what he would find when he opened his eyes, but he did so anyway.

Sousuke was gone.

His side of the bed was empty and cool, mattress dipped in where he’d been the evening before. Anguish clenched Rin’s throat. He turned his face into the pillow, shrinking in on himself.

Then he felt it.

There was a weight around his waist, under the covers.

He gasped, fingers trailing to his stomach…where a lazy armed was draped. Then a voice low, and husky with sleep, rumbled in his ear.

“Morning, Rin.”

A tremor ran down his spine, and he twisted around. Sousuke was there—with heavy eyes, and a tired grin—devastating in the early light.

“Morning,” Rin managed.

He waited, unmoving, battling the urge to roll over, and throw his arms around this man.

Sousuke took an even breath, collecting himself. He looked drawn, and slightly pale from two long nights in a row.

“I…thought a lot about…what you said yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Rin scooted closer, and rested an encouraging hand on his arm, holding it over his hip.

Sousuke nodded, grateful for the touch, and cleared his throat. “I have…no idea what’s going to happen next, or what to do about any of it. It’s all miles over my head. Somehow I ended up tangled in the mess anyway, and so have you.”
He rubbed the flat of his palm over the small of Rin’s back under the covers as he lowered his eyes, ashamed. “It seems like no matter what choices I make, I end up hurting you in one way or another.”

Rin shook his head, pleading.

“But I don’t want to.” Sousuke’s hand glided up to Rin’s shoulder blade. “I’m sorry that I’ve jerked you around, and…made you cry.”

“You deserve to be happy.” He paused, gathering what he needed to keep going. “And…I’d like to try and make you happy. To stay.” His voice wavered. “If that’s alright. If you still want me around mmmmph—”

Rin kissed him sweet, and deep enough to tell Sousuke that yes, he certainly did want him around.

“You finally, finally get it,” Rin beamed.

Sousuke caught his breath, visibly relieved. “I might have.”

Joy overflowing, Rin leaned their foreheads together. “We’ll face whatever’s ahead. As a team.”

The sun was peeking over the city, casting a glow about the room, and blades of gold against the far wall. Rin rolled off onto his back. Sousuke rose up on one elbow to see him better. The way he smiled with his whole face—tender, and radiant with adoration—made Rin’s muscles weak. His hair was a sleep-shaped mess, and Rin reached up to comb his hands through the thick strands, looking for any excuse to touch him more. Playful fingers brushed over the short, coarse patch at his nape.

“Nnnngh that tickles, Rin.”

“Good.” Rin danced his fingertips up to the shell of Sousuke’s ear, earning a light shiver. He traced his fingers around the lobe, and Sousuke’s eyes narrowed, daring him to try it again. Rin treasured this playful, comfortable, kind of companionship more than he could say. They were, at the heart of it all, best friends.

“You never quite grew into these ears, did you?”


“I love them.” Snickering, Rin brushed his lips over an earlobe.

He sank down to see Sousuke following his movements with appreciation, and a faint blush. Groaning, Sousuke heaved up off the bed.

“Sousukeee~ Come back!”

It seemed there was something he needed to do. Stretching out his morning heaviness, Sousuke plucked a sealed sheet of paper off of the desk, and Rin went quiet.

He carded his farewell letter between two fingers, looking it over a final time. Then he strode to the fireplace, and tossed it into the coals. Tendrils of smoke wafted upward as lingering heat curled and blackened the parchment. He watched in thoughtful silence.

Tossing the sheets off, Rin crossed the rug to him.

Sousuke loosened immediately, as though Rin’s presence was melting the ice in his limbs.
“I’ve spent so many years running away from you.” He wrapped a strong arm over Rin’s bare back, and turned, eyes sparkling with hope. “I think I’ve made you wait long enough.”

Something between a sob, and an elated scream was surging in Rin’s throat, and he bit his lip to hold it there. He took Sousuke by the shoulders, and pushed him down onto the sofa, settling into his lap with the Samezuka sun warm on his skin.

“Yeah. You really have.”

Chapter End Notes

<3 <3
To the beginning, and back again.

Natsuya didn’t remember all that much about being six years old. Recollections of his childhood had funneled—piled in one pocket of time, like dust in the dip of a bowl.

He remembered the house he grew up in, his parents, and his baby brother. Port sounds, cloudy skies, the stink of stale seawater, and the boat his family sailed along the Iwatobi coast when his father closed shop to take a couple days off.

He remembered huddling below the deck of that boat with the door jammed on the night his family died. Stars were shrouded, the ocean restive.

He remembered the cold. A chokehold chill that shuddered down his body, seeped into his skin, and locked his limbs. Shrieks, screeching from the water just outside, the awful sound of scraping, scratching at the wood as something climbed up the hull.

“Stay inside, Natsuya, Stay quiet. Whatever you hear, son, don’t come out.”

His father lifted him into a linen cabinet while his mother held the baby. He was bawling; the screeching outside would not let up. She brought the child to the shelf, Natsuya spread his arms to take him.

“Keep your little brother with you,” his father said.

Ssshh ssshhh, honey you’re too loud

Stop crying, he wouldn’t stop crying.

Please, please, please stop crying.

Natsuya remembered clearer than anything, the look on his mother’s face as she cradled his baby brother close, shook her head, and shut the cabinet.

He heard the snap of the door splintering open, footsteps, gravelly voices, rattling laughter, a thump of heavy things on the ground. In the airless dark, he smothered a scream behind his hand. There was a presence in the room—a being so rank with evil, its aura was a suffocating weight.

His brother was still crying, it was freezing.
Then a splash,

and nothing more.

Nothing save the slow, swaying creak of the boat in the arms of a fickle sea.

______________________

Five years later

It must have been near midnight. Natsuya wrung the rough wood of the ship rail, white-knuckled, searching the inky water beneath. There was a broom in his hand, a knife tucked in his sleeve, and determination in the set of his jaw.

“What are you doing, boy?”

One of the soldiers approached, chin raised in cautious concern. “You looking for them?”

“Nah.” Natsuya brandished his broom. “Couldn’t sleep, Sir. Thought I’d get a start on sweeping the hold ‘fore the rest is up.”

“Ah.” The man relaxed. “Best get to it, then. Not the safest up here on deck.”

“Aye, sir.” Natsuya gave a stiff nod, and slipped around the corner.

Guards on duty had all been testy for the last few days at sea. Even a green deckhand could see why. Iwatobi had achieved something no other nation had in the span of history: a truce with sirens. It was a tenuous peace won by three young girls, Natsuya heard. A trio of prodigies from the lowlands was powerful enough to scare the creatures into submission. Impressive as that was, demons knew no honor. Especially not these.

Tonight, on this ship, there was finally one of them within his reach. Natsuya hung his lantern on a hook at the top of the stairwell, and descended into musty gloom.

The cargo hold was dim, and dry. Gentle pitches of the waves groaned in the floorboards, and in the tinny clink of chains. There it was—like a monolith in the center of the floor, chained to the walls and covered by canvas: the monster’s cage. Natsuya slid the knife from his sleeve, and took a breath. Fear and trepidation was bristling through his limbs. There was something inside that cage, and it didn’t deserve to the see the light of another day. He’d waited five years for a chance like this, so hell if it was going to waste.

Only someone had beat him here.

A cloaked, slight-framed figure hovered near the iron door. Natsuya lowered his gait, and crept
forward. “Hey, you. What're you doing down here with that?”

The person angled to meet him, unmoving.

“We’re talking.”

It was a young boy’s voice—clear, with the telltale lilt of nobility.

“I could ask you the same.” Bright sage flashed in the low light from under the hood, and dropped to Natsuya’s knife. “But I don’t think I need to.”

“Good.” Natsuya snapped. He hadn’t expected to find anyone down here. This kid was making him nervous. “Then you can get on back to your cabin.” He gulped. “And forget you saw me.”

Grip sweating at the knife hilt, he edged even closer. The other boy stiffened, and backed against the cage, but made no move to flee. A metallic scrape came from inside as the creature scrambled into a corner.

“Stow your blade. You are not going to hurt him.”

“Fucking right m’not,” Natsuya prickled. “I’m gonna kill it.” The world would be better for one less of them. “So move. Before it gets you.”

The cloaked boy held his ground. “He is six years old.”

“My brother was a baby in my mother’s arms when they killed him,” Natsuya snarled. “They don’t deserve anyone’s mercy; I don’t care how young. It’ll grow up to be a murderer like the rest. I’m doing us all a damn favor.”

He was within arm’s reach of the boy now, and he honestly didn’t know what to do next. The plan was to kill a monster, and sneak back to his quarters before anyone noticed it was dead. He’d be a quiet hero, saving the lives of all its future prey.

“This one was born human, you know.”

Natsuya stilled his advance. “You made that shit up.”

“I asked him,” The cloaked boy answered. “He and the other ward are the only two like this.”

“You learn things, if you look for them.” The kid’s gaze fell to the knife again, where it was still glinting unsteady in Natsuya’s fingers. “You could stand to try it.”

Condescending little prick.

“Easy to spit shit at others, when you haven’t lived what they have.”

The boy regarded him coolly. “Isn’t it?” He took Natsuya in curiously, like he couldn’t believe a human so pigheaded could exist. “Your lack of foresight is truly astounding.”

Anger boiled under Natsuya’s skin. “Why would they hold to their word? You’re damn stupid if you think they will. Probably sent the little leech to kill the royal family anyhow.”

“If that were the case, he could have already done so.”

Stepping into the weak bloom of a lantern, the boy pushed back his hood.
Silver. Hair like spun moonlight spilled forth, framing pale green eyes, and soft features. There was an air of peace about the boy that seemed almost strange on such a young face. A crest fastened his collar at the throat: an “I”—eagle winged, and sapphire blue.

“You’re!” Natsuya sputtered. “You’re the—!” The crown prince of Iwatobi.

“Yes,” the boy sighed. “So stop all of that swearing.” His gazed narrowed, and Natsuya felt its pierce like a snake bite at his throat. “And do not call me stupid.”

“Guards!”

Panic struck in white-hot bolts.

“Wait! Please! I’ll put the knife away; you can have it!”

Natsuya was dead. Or worse, doomed to wither into bones beneath the canyon, if he was caught pointing a blade at the prince. He snapped up like a cornered animal, pleading, desperate. Heavy footsteps rumbled down the stairs, and there were firm, gloved hands on his shoulders; it was over.

Unshaken, the prince nodded in Natsuya’s direction. “This boy here would like a chance to fight for Iwatobi, though he clearly does not know how.”

Oh, this fucking—

“It would be a shame to turn away such spirit. When we return home, see that he is given a spot amongst the academy squires.”

Natsuya’s jaw fell agape. “…Huh?”

A chorus of “Yes, Prince Serizawa!” rang out in answer, and Natsuya’s future tumbled down a terrifying new trail.

______________________

Eight months later

Natsuya had bidden the coast farewell.

Now a squire in the king’s army, he called the hewn heights of Negura his home. Iwatobi’s booming capital was nested deep in the curves of Tottori Canyon, beautifully carven into sheer cliff faces a quarter mile above the river. The city’s thin air, and dizzying verticality had taken some getting used to.

He’d known nothing, and no one when he’d arrived at the knights’ academy. But he took to combat readily, and before long, his easy humor had won him a wide array of friends. The discipline of military life honed him, gave him a purpose. If he was honest, he owed the little prince a thank-you for affording him this chance, though he doubted he’d ever talk to the kid again.

Then one morning, completely out of the blue, Serizawa appeared at the practice field. When drills were over, he strode up to Natsuya with his polite smile, and asked if he knew his letters.
Lessons became both the worst, and best days of Natsuya’s week. Reading was drudge work—pointless, and frustrating. But Serizawa’s patience was inexhaustible, his serenity shatterproof. On occasion, Natsuya would crack some brazen joke, and earn a subdued laugh. He would narrate a sentence just right, and the courteous mask would split with genuine pride. It was fulfilling in the strangest of ways.

Natsuya figured this was all sprung from Serizawa’s guilt—assuming responsibility for recruiting a rascal like him. Even so, no one after his parents had ever expended so much effort for him, or had half as much faith. He puzzled over it, until he accepted the only explanation: the prince was simply kind.

Weeks molded into months. “Your Highness” became “Serizawa.” And when Natsuya called the prince by his given name, he’d met no protest.

Today, he was back on the ground.

The entire court was invited down to observe Lord Shiina’s unveiling of *Tsuguro*—the greatest warship Iwatobi had constructed to date. It rested in the water beyond the Shiina’s gates, a goliath of a thing. Any other ship in the fleet would fit comfortably in its hold.

Natsuya squared his shoulders, and stuck close to Prince Nao as they milled about the colorful, carefully landscaped Shiina estate. Festivities wore on inside, cheers dulled by distance.

“Sooo, you just gonna sniff flowers all day?”

Nao bent away from a crane-shaped floral sculpture he’d been admiring. “You’re completely free to do something else, you know. No need to hound my heels.”

“Eh.” Natsuya folded his arms behind his head in a way he was pretty sure looked casual. “I don’t know anyone here.”

Nao sighed, then knelt to the lagoon bank to observe a train of ducklings hopping after their mother.

“Reminds me of you.”

“Hey!”

Natsuya was on the cusp of a comeback when a child’s scream tore over the yard. Nao had heard it, too. They shared a look, and broke off at a run. Unsurprisingly, Natsuya was faster. He cut across a garden, charged down two flights of stairs, through a bush, and rounded the hedge.

It took a moment to make sense of the scene before him. Three teenaged girls were crowded around a hickory tree. Finely dressed, golden hair pinned with gems, the tallest of them stood apart with her doll-like face split in a wicked grin.

The Hazukis. Shun, the oldest, Miri the youngest, and Kyo, the sister in the center—in every way. By now, they were famous figures. Renowned for their prodigious talent, and for bringing peace unprecedented to the kingdom. Natsuya had never seen them in person. They were younger than he thought they’d be.

Kyo had her fist locked. On the ground was a mewling black cat, trapped in a cage of stone. He pawed at the teeth of his prison, smoky fur on end.

Natsuya strode out. “The hell’s going on here?”
“They’re trying to make Ikuya kill Haru!” A boy was crouched in the grass beside the cat. He was a springy thing, with a tangle of bright red hair. Natsuya recognized him instantly: Master Shiina’s bastard boy.

Beside him was another.

The second boy was thinner, paler, tiny in a shirt that didn’t fit him. Scales flushed down his neck, and over his arms in jade crescents. His blue eyes were wide and wet, pupils slitted like a lizard’s. *The siren ward.* Natsuya wrestled down his enmity for the sake of the human kid, and the damn kitten.

“I’m getting bored!” Hopping on her toes, Miri kicked at the cage. “Just kill it already!”

More scales folded down the siren’s neck, and he curled into himself.

“Shut up, shut up! Ikuya would never!” The Shiina boy shoved his way forward. “Especially not for you!”

The situation was taking a dangerous plummet. “Right,” Natsuya intervened. “Here’s where I tell you girls to cut it the fuck out, and step away.” He was taller than most of the squires, certainly taller than the three sisters. He loomed into their space. “Play nice, will you?”

None of them budged. Kyo rolled her tongue against the inside of her cheek, looking him head to foot twice over, like he was a lame dog begging her for a mercy kill.

“We want him to off the cat, is all,” Miri piped. Her hands were laced angelically behind her back. “With his eyes, like they do. Just to see!”

“Exactly.” Kyo added. “We need to see. Don’t you want to know how they do it? Aren’t you curious?”

Something buried deep startled to life. “No. I’m not,” Natsuya growled. “Nothing’s dying here today. Much less in front of these kids. Why don’t you three go enjoy the party? I hear the lemon tarts are especially good.”

Kyo’s expression was still as carved marble, and infuriatingly undecipherable. Standing eye-to-eye, Natsuya began to understand why the sirens had submitted. There was passion unstable, and unstoppable raging in her. Beneath the pretty dress and glittering jewels, she was a frayed rope held taught by a few thin fibers, ready to snap at a whim.

Natsuya had worked the piers long enough to know that you never left that shit up to chance. If a rope was rotting, you cut it loose. He edged closer with a barbed challenge in his glare.

“Natsuya!”

Wheezing, his robe hem stained with mud, Nao rushed into the clearing. He sized up the moment, and gathered his poise.

“Sorcerers, stand down. I am Serizawa—”

“-Nao. We know. *Prince of Iwatobi,*” Kyo droned.

Nao’s smile was unrelenting. “Good. We are grateful for your services, ladies. But do keep yourselves in line.”
Kyo’s lips warped into a sneer.

“…Sis?”

The group’s attention froze midair, and converged at the edge of the grass. A boy was there, shuffling closer, curious. He looked of an age with the other two children—with full cheeks, and a head of golden curls.

“What are you doing to the kitty?” He pouted.

“Get out,” Kyo snapped.

Smoothing down his velvet doublet, the boy stooped beside the stone prison. “Look, he doesn’t want to be in there.” His mouth tugged into a frown. With a jerky wave of his tiny hand, he shattered the enclosure. The Shiina kid cheered as the cat streaked across the lawn, disappearing into a thick hedge.

“NAGISA!”

Boiling over at last, Kyo roared at their brother. He shrank down. There was fear in his eyes, but no remorse.

Quickly, Shun swiped his hand, and led him away. The boy threw a wistful glance over his shoulder, then disappeared with his two sisters. Only Kyo remained, seething.

“Serizawa,” Wrath redirected, she dragged the word across a bed of thorns. “You can’t do anything, can you? Not of much value to Iwatobi, yet we all bow to your every fancy. It’s pathetic, really. All you’ll ever have is your name.”

She edged nearer, too near. “Someday that won’t be enough.”

There was a nettling threat in her voice, and Natsuya's patience ran out.

“Oh, fuck this.” He lunged.

The sorceress curled her fingers at her side, then the ground beneath him shook, and slid out. He fell hard on his back, and the sky went dark to a chorus of echoes.

A minute later, he came to with a splitting headache, and the prince’s reddened, worried face above him. “Are you alright?”

He smelled good. Natsuya had never stood close enough to notice, but Nao smelled like the mint leaves he was always chewing: cool, and sharp—a soothing sting. His head hurt a little bit less.

“…Natsuya?”

“Oh. Yes. Yeah.” He heaved himself up with a grunt.

Nao relaxed back onto his heels. “That was rather foolish, what you did. She wasn’t going to attack me.”

Natsuya huffed. “Wow, you’re welcome.”

“No! I mean—thank you, I just…she might have hurt you worse.” The prince shifted with agitation. “I would never ask you to risk yourself for my pride’s sake.”
“Yeah, well. You don’t have to ask friends to do that.”

Nao’s lips parted in surprise, and Natsuya barely had a moment to feel embarrassed before the prince took a breath to say something—

“HEY! Hey, guy!” The Shiina kid scrambled over on all fours like an enthused monkey, and blinked up at him, unguarded. “That was a little uncool just now, huh.”

Natsuya would have been more annoyed if Nao didn’t look so amused. “I don’t remember asking you, peewee.”

The prince had to hide his snicker with a hand.

“MY NAME’S NOT PEEWEE, IT’S ASAHI!!” Throwing an arm out, the ginger fireball gestured to his friend. “And that’s Ikuya!”

“Thank you for your help.”

The siren ward was seated primly on his knees, a safe distance away. Natsuya wondered if the boy remembered his voice from that night on the ship. He didn’t doubt it. Now that he had a good look at him, he could tell Nao was right; the kid was part human. His scales were gone, leaving only peachy skin. Something snapped together in Nao’s memories at the familiar curve of the boy’s eyes, the pinch of his nose, the way that cypress teal hair swept over his forehead.

“Yeah, no…problem.”

For the first time, the siren boy lifted his gaze. Where the blazing blue had been, Natsuya saw red. A coppery, earth-wrought red.

Much like his own.

______________________

Two years later

Ikuya kicked, and slipped through the water like a seal at play. He and Asahi shinnied up the riverbank, and to the dock. Haru the cat was grooming himself in a patch of shade nearby, unfazed by their shouting.

It was a perfect day. Blue, sunny, the breeze just right. Natsuya had it free, so the four of them had taken a trip down the canyon to the sandy river beach for a swim.

“Natsuya!” Ikuya called out with a wave. “Watch!”

“I’m watching!”

Charged with a running start, the boys launched themselves off the dock. Ikuya dove, slicing through the surface with a kiss of a splash. Asahi followed with his legs hugged to his chest, hitting the water in an ungainly explosion.

Natsuya cheered from the shallows. It had taken a bit of time for him to accept fully, but Ikuya was his brother. The child hadn’t been killed that night; he’d been stolen. And in spite of his dark
upbringing, Ikuya was gentle, smart, and sweet. Natsuya was eternally grateful for whichever stroke of fate had brought them together again.

Had Nao not been there on that ship, he might have killed the boy. Shame scorched through him each time he remembered.

Absently, he stole a glance at Nao, who was reclining under a canvas tent out of the sun. Reading, of all things. Which, if you asked Natsuya, was a right waste of a day at the beach. But the prince was happy like this, and so Natsuya guessed he was happy, too. He swam ashore, and made his way up the bank. A cluster of highborn girls had been fluttering close to their group, trading secrets and sliding coy looks at him. He winked, and they giggled all the way to the water. He was fairly sure he’d fooled around with at least two of them already in the storehouse behind the dormitories. Being a royal knight in training did have its perks.

Nao’s weary sigh could carry a ship to sea.

Slicking his hair back, Natsuya dropped down on the blanket beside the prince, and stole a pear from the basket. “More innocent bystanders fallen victim to my reckless charm.”

“Reckless and charming, hm. You’re one of those things for certain.”

“Ha, thanks. Hey, wait—”

Nao tore his eyes away, and cleared his throat into his fist. He cast around for anyone nearby. “I stumbled upon some records last night in the archives. On the Hazuki sisters.”

“Oh?” Natsuya’s focus sharpened. “And…?”

“And I found out that their current father is not their birth one. Their real father was a criminal. A smuggler, and a magic-wielding murderer.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Natsuya snorted.

“He was imprisoned, and later executed, eight years ago. Publicly.”

*Publicly.* Only the worst of the worst were sentenced to death in Iwatobi. Veritable dangers to human safety, Natsuya recalled. “So you think they have it in for the royal family, after that, huh?”


The prince was reclined in a simple bamboo chair. He was the image of serenity, but for the way his mouth tightened and twisted. “The Hazuki sisters are cruel. There is no beating around it. Yet while they serve as our main defense against sirens, the council will continue to nurse their needs, and raise them high. When that is the last place they should be.”

The sorceress’ power was something unheard of. They cared little for those they displaced, leveling land, brushing opposition aside like dead leaves on the road in their quest for improvement. They were irreverent, hungry, and marbled with madness. Nao’s worry compounded with each passing month. Yet the people revered them, and the king rewarded them.

There would come a day, Nao was certain, when they would turn on the capital, and nothing in Iwatobi would be strong enough stop them.

“But we do need ‘em.” Natsuya gritted out. “If the monsters ever go back on their word, and redouble their killing like people think they will.”
Nao paused.

“That may be. But when we fight evil with more evil, it doesn’t matter who wins at the end, does it? We all lose.”

Natsuya unscrambled the prince’s thoughts in his head, and the conclusion made his insides pitch.

“You think we should kill the sirens ourselves. Without the sisters.”

“If we did, the Hazukis would be rendered unessential. They would fall out of favor with the council, lose their privileges, and we could be rid of both threats.”

Objectively, Natsuya had to marvel at the outrageous boldness of the idea. Nao was nothing if not gutsy. It was an ideal order of events. The only problem being, sirens were impossible to do battle with. Soldiers needed their vision to fight, and one glimpse of the enemy spelled the end. In groups, the creatures’ screams drove armies mad, chasing men to their deaths in terror without even a dent in their own ranks. Natsuya knew intimately how hard it would be to stand up to them.

He turned to see Ikuya, splashing around with Asahi in the river, and his response was quick.

“I’m in.”

Nao’s eyes lifted, wide. “You’re…in? You don’t even know for what.”

“Don’t care.” Natsuya shrugged, but fixed the prince with a sure look. “They took my little brother once, and I ain’t giving him back.”

The prince’s mouth shaped to an “Oh.” Fondness quirked the corners of his eyes.

Squashing down embarrassment, Natsuya took a bite of pear. “So, what’s the plan?”

Nao chewed his lip. “I’m working on that.”

A couple of fifteen-year-olds against the oldest horrors on earth.

A willow leaf had blown into Nao’s hair, and Natsuya reached over without a second thought to pluck it out. Tossing it into the wind, an idea struck.

“The forest!” Natsuya surged forward. “The Guardians of Aomori could help, right? Get some of them out here!”

“It’s possible they’re powerful enough.” Nao pondered. “But they are beholden to the gods, not us. Aomori’s Guardians live by a purpose which transcends the squabbles of society, and pulling them into this mess could put that in jeopardy. They would not agree to leave the forest.”

Natsuya deflated with a grunt.

Ikuya and Asahi’s bubbling giggles derailed the silence as they raced up the beach. Asahi plopped down on the blanket, shaking river water out of his wild mop, getting it everywhere like a brat.

“Ikuya, may I ask you something?” Nao gave the siren a kindly smile.

“Yes!” Ikuya sat at attention, ever eager to be of help. “Anything!”

“I know you were young when you arrived here. But I’d like to know…aside from the Hazukis…was there anything the sirens were afraid of? Anything they avoided, or…warned you about?”
The boy’s whole body stiffened at the mention of his old home, and a wave of protectiveness drew Natsuya’s arm around his little brother.

“Afraid…?” His brow pinched in thought. “Dragons, I guess.”

“I see.” Nao resigned. “I suppose they would be. I apologize for asking.”

Ikuya’s shoulders sagged, and Natsuya ruffled his hair. He shot up. “Wait, Your Highness! There’s something else.”

The group folded in to listen.

With all of the attention on him, the boy shrank shyly, and leaned into his older brother. “I…never saw them myself, but there was one…more thing that the others didn’t like.”

____________________

One week later

Natsuya tugged open his shirt as he stormed across the bridge to Nao’s private study. A lacy waterfall threaded down the steep rock face beside the walkway, and he was infinitely thankful for its mist. Negura was sweltering in late summer, and the ride here from the bottom of Tottori Canyon had been arduous.

The great aspen door to the study was cracked ajar, and Natsuya let himself in. The room was plastered floor to ceiling with shelves of texts, making it feel far smaller than it was. Rounded lancet windows opened the out-facing wall, baring a harrowing view of sheer heights. Nao always forgot about them when he was in here; it was stuffy as hell. Natsuya nudged one open for some needed fresh air. A trail of Nao’s work was already laid out. The prince had pushed all of the chairs against the walls to make space for piles of books and scrolls on the rug.

“Took you long enough!” Nao’s head appeared over the stair railing on the second floor, and he hurried down, lifting the hem of his robe.

“It took me long enough!? Do you know far I—”

“Sit!”

Nao settled neatly onto a clear spot of the rug, motioning for Natsuya to join him. Rolling the stiffness out of his shoulders, he did. He thought he caught Nao’s gaze catch at his open collar for a brief moment. But he was probably mistaken.

A deep breath, and the prince began. “After speaking to Ikuya, I did some looking around.”

“Oh yeah?”

“This—” Nao heaved a stack of weathered leather books onto the floor between them. “—is the collected travel logs of Ryuugazaki Nobu.”

“Ryuugazaki?” Natsuya was sure he’d heard of the guy before. “Oh! The loony!”
Nao’s brow twitched with annoyance. “A tragically misunderstood mind. A few of his more outlandish ideas led to the dismissal of his entire body of work. He was one of the greatest explorers in the history of the known world.” He plucked a stack off the top, cracking it open to a page he’d marked with a feather. “And that’s lucky for us. Look. Look at this place here.”

He tapped a finger to one label on the map.

Natsuya squinted. “…Tokatsu.”

“Tokitsu.”

“Close.”

The prince shook his head, tracing lines over a paper sea. “Here is the country of Tokitsu. And here is Moyajima.”

Natsuya blinked, craning up to make sure he was catching it at the right angle. “That can’t be right. Who would live that close, are they fucking nuts?”

Nao pinched him for the swear. “It’s as true as any map might be; I’ve checked other sources.” His hands were jittering with excitement, flitting through fraying pages. “These people built their entire way of life around defending themselves against monsters. They’ve been there for centuries.”

There were drawings in Ryuugazaki’s journal. Houses, and boats, weapons, and people with “dark hair, and eyes in every hue of the sea.”

It was amazing, sure, but Natsuya was still at a loss. “What’ve they got to do with us?”

“I was waiting for you to ask!” Nao turned to another marked spot, breath short because he could barely contain himself. Cute. His long, feathery lashes fluttered as he scanned the journal.

“It says here that they can fight without seeing. So they are completely invulnerable to a siren’s glare.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Nao affirmed with vigor, and shuffled closer. Bright shadows climbed the walls of the study, as afternoon wore away, and the prince explained everything he’d found. Natsuya could hardly believe it. Saving the world from demons was a child’s storybook fantasy, but here in this sunny study room, Nao was planning it into reality.

“I want them to teach our army.” The prince closed his journal. “If they’ve fought off the sirens as a tiny nation, imagine what we could accomplish with sixty thousand blind Iwatobi soldiers. What we could do if sorcerers could learn it.”

Natsuya flared with eagerness. “We could be rid of the creatures forever!”

There was a problem, though. Examining the map again, Natsuya found one enormous, blaring, dream-dashing problem.

“They’re part of Samezuka.”

Nao had a response ready. “They live on the empire’s claim, technically. But they’re an isolated autarky. Not even on the imperial roster of managed territories.”

Natsuya’s brow furrowed. He’d heard things in lessons about the massive realm across the sea.
Firespitting beasts, wild oceans, and a ruthless ruler.

“Emperor Matsuoka will not start a war for this. I am certain of it,” Nao insisted. “He’s busy in the south, and Tokitsu’s land is not by any stretch, valuable. Gauging his past decisions, he won’t risk his men, and especially not his dragons over a hold so small and remote.”

“Besides,” Nao elaborated, “we’re not stealing his territory; we are offering protection, and borrowing his subjects. This is worth a try, Natsuya.”

“Well sure, but—”

“The monsters will be gone. We’ll be free of the Hazukis. You won’t have to give up Ikuya. What happened to your family would never happen to another anywhere, again.”

An eagle called out over the canyon from somewhere outside. Light bounced up from the floor, and illuminated Nao’s face amidst glowing specks of dust. His hair was disheveled, body fragile and frazzled—but every inch of him radiated hope. Natsuya found himself oddly breathless.

“…Yeah. Th-that’s…” Natsuya stuttered. “I like…the way that sounds.”

Somewhere in that warm calm, Natsuya felt a swell of something he wasn’t quite sure what to do with.

_____________________

Their ships docked in Whale Bay on a shivery winter morning.

“You sure you’re gonna be ok?”


“Pretty, like always.”

“I meant do I look presentable, you rake.” The prince flicked Natsuya’s arm with a finger. “We need to make a good impression here. Much depends on it.”

“Alright.” Natsuya resigned. “Then you look like a land-loving royal who’s just spent a month on the water, never quite got his sea legs, and probably hasn’t had a decent night’s sleep in days.”

“You—!”

“But you made the trip out here. You’re walking on your own two legs to meet these people, in the hopes that we can all win ourselves a brighter future together. If they’re anything like they’ve been in their letters, they’ll get that. And they probably won’t care if you’ve got a few hairs out of place.”

Nao blinked. His drawn face relaxed, and curled into a grateful smile that made Natsuya want to lock the cabin door, and steal a few more moments for themselves.

“Your Highness!” The ship captain shouted from outside.

“Thanks, Natsuya.” Nao nodded, threw open the door, and ducked through it.
There was little fanfare. *None,* actually. Only a small company of soldiers was waiting at the dock for them, standing at attention in full armor. The broadest of them approached with a stiff bow.

“Welcome, Prince Serizawa. Please follow me.”

Natsuya trailed close behind Nao at the head of their entourage as they walked, taking in the bay. A smooth beach was rolled out from the harbor, sand clawing at the base of an enormous, sloped stone seawall. Its bricks were dark like the cliffs around it, the battlement stained white by gulls. Menacing, fanged warden gods were carved into the surface, snarling outward at the ocean. At the far end of the stripe of sand, raised out of tide’s reach, was an enclosed pit. Natsuya couldn’t see the bottom, but the sides were charred black.

"That's for getting rid of them." One of the warriors supplied. "The dead ones."


Waves crashed behind them, restless. Natsuya prickled with the urge to be on the other side of that wall.

Their escorts ushered them through a portcullis and up the long, uphill road to the lord’s council hall. It was, understandably, rather far from the beach. Streets were lined with simple, sturdy wooden buildings on stone frames, topped with thatch. Smoke from the smith shops, and the earthy scent of pinewood swirled in the briny air. Citizens gathered along the roadside, or leaned out of their windows to catch a glimpse of the foreign visitors. Ryuugazaki had been right about their looks, at least. *Striking,* Natsuya thought.

He cracked a grin, and waved at some of them to stir the atmosphere; the pressured silence was making him anxious.

Blue-green banners swung from heavy painted arches, emblazoned with a swimming whale shark. It was a peaceful beast. Gentle, and steady.

Sentries greeted them at the lord’s hall, and showed Nao inside. They drifted under thick pine beams that lofted the sloping roof over a low table. Fire in the hearth burned rich and warm behind the elderly man seated there, flanked by stern officers and advisors.

"Prince of Iwatobi," the lord rumbled. "Do sit."

Nao sank into a cushion on the floor, and Natsuya dropped down beside him. There were no pleasantries to fuss over. The lord launched straight into discussion. Natsuya did his best to follow along, but the conversation barreled ahead of him, and he found himself lost in the painted murals.

Deliberations had dropped to a drone. It might have been an hour, maybe two.

Suddenly, Natsuya felt his prince’s hand under the table, groping for his. He snapped to attention, and took it firmly.

“Not once has any great nation offered to stand with us.” The lord’s face was sunken and shadowed, but flickering with interest. “So I ask, Prince of Iwatobi: Why so suddenly, have you?”
Every pair of ocean eyes was turned on Nao, and Natsuya felt sweat bead at his temple under the constricting scrutiny. Nao didn’t miss a beat.

“Cruelty paired with power is the enemy of all sovereign people. It is the easy thing to cower before it, or to slip behind it to allay suffering and death. But, my good lord…” Nao’s hand squeezed. “I would rather not.”

The crackle of firewood was deafening.

Natsuya was certain he could hear bones creak as the lord unlaced his fingers. All present watched his gnarled hands curl around a letter blade, and score a shallow cut into his calloused palm. He opened a lacquered box, and removed a small block of wood. One press to his red palm, then the paper. And the alliance between Iwatobi and Tokitsu was sealed in blood.

Nao’s pulse jumped in Natsuya’s grip.

At length, the elder reclined. “You should have a look around, guests, if you are not too tired from the journey.”

“Not at all,” Nao lied.

“Good.” The lord motioned across the table. “Yamazaki, if you would. Both of you.”

One of the younger officers rose from his seat and bowed. A tall man, with a bear pelt draped over broad shoulders.

“Yes, lord.”

General Yamazaki was a mountainous presence—tanned rough-hewn angles, with a dark beard, and arms that could crack skulls. Beside him, his wife and lieutenant was no less intimidating. She was strong and elegant like sculpted ice, with a single silken lily pinned in her hair. She hadn’t said a word since entering the longhouse, glassing in pale blue over every one of the Iwatobi soldiers. She framed the doorway, and ushered Nao’s retinue outside. Natsuya rejoiced to feel the salt breeze again.

“So. You want to know about the sirens?” General Yamazaki took the lead with a leisurely stride, making for a lookout above the city. His voice was rich with command. “They attack when it is dark. The light of their eyes can be seen best.”

“They are fast in the water, slower ashore.” He dipped to make sure the boys were listening. “Slower, but not slow. Don’t forget it.”

The air was still dense, after their arduous talk. It wasn’t mistrust, Natsuya thought, but distance.

Picking up where the general left off, his lieutenant continued. “You will sense their lust for humans like a chill in your bones. The more there are, the colder it bites.”

“And no cold delves deeper than that of their leader,” the general supplied. “Some call him Lord of Demons, though he goes by other names. He is smarter, more powerful, older. He seldom risks a trip here. Maybe once in seven years, you will see him. But when he appears…the night will be long.”

Yamazaki pushed up the sleeve of his robe to bare a swarthy scar that ran from wrist to elbow. “I’ve fought with him only once. And he would have been my end, if not for her.” He tossed a quick look
of endearment at his wife. “So prince, know that we will have to fell that devil, in one way or another.”

The group passed a fenced-off lot where a class of youngsters was running practice in the sand. They were lined up in staggered rows, each one poised with a wooden sword in one hand, and a blindfold over their eyes, at the center of a drawn circle.

“When we train your men, it will be as you see here,” the lieutenant explained. “Without our sight, we stay in the middle of our circle. Anything that steps inside, is killed.”

Natsuya watched the kids in their lesson. They looked a few years his junior, dressed all in blue. With each barely audible ring of an instructor’s bell, they swung their weapons around, following the chime, from whichever direction. None of them could see where their teachers stood, but they were getting it right, every time.

“Look at that one there.” The general bent over Nao, sweeping an arm out to one of the students: a lanky boy at the far end of the yard. “He’s very good. Fast, form is strong. No hesitation.”

Yamazaki paused, and cleared his throat.

“…That’s my son.”

“Ah.” Nao pursed his lip in amusement. “Is that so?”

One of the other soldiers cut in with a snicker. “Careful, prince. You shouldn’t ask Yamazaki about his boy. He will never stop bragging.”

Roaring laughter shook the group of officers. A smile split the general’s face—wide, and warm. The storm clouds dispersed.

“It’s true, it’s true.” He scratched the scruff on his cheek, embarrassed. “Come. There’s more to show you.”

Mirth lingered for the rest of the morning. At dusk, Nao and Natsuya were invited back to the longhouse for a celebratory dinner. Tokitsu’s warriors were far more sociable over food (Natsuya had no idea there were so many ways to prepare mackerel), and a sort of clear rice wine poured from cedar barrels. Even the kids were allowed alcohol, which took Nao by surprise.

Yamazaki rumbled with laughter at his appall. “Do they not let young ones drink liquor in Iwatobi?”

“They certainly do not.” Nao took a polite sip, fighting a wince.

“I gave my son his first steel knife for his eighth birthday.” The general raised his cup in a friendly toast before draining it one gulp. “So I trust him with a little wine.”

The lieutenant followed her husband into the crowd. “I trust Sousuke with his drink more than I do you.”

Night deepened. The light was fuzzy, and everything was far funnier than it probably should’ve been. Natsuya floated his gaze around the longhouse until he landed on a pair of girls, and a boy about his age, and wow those eyes were gorgeous…

Nao blocked the view with his tired frown. “Whatever you are about go do, don’t.”

Natsuya grumbled, and threw his palms up in surrender. Peripherally, he admitted that he might’ve
had a cup of rice wine too many.

“Fine.”

Courage waxing, he leaned in close. The exasperation on Nao’s face fell away with the distance between them. “Can I flirt with you?”

Nao’s complexion flooded with color, and Natsuya was not expecting that. The blush looked good on his soft cheeks. Inviting, even. His best friend, with his silver hair down, and a coat wrapped around his shoulders, was the most alluring person he’d ever seen. Natsuya had been waiting to get shoved, or scolded, or chided—not...this. His breath faltered, and his mind blanked. He didn’t get flustered; that was for other people, what the hell—

They blinked at each other, two birds caught together on the same perch. Natsuya was never one to overthink, but suddenly he was immobilized beneath an unwelcome barrage of doubts. He could kiss the prince. He was so close, Nao seemed willing—had he always been willing?

But if he was wrong… there was everything to lose.

_Nao was royalty, and he was just a dumb kid from the docks._

Drum beats shook the walls, and the pair jerked apart. Thankfully, the song was loud enough to drown out the hammer of Natsuya’s heart against his ribs.

Natsuya and Nao spent the week in Tokitsu. They saw no more of the Yamazakis, but other arrangements had been made. Each morning, the Iwatobi boys rose before dawn, ambling their way down to the beach to observe the soldiers’ daily routines. As a future knight, Natsuya was invited to get a head start. He was handed a staff and a strip of cloth for his eyes, and ushered, stumbling, into a circle of his own.

Fending off sacks of straw without looking was a great deal harder than the warriors made it seem. By midday, his arms and shoulders ached terribly. He supposed there was nothing but more of this to come. Even so, when he lifted the blindfold, the thrill he saw in Nao’s face was worth the bruises ten times over.

“How is it so far?” The prince handed him a towel.

“It’s good!” Natsuya swiped it over his damp forehead. “Nothing pumps your pride quite like knowing a bunch of ten-year-olds could kick your ass with their eyes closed.”

Nao laughed. Doubled over, and really laughed, and it seemed to Natsuya like the rest of the world silenced itself to listen.

Tokitsu’s warriors were grown from their very foundations with a spiritual focus that was difficult to grasp from the outside. It was an awareness of the body, the earth, wind, and water that ran far deeper than a blindfold and a few lucky swings. A week under their tutelage had barely grazed the surface of their arts, and Natsuya was sure that only one who understood these things completely could teach them. There were less than seven years left to learn, and he hoped it would be enough time.

Still, Natsuya had to pinch himself. This was all _happening_. Nao had woven the future in the hole of his study up on the cliffs, and now they had a real alliance. Freedom was waiting for them on the horizon.
On the final night of their stay, the Yamazakis returned with a small company. Both of them were among the soldiers, instructors, and ambassadors selected to depart for Iwatobi.

“General. Lieutenant.” Nao bowed. “It appears we will be seeing a bit more of each other in the months to come.”

Yamazaki boomed with laughter. “We only just found out ourselves!”

Nao and the general bubbled in pleasant conversation. Soundlessly, the lieutenant stepped aside to let them talk, standing watchful beside Natsuya. He saw his chance to ask the question that had been nagging at him since he first saw that map. Subtle, he cleared his throat to draw her attention.

She raised an eyebrow to let him know he had it.

“Why do you stay here, so close to them? You could live anywhere.”

He honestly had no idea what kind of reaction that would yield, but of all the people he’d met here, the lieutenant seemed most likely to give him an answer he could understand. She searched his face with thoughtful intensity.

“The demons attack your ships, do they not? And your shores?”

“Well, yeah—”

“And yet you live far away.”

She folded her arms—amused, of all things. “They don’t care for land, knight. Or riches, or anything else. They come to take from you something far more valuable. I think you know.”

He really did.

“So you can run forever,” she explained, “or you can dig your heels into the sand, and fight for your home.”

Natsuya felt a bud of understanding flower in his chest. His hand was perched at the grip of his sword before he realized it was there. The lieutenant noticed his reflex with the hint of a smirk.

Nao and the general chuckled at something, and roped the pair back.

“Our ship departs in a few hours.” Nao offered. “If you would like to leave a bit early, General, we would be honored to host your family aboard.”

Yamazaki paused to consider. His piercing green gaze wandered up the hillside, smoothing over the sheer scape of his homeland.

“I…would like another few days to say our goodbye to Tokitsu,” He answered, threading his fingers between his wife’s. “We will go with the rest, on the second ship.”

“I understand.” Nao proffered his hand as a show of conviction, and the general engulfed it in his own. “Next time we meet, Natsuya and I shall be happy to show you our shore.”

The Yamazakis bowed low. “We look forward to it.”

There was that mile-wide grin once more.

“May the sea sing kindly to you on your voyage home.”
The second ship did not leave Whale Bay.

Maps and parchment littered the cabin floor in brittle leaves. Ryuugazaki’s journal was left open, its timeworn pages the last record of a city swallowed by hell.

Natsuya slouched on the rug beside his prince, against the foot of his bed.

“Do not tell Ikuya,” Nao’s voice was pulled thread-thin. “He doesn’t need to know.”

Natsuya thought the same.

Outside, the sun was sinking beneath the waves. Silence settled, leaden and cold as a graveyard.

“The Emperor killed his own subjects.” Nao said, more to the book in his hands than to Natsuya. Wetness was welling in his vacant eyes. “I didn’t think—We could not have predicted he would do that.”

Natsuya wished he could come up with something to lift Nao’s broken spirit, but his own was drowned at the bottom of the well.

“It couldn’t have been our fault,” Nao choked. His voice cracked as tears spilled over. “Gods, Natsuya tell me it wasn’t our fault.”

Natsuya opened his mouth, but just couldn’t find the words. With nothing else to offer, Natsuya heaved his arms around his best friend, and pulled him close. Nao crumbled, and wailed into his shirt.

They hunched over the sprawling nest of paper as shadow crawled up the walls.

Years trickled by in the shade of Tottori Canyon.
Natsuya watched as King Serizawa withered, pouring his faith into the three sorceress sisters. If given the time and the means, there was seemingly nothing they could not do. Kyo led her two siblings, testing the very limits of magic, as the trio was fashioned into Iwatobi’s most fearsome instruments of defense.

Tokitsu’s destruction had left Nao hollow. His plan had failed, their efforts dashed, the greatest warriors in the world were gone forever. They were no closer than they’d ever been to freedom from the sirens, or the encroaching hand of Hazuki Kyo. Quietly, Nao had retreated from the court, and his role as crown prince. The farther he sank, the higher they rose.

Nineteen years old, and freshly appointed captain of a young squadron, Natsuya crashed through the castle greenhouse door. It was evening, and insects hummed in the thick of trees beneath slabs of sheer crystal. Nao tended to a bed of wilting jasmine.

“He’s lost it!” Natsuya shouted. “The king’s lost it.”

Refusing the distraction, Nao pulled on his gloves. “Not as sharp as he was, no. Is that all—”

“Your grandfather lost the warship. Tsuguro is missing. Just gone from the harbor like it was never even there, and he doesn’t care!”

It was muggy inside the covered garden. Flowers were closed, and the verdure formed dusky walls all around them. Nao stretched, and grasped the base of a withering shrub, but didn’t pull.

“He gave it to them. I can’t prove anything, but your grandfather gave the Hazukis that ship. Now they’re hiding it, doing who knows what with it.”

“Not only that.” Natsuya pushed further into the greenhouse—deeper into Nao’s space. “Asahi saw orders his family filled a few months ago for steel plating on the inside of its hold. Why the fuck would you put steel plating on the inside? What are they doing, Nao?”

The prince made no move.

“Take the crown,” Natsuya pleaded. “Iwatobi needs you to.”

“We’ve been over this, Natsuya. Even if I wanted the crown, I would not deserve it.” He pulled his sleeves back over his wrists, and resigned to the rear door.

Natsuya slammed himself in front of it. “Bullshit. The you I used to know wouldn’t just sit back and let this happen.”

Nao’s expression pinched with bitterness.

“The ‘me’ you knew was a stupid little boy with his face wedged in a book, who thought he knew the world in scraps of paper. He didn’t. And thousands lost their lives for it.”

Heartbreak hung on every word. It was a weight they bore together.

Crickets warbled from the brush, ticking by the seconds.

The moment was evaporating, and Natsuya despaired.

“Yeah. Yeah, they’re gone,” he conceded. “But those people stood for something, Nao.” Now that he’d started, he couldn’t stop. “Maybe evil was greater—maybe it’s always had the upper hand, but
that didn’t stop them from fighting back. And they believed in you. If we give up, then what the hell did they die for?”

Shock and remorse flooded Nao’s face. He smoothed it over; it was frightening how quickly he could do that now—and retreated into the shade. “Leave me.”

“Nao—”

“I need to be alone.”

Natsuya reeled from the sting of the dismissal. He slipped back into the easy role of Captain with a stiff bow.

“Hey, Nao. Don’t…” Halting at the door, he stole a last look at the prince. “Don’t call yourself stupid.”

Ten days later saw Natsuya in his office, penning a report by the glow of a lantern. Haru was curled up in the chair beside him next to the window. He hadn’t spoken to Nao since their dispute in the greenhouse. Guilt was gnawing at his thoughts. He’d sworn to himself that he wouldn’t dredge up Tokitsu in his plea to the prince. But Nao had brought it to the table first, and Natsuya was getting desperate. He rested his quill, and sat back. Gods, he was tired.

Footsteps thundered in the corridor outside, and Natsuya recognized the distinct sound of ceramic shattering. A muffled, rushed apology later, and Asahi was at his doorway, ecstatic.

“Hey, peewee.” Natsuya gave him a weak smile.

“NATSUYA!!” Asahi bulled inside. “Nao did it! He accepted the crown!”

Nao was in the center of a small crowd, answering his advisors when Natsuya skidded to a stop at the base of the throne room stairs. The new king caught sight of him, and the shift in his expression was subtle, but immediate. Natsuya could read “Please excuse me a moment.” on his lips, and then he was moving downward.

“Might I see you alone, Captain?”

Nao shut the waiting room doors, snapping the brass lock, and turning around. Slowly, like the break of dawn over the canyon heights, his face warmed into a blinding grin. Not the pleasant mask he always wore, but a real, barefaced smile.

There was no hesitation in the embrace Natsuya wrapped around Nao’s narrow shoulders. They laughed into each other’s ears and squeezed the other tighter.

“I knew it.” Natsuya was pretty sure he was crying. “I knew you would do it. You’re too brave not to.”

The king loosened his arms, and shifted back. “You always did have a strange way with words.” They searched each other, finding something they had known about for entirely too long.

“And…” Nao framed Natsuya’s cheeks with steady hands. “In the spirit of being brave—” He pulled his captain down for a kiss.
Nao tasted of tea, and mint leaves. Natsuya couldn’t say when it happened, or how, or why it took him all this damn time—but he loved this man. It was such a profoundly simple thing to admit. Nao’s lips gave easily, and his hands were divinely gentle, just like Natsuya imagined they might be.

He pushed into his king for more.

Natsuya placed the moonstone crown on Nao’s head, to the cheers of all Iwatobi. The crown was a thing of unworldly beauty—a twisting branch of blessed wood from Aomori, wound with silver, and glittering with blue gems. It fit perfectly, like the ancient spirits had made it solely for him.

Their fight from there was not an easy one. Nao’s grandfather had set the odds staunchly against them.

Soon after Nao ascended, the Hazukis appointed themselves royal sorcerers, floating around the castle like ghosts, lovely as they were treacherous. Outwardly, the trio was a model of loyalty. But inside the corridors of Iwatobi Castle, Nao knew they were tracing his every step, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Nao fought his battles with them in whispers, bloodied secrets, bribes, and letters—all passed behind satiny smiles. It was a dance Natsuya could not hope to keep pace with. So he stayed close to his lover with an eye over one shoulder, and hand closed over his weapon.

Time whittled to a sliver, then ran out.

Natsuya bade his little brother goodbye at dawn on the last morning of summer. He had never known a harder day. Through the blur of tears, he watched a ship carry Ikuya out of Tottori Harbor. Back to a den of monsters, and a life in the murk. From the deck they could see three shapes with honey-colored hair. Hazuki Kyo was elegant in indigo, her smirk like venom spiked with victory.

Nao’s heart was breaking with Natsuya’s, and they held themselves together by the desperate grip of the other’s hand.

His father’s last wish was torture echoing in his ears.

*I was supposed to keep him with me.*

______________________________________________

Ikuya returned.

In a heaven-sent blessing, Natsuya’s little brother came bounding back to him in the castle courtyard one afternoon with open arms, overjoyed. The sirens had released him, he could *stay*. And all for the bravery of his old friend, Haru. The other shoreborn had run back to Aomori—to his human lover. A holy guardian and a sea demon; it was hard to imagine a more unlikely pair. Natsuya owed that man
everything. He had never wanted to meet someone more.

Though he’d only been away half a year, Ikuya was changed. Watching his friend face down the Lord of Demons had ignited something in him Natsuya could see burning, and spreading like brushfire. He and Asahi prepared to set sail, and find the missing warship, when all prior missions had failed. Letting him go was gutting to the core. But Ikuya was nearly a man now, and the fight was as much his as anyone’s. The siren and the shipwright left Negura like heroes beneath a gloomy veil.

The pair was gone nearly a year. One evening, shivering wet with river water, the boys staggered up from the waterways of Iwatobi Castle to tell Nao and Natsuya everything. They’d found the warship, and the hideout of the Hazukis.

And they knew now that for all of their efforts, the trio could in no way be contained.

“They are going to kill me one day, love.” Nao’s eyes were empty, searching Natsuya from across the pillow in bed. “When they’ve had their fun with me.”

He ran his fingertips along Natsuya’s collarbone with a sad kind of relish. “It might be next week. It might be next year. But they will tire of this game, and they will kill me.”

Natsuya hissed, and took his lover’s hand firmly in his own. “I’ll never let that happen.”

Nao shook his head. “It will. And when it does, I want you to stand aside.”

“Oh like hell I—”

“Please,” Nao whispered. “When I’m gone, there needs to be someone left, Natsuya.”

In their most desperate hours, news arrived from across the sea. The rightful ruler of Samezuka had come of age. From the rumors that floated into port, he was an odd one—beloved by the common people, an outspoken opponent of slavery and reckless conquest, sympathetic to suffering in a way his uncle was unequivocally not. Nao brightened with each new piece they gathered about him. The Matsuokas had dragons; they answered to no one. The Emperor of Samezuka did not need to care to be obeyed. Yet this boy did. His voice had fallen on deaf ears in his uncle’s court, but it reached Iwatobi on springtime sails anyway—a spark of hope that Nao fanned into a fire.

“I should like to meet him,” Nao decided. “this…Matsuoka Rin.”

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The view was majestic from Nao’s guest bedroom in Samezuka Palace.

All the world shared the same sky, yet it was clear that the sun loved this land best. It was built up from the ashes of enemies—raw, untamed, and on fire. From their window, Natsuya could see the red mountains, and glimpse the valley beyond them: an unknowable wild with which all had been
Occasionally a roar or brick-rattling screech would tear out over the wall. Dragons swooped low, passing over the sun like the deadliest vultures. It was an odd thing to witness. Citizens here did not so much as glance upward, so accustomed were they to living in the shade of beasts. Their manners were coarse, they watched battles to the death for mere entertainment, and bared their skin without a drop of shame.

Their new ruler had flung himself from a cliff, scorched a kraken, torn off his shirt, and claimed the throne for himself. A stunt like that would have had him branded a lunatic in Iwatobi. Here, the people loved him all the more for it. There was a brutal confidence in the blood of this place that came with its undisputed dominance.

A late morning breeze whispered over Natsuya’s naked back where he was stretched out on the bed like a housecat. He had risen early to see to his men, borrowing the palace’s training facilities to keep them on their toes, even abroad. After, he returned to his king and lay himself out to steal a nap. Sleep still clouded over his consciousness, and he rolled over with a groan.

Nao was there beside him—dressed and reading. He must have gone about his errands, and sneaked back into bed, just to sit like this, fingers carding through Natsuya’s tawny curls.

Half his face still stuffed into his pillow, Natsuya curled a grin. “Morning,” he said for the second time.


“You weren’t calling me lazy last night.”

Nao slipped gracefully off the bed. “Why do you think I let you nap so long?”

He was in a sky-blue robe Emperor Rin had given him, and doing his best to wrap it tighter. At length he resigned, and let the front fall open with a sigh.

“The Matsuokas are suspicious of us, Natsuya. I was afraid this would happen.”

“Rin seems to like you enough.” Natsuya heaved himself up and stretched, smug at the way Nao traced him with his eyes unreservedly.

“No. Not him.” The king pulled his fine hair back, reaching for a tie to keep it in place. “His sister. The princess does not dole out trust and friendship as her older brother does. They knew this. It’s why they made a target of her betrothed the very night we arrived.”

A trip here had been a gamble. Far from the kingdom, they were willing prey walking into the dragon’s maw. This was not how their courtship with Samezuka was supposed to play out.

And, most troubling of all, the Hazukis were missing.

A festering unease subsided in Natsuya’s gut. “What should we do?”

“We’re going to use this opportunity to do what we came here for,” the king concluded. “While there is still time.”

Natsuya dragged an anxious hand over his mouth. Nao was at the window, suddenly stiff with shock.
“What is it?”

“Come here. Look.”

Sidling up the king, he traced the man’s gaze down to a raised bailey, where the Imperial Guard was holding their training. One of the men was fending off two others, alone in the center of a wide ring of grass. He would dart out, forward, behind, twirling his bamboo staff in a perfect circle to keep his space clear of attackers.

Natsuya seized the sill in disbelief.

“No way...”

The crack of blades clashing, whether wooden or steel, was a tune that sang like home to Sousuke.

His second opponent crashed to his knees with a practice sword steady at his chin. Sousuke backed off to let him stand. He’d missed this far too much.

Truthfully, he hadn’t come across muscle this tough in a long while. His back and arms stung with fresh bruises. The famed “Black Pearls of Samezuka” were the best soldiers in the entire realm, and it seemed he would have to earn his reputation here, too. That was fine. He was always game for a challenge.

Seijuuro walked Sousuke to the practice yard that morning with a familial arm slung over his shoulders.

“They’re a good bunch of boys!” the Captain barked. “Most of ‘em. If the rotten seeds give you grief when I’m not around, come to me, and I’ll set ’em straight.”

“I appreciate it.” Sousuke paused. “Thanks again...Sir.”

Seijuuro cackled, and thumped him on the back hard enough to knock the air out of him. “They’ll know better than to bully the Captain’s little brother.”

He searched around for Momo before recognition set in, warm like a hearth in winter.

Sousuke stalked around his ring as the remaining rival lumbered forth.

“When did the Guard become a damned orphanage for foreign ringnecks from the pits?” the man gibed, just loud enough for him alone to hear.

Sousuke supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that a few resented him. The Imperial Guard was a gilded group of people hailing from Samezuka’s oldest elite families. Most were younger sons, and a few daughters—seeking esteem where they lacked inheritance. They’d undergone years of training before donning their black robes. Yet Sousuke was given a place among them upon his arrival.

He decidedly left out that he’d already impersonated them for the sake of Kisumi’s contraband.

“We may be the cream of the crop, but mainly what we’re for is looking tough, and keeping our mouths shut.”

Seijuuro said that with a laugh, but it made complete sense. The Captain had been only eighteen
when Akira sent him to kill Sousuke. It was assassin work, however you sliced it. The Black Pearls were, above all, the Emperor’s men.

Though for his part, Sousuke thought with a jump of his heartbeat—he was also the Emperor’s man.

There was a rumbling from somewhere in the clouds, vibrating through the stone of the enclosure—a flex of mighty bones, and full wings. Shadow glided across the yard, and Sousuke shot upright. Tora was coasting over the wall with Rin on her back.

Exhilaration shocking up to the tips of his ears, Sousuke whirled around to face his captain. Seijuuro tossed him a dismissive wave.

“Get outta here!”

Sousuke nearly toppled the rack of bamboo staffs in his hurry to leave. Rin was flying in hawk circles above before swerving out of sight. Following, Sousuke dashed up the long flight of stairs, taking them two in a stride. A gust blew his bangs back at the top of the rampart. Tora wove as close to the wall as she dared, and Sousuke ran alongside. Rin was riding without the saddle, the madman.

Firming one arm at the juncture of Tora’s wing, he pushed up onto his feet to stand.

Sousuke had to remind himself that Rin knew what he was doing, or he would worry himself into a knot.

“Hey, handsome!” Rin waved with his free hand in a theatric arch.

*Showoff.* Sousuke huffed a laugh, and picked up speed. For a few perfect seconds, they were exactly in sync.

Then the dragon pulled ahead, and reared back to land on the platform beside a guardhouse. She bent low so Rin could slide off, and then he was sprinting over the walkway.

This was probably going to hurt a little. Sousuke’s pure joy swept away his capacity to care.

Rin leaped into his open arms, knocking his breath out in a rush. Sousuke used their momentum to spin him around before setting him on his feet, and lunging down to meet his lips, hard. They pulled apart when their lungs burned for air, and spots crept behind their eyelids.

“How’s your morning been?” Sousuke panted.

“Good.” Rin cupped his cheeks, his palms an icy blessing on Sousuke’s hot face. “About to be better.” Gigging, he arched up on his toes again to drag Sousuke down for another kiss—less urgent this time; a playful *I missed you.*

Sousuke bent an elbow around him, and dipped him backward. Rin’s laugh fluttered into his mouth. He didn’t think he’d ever been happier.

“You’re freezing.”

Snowflakes powdered Rin’s shoulders, and matted his hair—souvenirs from a joyride through the clouds. His skin was cool and goose-bumped. Sousuke hugged him closer, making the most of his battle-won heat, rubbing life into Rin’s arms.
Purring with approval, Rin snuggled into him, and let Sousuke warm his cheeks with wet kisses. He was wearing his riding pants this morning, and Sousuke made a mental note to thank the gods for it later. The smooth leather clung to Rin’s legs, leaving little to the imagination. He nuzzled into Rin’s neck, and dared to let his hand drift down and appreciate the firmness of his thigh. Rin hummed, and hugged him tighter.

Sousuke could live forever like this— kissing Rin good night, and waking up in love. Watching his emperor take to the air with a smile and a wave. And when Rin touched back down to earth, Sousuke would be here for him, always.

“Sou—mmph—Sousuke. Close your eyes a second!”

Sousuke did, at once. He waited for the plush press of Rin’s lips on his, only to have something else pushed into his mouth.

Rin held a hot steamed bun between them, grinning wide. “Early lunch?”

Plucking the bun out of his mouth, Sousuke turned it over. It was round, shaped with pink dough, the top branded with “凛” inside of the imperial crest.

“I went into the market.” Rin was adorably giddy. “The lady at that stand I like made these in my honor. Isn’t that cute?” he effused. “It’s pork! With a little cherry in the bread. Eat it before it gets cold!”

“Amazing,” Sousuke crowed. “You’ve got a pork bun named after you, Rin. I think you’re starting your reign off completely right.”

“Tsss.” Rin nudged Sousuke with a knee. “I’m gonna ask them to make one named after you. One of those long rolls.”

“You couldn’t flatter me more.”

Sousuke knew that little things like this made Rin profoundly happy. Gestures as small as sakura steamed buns were reminders that people thought of him. When he floundered for his own faith, he would remember that somewhere, they were glad he was their ruler.

“So, what do you think?” Snug against Sousuke’s shoulder, Rin accepted a bite. They walked over the battlement with their arms wrapped comfortably around each other’s waists.

“It’s really good.” Sousuke swallowed. “I like the cherry. You sort of don’t expect it to be sweet.” He brushed a crumb from Rin’s chin. “But it is.”

Sousuke could never tell if saying things like that would earn him a sock on the arm, or an affectionate smile—but for the latter, it was worth the risk. Rin blushed prettily, and pushed in close again.

Servants and guests passed them in the palace halls, stealing looks at the Emperor and his mysterious new suitor. Sousuke had assumed Rin would want to keep their relationship a secret, but from the very start, Rin had no such intentions. He was open, uncaring, and, if Sousuke could afford a lapse in humility, showing him off.

Six days had passed since the sorceress trio had broken into Rin’s chamber. They had not been seen since. Sousuke couldn’t decide if their absence was a relief, or a warning. The needling fear kept him on edge.
Sousuke noticed that Tora flew low for a while after Rin dismounted, as though guarding him until he’d made it inside. When her partner wasn’t looking, she would meet Sousuke’s gaze until he answered her with a nod.

“I’ll take it from here.”

She whistled and streaked away, headed for the valley.

“There she goes,” Rin drawled.

A few of the younger dragons around the city grouped together to follow her home under her wings.

“We should go back there together soon.” Balmy wind ruffled Rin’s hair, his smile like summer.

“Make a day out of it.”

Sousuke took another thoughtful bite of the bun. “Sure. Maybe that asshole black dragon can chomp my head off for real this time.”

Rin’s brow lifted with humor. “Tamo?!” He giggled. “That happened once! He was fucking with you. He’d never have eaten you in front of me.”

Sousuke snorted, and rolled his eyes. “Good to know.”

Laughter drained into a sigh. Rin turned outward, his shoulders tensed.

“…Rin?”

“Actually, he…” The grip on Sousuke’s waist tightened. “He’s gone. Tamo had a fight a few years back, with one of the others. He was always getting into fights. It was with this big, aggressive older one trying to hassle Tora over a kill.”

“Oh…” Sousuke slowed, and observed his lover closely. He knew how Rin must have felt. The dragons were like another family to him. They were his subjects, friends, siblings—losing even one of them was painful.

“Did he…win?”

“Yeah. But it cost him,” Rin spilled. “Dragons are like cats when they get hurt. They run and hide so the others can’t see them weak. He flew out somewhere, and we never found him.”

Rin paused in thought as they neared the foot of the stairwell. “Tora wanted him as a mate. It was really…kind of a tough time for us. For a bunch of reasons.”

Sousuke tugged Rin closer at his hip. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Maybe he’ll come back someday.”

Relenting, Rin leaned gratefully into Sousuke’s shoulder.

“You did.”

Conversation lulled as they finished the food, and Rin led them between the tall, sunny colonnades of the eastern wing. It had been a good while since Rin thought about Tora’s lost mate. Her quiet grief had wrung his heart dry. Both of them had all but given up on happiness then. But clinging to
hope was not a vain endeavor in the end. He relished the sturdy warmth of Sousuke at his side. The privacy of their bedroom was suddenly a carnal pull.

Out on a platform across the bailey, Rin caught sight of Sango, returning from a morning flight. She barely made a sound, touching down atop the wall. Her rider dismounted.

Matsuoka Akira was now a stony specter in the halls of Samezuka Palace. He attended every council meeting, said little, and left the chamber before Rin could so much as look his way to request a moment with him. Not that Rin was eager to have that exchange. The longer he stalled, the darker it loomed. He knew the reasons his uncle would give—why he’d done those horrible things, what he thought of Rin’s claim. And Rin simply didn’t want to hear them.

Smoothly, Rin skirted around, and led Sousuke away from the edge before he could catch a glimpse of the former emperor. He knew he was putting it off, building a bank, stymying the flood. Soon, he would have to find his answers—for his own future, and now for Sousuke’s.

*Just not right now.*

Sousuke was peering sideways at him with worry knitting his features.

“Rin, is something wrong, you seem—*aaghh!*

Rin tickled his fingers behind the shell of Sousuke’s ear, making him twitch, and shiver. It was quickly becoming a favorite spot to tease.

Thankfully distracted, Sousuke dropped the questioning, and fell back into step.

They hadn’t gone two paces before Rin felt the answering trace of a finger up his spine. He arched with a tiny cry, drawing curious stares from several passing maids. Sousuke just kept eating, eyes ahead. It was *on.*

Clicking his tongue, Rin reached around Sousuke’s wide shoulders, leaning into it—and squeezed his chest once before dropping back.

Sousuke stuttered. He turned, brow raised, and lips parted.

*“Hee hee~”* Rin sang through a toothy smirk.

A pair of guardsmen sauntered by, then another chamber maid. Every pair of eyes was another boost of anticipation. Rin’s body was charged with it, and ready.

But not ready enough for the quick smack on his ass. He squeaked, and scowled at Sousuke laughing through the last of his lunch.

Snarling, he cast around for any passers-by. They were nearing the royal apartments, and the corridor was mostly empty. It was an easy track to the bedroom, and Rin played to win.

“Sousuke…”

“Yes?”

Rin snapped down, and cupped his lover’s crotch. He had half a second to see Sousuke gasp,
jolt, before tearing down the hall for the stairwell.

That absolute devil.

Sousuke sprinted after Rin’s echoing laughter.

They stumbled backward through the nearest door, and Sousuke barely managed to flip the latch over before he was hauled inside by the front of his shirt, and claimed with a fierce kiss.

Rin had pulled him into one of the empty bedrooms. It was somewhat like Rin’s in style, though smaller, and sparsely furnished. In lieu of a balcony, the chamber was rimmed with opulent windows, some of them stained in reds and orange. Light filtered through them, gleaming on ornaments and mounted swords in a flaming kaleidoscope. The chamber was well-kept through years of disuse. Its dusty stillness seemed to make the muffled sound of their voices and impatient shift of cotton ring even more urgent.

Training had left Sousuke a tired, sweaty wreck—clothes damp, muscles still twitching.

“Rin—We should…I should bathe first—”

“No need.” Rin touched his lips down Sousuke’s jaw to his collarbone, then licked up the tightening tendons of his throat. Falling back on his heels, he ran his tongue over slack lips, then trailed with half-lidded eyes down the expanse of skin at Sousuke’s chest. “I like the way you taste.”

Grinning, Rin switched sides, kissing and licking anywhere he could reach. When he found his mouth again, Sousuke caught the salt of his own sweat on Rin’s tongue. Sousuke unhooked the clasps and pulled Rin’s leather jerkin loose as they crossed the room, sliding it off his arms to the floor. He nipped at the man’s lower lip. Rin grunted, and bodily shoved Sousuke against the wall.

Rin had never taken a lover before. Sousuke had tickled that much out of him a few nights ago in bed. He had the bite bruise on his arm to show for it. Something about not wanting to be with anyone who didn’t hold his heart first. That truth made Sousuke want to give Rin even more—be his first, and last, and leave him wanting for absolutely nothing. He could wait. He was truly willing to wait until the right time to make that leap, so that it was utterly perfect. Even if Rin sometimes made patience a challenge.

The Emperor eagerly unthreaded the sash at Sousuke’s waist, eyes lit with intent as they sought assurance. Which he easily received. The shirt fell open, and he plunged into that dangerous, heated space between skin and the fabric of Sousuke’s pants. The prick of cold was invigorating.

Teasing, Rin hooked a finger under the tie of Sousuke’s underwear. The tightness of the fabric gave away Sousuke’s already sizable arousal. How far were they going today?

Unsure of how quickly Rin wanted their romance to progress, Sousuke had kept to kissing, and feeling one another through thin nightclothes under the sheets. Rin was so wonderfully responsive to his every touch. Whatever he gave, Rin took, and returned with ardor. He traced down the sensitive V between Sousuke’s hips, sending tremors down his legs. His hand rested there, at the dip. There was a moment’s pause as Rin realized what he was about to do. Sousuke leaned away to tell him he didn’t have to; they could stop anytime—

Sucking in a breath, Rin slid his hand down, pushed the cotton aside, and curled his hand around Sousuke’s length in one motion.
A hoarse gasp tore out of Sousuke’s lungs, his skull knocking painfully against stone. The room swam. Rin was still watching him closely, and wrapped his other hand around to rub the back of his head in sympathy.

“You okay?” He was stifling a snicker.

“No.” Sousuke’s breathing pulled heavier with each passing second. “Bastard.”

Rin laughed, but he was having just as tough a time clinging to composure, nervous with Sousuke’s shaft held like glasswork in his palm. Excitement swelled over, and a smile broke across his bitten lips. He brought them together for another deep kiss, and firmed his grip.

Then he moved his hand. Slowly, a tentative testing of waters.

Sousuke groaned in satisfaction, and Rin seemed to take that well. The pace of his strokes built up steadily.

He wanted to shed Rin’s clothes and reciprocate, but the laces of those damn amazing leather pants were a menace. When he’d fumbled too long, Rin snatched his wrist away, placing the hand on his hip, where Sousuke held on tight.

“Just let me.” Rin whispered low behind his ear. “Let me do this.”

Sousuke was panting hard as Rin kissed and nibbled his way over his neck and shoulder. Of course Rin was a biter, and Sousuke cursed himself for loving it. Rin would bite, and suck, then lick the soreness away, tenderly nuzzling the spot when he was finished. A lifetime of combat instincts screamed at Sousuke to protect his throat. One cut under the chin was a sure death, the veins there a constant target; he had the knife scar on his jaw to prove it—

“Rin..”

His eyes fluttered shut as he slid down the wall, and sighed into the scrape of Rin’s teeth over his pulse.

Rin captured Sousuke’s mouth again, his deep moan driving Sousuke’s hand down to the curve of his ass. He kneaded the muscle there roughly, and Rin’s hand stuttered.

The roll of Rin’s body against his leg, slip of his damp skin, and the breathy wet sounds he was making were driving Sousuke mad. Rin’s scent mixed with salt from seaborne clouds, and flowery perfume. He burned like an inferno, hungry and flawless. Eyes unfocused, jaw fallen slack, Sousuke knew he probably looked an unbecoming mess. Still, Rin saw something there he liked. He stared enthralled, as he stroked his lover closer to release.

A quick inhale was the only warning Sousuke got before Rin lunged. The Emperor laid his claim, sinking his teeth into the thick of Sousuke’s neck and shoulder—growling, possessive. The sting was deliriously sharp— a reminder that he was Rin’s. He loved him, Rin was his. It sent him over the edge, and he came shuddering, painting the inside of his training pants.

Sousuke fell against the tapestry to catch his breath. Rin licked his lips. He was still watching, hugged close to steady him. Sousuke could feel a hardness through the leather pants against his thigh, and was jerked back through the haze. Gods, did he want to return the favor.

Rin wasn’t prepared for Sousuke’s shove off the wall, and let himself be pushed down into the
sturdy desk chair. The man was on him in a second, sucking on his lips. Buried in sensation, Rin didn’t notice the tug on his pants laces until Sousuke tried again, more insistent. He stilled.

“Oh,” Rin rasped. “Yes. Please.”

A fond smirk played across Sousuke’s face. He made quick work of the laces along the side. Hooking his hands over the waist, he peeled Rin’s riding pants and thin underwear down, then off completely. Rin felt a shiver of shyness to be stripped bare. His erection was weeping, and borderline painful. He’d never been so hard in his life.

Sousuke flicked his eyes upward. “Let me know if it’s…if you want me to stop.”

Rin wished he had some witty jab ready to go, but all he could do was gape, and nod his head yes. He’d just asked for Sousuke’s trust, and was happy to repay it with his own.

Sousuke pushed Rin’s thighs apart, and settled between them, appreciative blue gaze resting where Rin needed him to do more than just look.

“Stop staring!”


Rin tried to kick out, but Sousuke saw it coming, holding his ankles down until he relented. Rin’s arousal spiked in response. Legs spread wide to cradle Sousuke’s bulk, he followed the man’s every movement through a cloud of lust. Sousuke craned up to press a few languid kisses to Rin’s stomach, following the chiseled lines downward. Tiny puffs of laughter ghosted over the trail of saliva he left, making Rin jolt and quake. Then he was there, at the base of Rin’s cock, gorgeous and in charge, and Rin’s nerves caught fire.

Delicately, Sousuke gripped the shaft between rough fingers, wetting his lips with precum leaking from the tip. Rin watched him with bated breath as he took the head into his mouth. Sousuke let out an approving grunt, and Rin realized he’d clamped his legs closed on his lover’s head.

“S-sorry! Ah!”

Sousuke eased his mouth off. “It’s fine. Relax.”

Rin obeyed, and let the tension seep from his muscles.

Sousuke returned to his task, and began to slide up and down, tonguing the head inside his hot mouth. He was rhythmically teasing a strip of skin above Rin’s entrance. Applying pressure there with his fingertips sent pleasure pulsing up from a place Rin had never known before. His toes curled, and he writhed, hands flying out to tangle in Sousuke’s thick, dark hair. Without any conscious consent, his hips bucked up to seek more. Then his lover was giving it to him, swallowing him deeper. Sousuke’s name was leaving his lips in mindless whispers, as he let all the feeling in his body pool where his man was adoring him between his thighs.
Close. Fuck, he was getting so close—

He glanced down. Sousuke’s gaze was heavy with want. Raw desire in those sea-green eyes dragged Rin down like an undertow, sweeping a shudder through his spine.

“Sousuke—”

The man hummed around Rin’s cock, dragging up from the base. He rubbed his fingers in a tight circle, pressed up-

-and Rin spilled into his mouth, thrusting up with a gritted sob. Sousuke held Rin’s legs there, cheeks hollowed until he was spent. Too late he realized that he’d given no warning, and shit, “Gods, I’m so sorry I should have—”

Gently, Sousuke slid off of him, tipped his chin up, and swallowed. He wiped his mouth with the inside of his wrist, and Rin whined at the sight, collapsing against the backrest. If the aftershocks of this climax killed him right here, it would be a fine way to go.

Rin hung boneless on the chair, his lungs raking in air. He let his head roll back, and mumbled nonsense to the ceiling.
“What was that?” Sousuke’s chuckle was hoarse, but smug.

Rin snagged him by the shirt, hauling him in for a clumsy kiss.

“Wish you’d saved that for tonight, Sou,” Rin cooed, licking away the odd taste of himself. “Now I’ll have to get through my day somehow, when it’s all I can think about.”

Heat flushed Sousuke’s face, and Rin savored the small victory. Sousuke lifted him off the chair, laying him out on the bed. Then he stretched out beside, and kneaded his jaw. Rin felt light-headed and weightless, like he was floating on his back in still water. There was a spot of white at the corner of Sousuke’s mouth he’d missed, and Rin reached out with a thumb to wipe it away.

For a spell they simply sprawled there, winded, damp, staring wonderstruck at one another. Then silence split open, and they laughed—airy, and full. They were doing this.

Rin wasn’t close enough. He wormed over, and flopped himself onto Sousuke, who welcomed his weight with a heavy embrace. Heartbeats settled and synced, and Sousuke’s knuckles soothed down the muscles of Rin’s back as he followed luminous shapes of colored glass up the walls.

“Sou.”

“Mm?”

“Let’s sleep together.”

“Mmkay…” The request sank in, and Sousuke blinked alert. “What, you mean—?! Already? You don’t want to…wait a bit?”

“Why would I?” Rin clipped.

“I dunno, I just thought you might…” Sousuke trailed.

Rin paused as a thought snared him. “Do you? I mean, do you not want to…do that with me?”

Sousuke had experience with other partners, though he wouldn’t say from where. Rin could guess, though, and it chipped at his confidence. Those partners had made sex their profession—they were skilled, likely amazing in bed, and he was…not. Some part of him was terrified that he wouldn’t measure up. After all these years of longing, he was going to make a mess of things; it was inevitable.

“If you don’t, it’s fine, Sou,” Rin assured quietly. “I just thought I would ask.”

“Rin.” Souskue coaxed his chin up with a hand. There was nothing but utter devotion and reverence in the look he returned. “I want you so badly, I could die of it.”

A furious blush was creeping its way up to Rin’s hairline. He buried his burning face in Sousuke’s shoulder. “Soon, then,” he murmured against the scar.

Sousuke cradled his head with a tenderness that made butter of Rin’s ragged nerves. Rin let his eyes slip shut. He wished so earnestly that they could stay like this for the entire day. It was an unused chamber, the door was locked. No one would find them here.

Too quickly, Sousuke’s voice rumbled into his hair. “We should wash up. Stuff to do today, right?”

“Yeah,” Rin yawned. “Just a little while more.”
Sousuke scraped his shaving knife over a last patch of his cheek, and rinsed away lingering soap in the basin. His mirror in the dormitory at Sano was cracked and rust-stained. He hadn’t much need for a better one. Rin’s was a crystalline sheet of silver, and Sousuke stared back at himself in startling clarity.

The new uniform sat squarely on his shoulders, plunging low, baring his map of thin scars on sun-browned skin. A Imperial Guard. Once, the men wearing this shirt were his enemies—the protectors of everything he hated most. Now crimson, black, and gold were his colors. Scattered between slashes were bruising love-bitten crescents in the shape of Rin’s mouth.

“Oi, Sou.” Rin appeared soundlessly beside him, fresh from the bath, lips pulled into an appraising grin. “Lemme feel?”

Earlier, Rin had been kind enough to nearly crush his soul from his body between silky thighs, so this was the least he could do. Sousuke bent down with a smirk, and Rin delighted in the freshly-shaven skin of his face with warm hands. His touch both calmed, and electrified.

Smoothing downward, Rin frowned at the angry markings he’d left.

“Aahh, these looks bad.”

“They’re not.”

Hissing, Rin dipped his fingers into one of the jars on the table, and massaged a pearl of aloe gel onto the reddened skin. Relief was instantaneous, cool like a mountain stream over the stinging throb.

Sousuke expelled a sigh, and relaxed into the careful caress. “Here, I can do that myself—”

Rin clicked his tongue, and swatted Sousuke’s hand away. Gentle and determined, he rubbed the gel onto every bite he’d left.

“Sorry.” The Emperor met his eyes in the mirror, expression soft with apology. “Kind of lost it earlier. I’ll be more careful.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Sousuke tugged the uniform open to give Rin better access. “I…liked it.” He craned closer to hide the pink on his cheeks, and drop his voice in Rin’s ear. “I like that you lost yourself a bit.”

He didn’t miss the tiny intake of breath he got in response, and flitter of lashes. A smile beamed up at him.

Rin teased the points of his teeth playfully with the tip of his tongue. “Maybe sometimes, then.”

When he was done, Rin pulled the robe back up, and ironed it over. His palm stopped there on the white emblem over Sousuke’s heart, like he just couldn’t find it in him to pull away. Sousuke felt like he could shout his love from the highest peak in this moment, but instead treasured the quiet, and rested his hand over Rin’s.

There was a flurry of polite raps at the door.

Reluctant, Rin retracted his arm, and cleared his throat. “Come in, Ai.”
The Emperor’s assistant hovered near the doorframe, bound record book cradled in one elbow. “You’ve a meeting with your sister soon, about planning for the ceremony.”

“Oh, right.” Rin raked a comb through his hair. “Thanks, Ai. Almost ready.”

The boy made to leave, then swiveled back inside. “Shall I have lunch brought up, Your Grace?” Rin shook his head. “We ate already.”

“Yeah.” Sousuke waved. “I had Rin for lunch.”

Ai’s smile flickered, as Rin choked on a breath. Sousuke held up a partially-eaten pork bun, name facing out.

“O-ooohh! That’s…wonderful! Very pretty!” He didn’t miss the boy’s relief. “C-congratulations, Your Grace.”

“Thanks, Ai! We’ll be out in a minute,” Rin chirped.

“Right, then I’ll be…in the hallway.” Ai bowed, and scuttled out in an awkward rush.

The door banged shut, and Sousuke took a slow bite of cold bread. “…Should I run?”

“Don’t even bother.”

Aichirou deflated, resting against the wall as hollering and laughter erupted behind Rin’s door. He was happy for Rin. Truly. Not having known the Emperor before he’d come to work at court, he marveled at a side of his liege that he’d only ever heard about from Princess Gou. Rin was not one for subtlety, but Aichirou had never seen someone glow quite like he did of late. He’d never witnessed two people so loudly, deeply in love.

“Ai.”

The boy whipped around, and down into a bow. “Princess! What can I—”

His words stuck like dry cotton in his mouth.

Gou made her way past the stairwell, beautiful and severe in sharp tooth-rimmed gold, and a dress red as fresh blood. At her side was Miss Hanamura, and an armed, grim-faced Captain Mikoshiba. And behind them—

“Ah…oh.” Aichirou bowed a second time. “High Commander Matsuoka…”

The former Emperor was as eerily austere as ever. His thin mouth pulled tight, arms folded over his chest. His features were so similar to Rin and Gou’s—but twisted, hollowed with anguish, and carved with loathing.

“I shall, ah…” Aichirou backed away. He was inexplicably drawn toward the safety of Rin’s chamber. “I’ll retrieve the Emperor immediately, he is—”

“Right here.” Rin strode forward through his door with Master Sousuke barely a step behind him. “What is this? What’s going on?”
Footsteps were like hammer falls on the tiles as the pair approached. Aichirou traced the High Commander’s simmering stare to Master Sousuke, where it was returned twice as murderous. The space crackled with a flammable tension.

“The Silver King has requested an urgent audience with us.” Gou answered. “All of us.”

“He says….” she clacked her fingernails on her thigh, where Aichirou knew she hid a dagger beneath her skirts, “that he wants to warn us.”

Chapter End Notes

*wipes sweat*

Apologies (again!) for the infrequency of updates. Work and life have been kicking my ass harder than usual.

But hey! It’s been about a YEAR since I published the first chapter of this fic. Which is…pretty nuts, honestly. I never expected to be sharing the story in this way when I drew the first comic. Thank you so much for reading along thus far, and I hope you enjoy the rest! <3

The travelers make their return next chapter ; )
Under Our Wings

Chapter Summary

Nao bares the truth to Samezuka, and three travelers leave the forest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rin squirmed in his seat at the head of his council table, glassing over six people whose festering enmity felt thick enough to swallow the sunlight.

Samezuka’s war chamber was built for conquerors, and carved to intimidate. Colossal dragons sculpted in gilded black crystal snaked around one another along the walls, their fearsome jaws wide open at the floor in four smoldering hearths. They breathed out a steady heat, closing in on the council at the center. Rin had always found them rather calming, but he imagined an enemy might feel differently. How many spirits had been broken here over a millennia, he could not guess.

Serizawa Nao was seated primly at the opposite end of Rin’s mapped table, looking miserable. He was dressed in all blue—an embroidered mantle over the silk robe Rin had given him—like a polished sapphire in a bed of hot coals. Kirishima was an armored pillar beside him, warily sizing up every person present. Rin couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for the two of them, even as peace wavered on a tightrope.

Gou was wound tight on his right side as she and Seijuuro glared daggers in every direction but his. And to his left sat his uncle, and High Commander: Matsuoka Akira. He was watchful, and inhumanly still, with his long hands laced to a neat point. Rin felt Sousuke’s bloodlust steaming from behind his chair.

Something heavy was looming, gathering like thunderheads. Rin couldn’t shake the coiling presentiment that things were about to explode out of his control, and he just wasn’t ready. It must have been obvious, and the firm press of Sousuke’s hand on his shoulder anchored him back to home port. Sousuke kneaded the muscle reassuringly before retracting his arm to stand on guard. He left lingering warmth in his wake, and Rin slipped him a grateful smile.

“So, Your Highness.” Rin began. “I take it this isn’t about border negotiations.”

Serizawa raised his eyes to meet Rin’s. The king was frightening in his own way. He was quiet and modest, but had a keen sting in his stare, and a knifelike wit. “No. No, it is not. It never truly was.”

“And you didn’t come here to be friends, either.” Rin shot.

This gave the king a pause. “I…It is…complicated.”

Rin slumped against the stiff backrest, his scowl scathing. He hoped he could hide on his face how much that hurt. Serizawa had spoken to him on equal grounds, valued his potential, shared good taste in poetry. It was all a means to some end; of course it was.

Betrayal burned sour in Rin’s mouth. “Do explain. We’ve got plenty of time.”
The king cleared his throat, ironing out his nerves. “Actually, I am not sure that we do.”

Ai readied his stack of parchment, taking his seat at the dark mahogany scribing desk against the wall. He was a happy distance away from the table, and glad to make himself invisible. Rin was nice to talk to on a good day. He was a source of strength, and guidance for Ai—a dear friend. It was easy to forget sometimes, that he was now the most powerful man in the world. And he was trusting Ai to make record of history unraveling in this room. Stretching out the ache his knuckles, Ai shifted on his stool. The desk said, “Ah!” when he straightened his legs, and he slid his ink jar into place, turning the edge just so. Ink, fresh tools, a glass of water, and—wait.

Ai ducked his head under the desk.

“Momo!?”

The boy smiled up, his loud features beaming in the dark space beside Ai’s knees.

“SeisaidIcouldcome.” Not even he looked convinced by that.

“That’s definitely a lie, Momo-kun.” Ai frowned, about to continue, but another familiar face appeared beside Momo’s. “Miss Hanamura, you too!?”

The girl shushed him, and wormed into a more comfortable position. Her hair had collapsed, the seashell flower pins dangling comically askew. Ai snickered a little. On the inside.

“Gou would tell me everything anyway, so I’m just saving her the trouble.” She paused. “And checking her bullshit.”

There was probably a fair amount of truth to that, Ai supposed. He looked up to make sure the council was absorbed in introductions. Still, “You two aren’t allowed to be here.”

“Outrageous.” Chigusa blinked sweetly. “You mean this isn’t my assigned seat?”

Momo crouched forward on all fours like one of those toads he kept in the garden pond. “We have to know, Ai. It’s important. What if they…” He gulped. “What if they go to war?”

Ai froze. No matter how close they’d grown, Momo’s earnest nature still managed to hurl him right off center. Whatever this “warning” turned out to be, might very well lead the Matsuokas off to battle. And if the Emperor flew out, the Black Pearls were not far behind. Momo could lose his family, Chigusa her childhood friend, if it came to that. Ai settled back into his seat, and dipped his quill in the inkpot. He’d been ready to record the words, not truly letting their reality take solid shape until now.

Serizawa started speaking again, and Ai snapped back on task, tucking his legs in to give Momo and Chigusa more room.

“I arrived with three women in my retinue,” the king started. “Perhaps you noticed them. My personal sorcerers.”

Rin’s eyes narrowed. Sousuke seemed to be sharing his cloud of thought, one tight hand wringing the shaft of his glaive.
“Hazuki.” Rin glowered. “We met. They’re very charming.”

He remembered how easily the woman had hurled Sousuke across the chamber, stripped the rock from his wall, would have crushed them both on no more than a whim.

“All three are unparalleled magical geniuses,” Serizawa said. “They’ve dammed rivers, leveled mountains. We owe the safety of our sea routes to them. Back home, they are championed symbols of victory. But their real intentions are... darker than most would believe.”

Rin leaned in. “Seeing as they busted into my bedchamber a few nights ago to threaten us, let’s say I do believe. Dark how?”

Serizawa stiffened, shock stuttering his stream of thought. A question was flickering on his tongue, Rin could tell. But the king knew the rules of this game. He would have to explain before he could ask. He cleared his throat and took a shallow, nervous sip from his cup.

“Our story is long,” he said at last. “And we owe it to you in full.”

Morning burned away, while clouds peeled over the mountaintops and dissolved like paper in warm water. Shadows shortened as Serizawa unwound a battle of fourteen long years. Kirishima would interject where his account was clearer, his energy sparkling back and forth between them.

They reached a chapter of their tale that had Sousuke strained—his mouth tightening, and throat bobbing. Rin reached over the armrest up to take his hand, and press their pulses flush. Sousuke squeezed back hard, and did not let go.

Akira frowned with acknowledgment, but not remorse.

The king and his captain recounted the slow erosion of Iwatobi’s foundation by three gifted young girls who were too strong to restrict. Serizawa’s grandfather had grown them, nurtured them, only to find that he had poisoned his own garden—rotten down to its very roots. The Hazukis were loyal to no leader. They valued absolute power and nothing else, blazing quiet destruction across the land in their own pursuit of it. As their influence mounted, they had stolen the largest warship in the royal fleet, tucking it away inside an island they had gutted. The king was certain that when they deemed the time ripe, they would overtake Iwatobi entirely to rule it as they pleased.

And, he explained, they were not likely to stop there.

Hazuki Kyo was cruel in the deepest parts of her soul, Kirishima believed. A world beneath her foot would be a world doomed to suffer.

“They will grind my throne to rubble, and build themselves a higher one,” Serizawa concluded. “Even higher than yours.”

Walking in, Rin was not entirely sure what the king meant by “a warning.” Here was his warning, desperate behind electric, steely green.

Rin said aloud what he already guessed. “You need me to destroy them.”

“If there was another way, we would not be here, asking.” Serizawa glanced about the chamber, over the statues and fire pits. He turned to Gou, then Seijuuro, Akira, Sousuke, landing on Rin again. “There is not. The Hazukis are too strong for any other sorcerers in Iwatobi to contend with. And the only ones on earth with the kind of raw power it would take to overcome them... is you.”

The dry scratching of Ai’s quill on paper was all they could hear. And then nothing.
Rin licked nervously at the points of his teeth. He could feel the crushing weight of a decision bearing down on his back. It was overwhelming. He should say something—ask a question that made sense. Unwittingly, he glanced to his side to seek out his uncle’s experience. Akira sharply accepted the wordless request.

Unfolding his hands, the former Emperor sliced through the silence. “Your situation is lamentable, Your Majesty. And this news is grave, indeed. But the risk you’re asking Samezuka to bear is not a small one.”

Nao regarded him squarely.

After a sip from his cup, Akira went on with gliding indifference. “You would point us to an island in the middle of the ocean, where your most powerful weapons could well be waiting for us—forgive me if this sounds a little too convenient. Faith in your word is a tall order after an attempt to murder me, I would say.”

“It’s not a trap!” Kirishima bristled at the accusations. “And that was them at the banquet, not us. I swear it.”

Gou’s face twisted with disgust. “So you did know,” she steamed. “You knew your sorceress sisters framed Sei for the attack. And you never saw fit to tell us until now?”

The king winced in apology. “I…I didn’t mean—”

“Instead you sat in the stands and sipped wine while Momo and Sousuke were nearly shredded alive for it. When you could’ve stopped the bloodbath with a word.”

Serizawa’s veil of politeness faltered. “Oh, spare me the blame for your own primeval practices! How was I to know what would happen to your betrothed? The Hazukis followed me here to watch me. Had we exposed them at that time, you would have attacked, they’d have fought back, we’d have a significantly larger bloodbath at hand.”

He raked steady fingers through his undone hair. “It’s why I hadn’t told you about them sooner. Inside the palace without your dragons, they would have crushed this place like an ant hive, and then where would we all be? They likely thought the debacle would make it difficult for you to trust me if I came to you. And behold, it has.”

Rin’s mind was grappling to tie the threads together. Every turn of trouble since the banquet was tracing back to one place. “What’s changed, then?” he rasped. “Why come to me now?”

“They left.” Serizawa shifted in his chair, distracted. A sheen of sweat beaded at his hairline and trailed down his jaw. “…to Gods know where. And I did not dismiss them. They’ve never defied my orders so openly before. That can only mean at this point, they do not care about what happens if they do.”

Already exhausted down to his marrow, Rin fell against the hard back of his chair.

“They serve me to spy on me,” Serizawa said. “Anything I told you, they would find out. I thought we had longer. I thought we could…build something, forge a friendship.”

“Oh, a friendship, was it?” Bitterness was boiling up from Rin’s center, heating his speech. “So you could manipulate me onto my family’s throne, and have me fight your battle for you?” Serizawa remained cool as still water. It was infuriating. Humiliating.

“I was only trying to encourage you.”
“Because I’m an easier ship to steer than my uncle.”

“Because I heard about you, and I thought you might save us!” Emotion cracked the king’s mask. “They said that you helped knead the dough in street-side bakeries, that your best friend was a slave—that you were different. Was I mistaken?”

Rin fumbled for a response.

“I’m sorry.” Serizawa spoke to the entire group assembled. “I’m sorry that I misled you all. And for the mess that I dragged to your doorstep.” He found Sousuke across the table, face raw with guilt. “I’m sorry that my mistakes have cost you so much.”

“I want my citizens to have the freedom to live their lives as they will, and to run on the beach in summer without fear of war, or demons. In nearly half my lifetime of trying, all I’ve done is fail them and fall short.” He glanced with inspiration at his captain, openly, for the first time all morning. It was painfully honest, and it struck a cord in Rin’s chest. “I just…I can’t give up like this. You might not trust me fully, but you understand that, don’t you?”

Ai stilled his writing.

Rin stood and walked around the table, as all eyes followed him, stopping where Serizawa was hunched in his chair.

He knew what defeat felt like when it soaked you through to your core, and reshaped you from the inside. The taste of hopelessness, and helplessness were familiar flavors. It wasn’t so long ago that Rin’s own life was plummeting out of his reach—when he’d had the will, but no means to right things—then the means, but an empty heart. Now his heart was fit to burst, and all of the power was his.

He decided that he was ready to use it.

Rin held a hand out to the king of Iwatobi. “I do understand. And I know that you can’t win this alone.”

Sousuke stationed himself beside the door, watching Rin build a plan of attack with the king. Gou was there with him, and Seijuuro looming at her back, shading her from the sun’s glare. Fires in the hearths had burned down to a mild orange glow.

Rin’s jaw clenched, and the muscles tensed in his strong forearm as he glided an ivory figure around the map. Serizawa added a piece of his own, Ai taking note of any significant move. They’d been at it for near an hour. A lock of hair fell into Rin’s face as he craned over the board. Delicately, he tucked it back, eyes flicking up to meet Sousuke’s for a only a moment. He looked tired. Sousuke fought the desire to cross the chamber, and gather him up. He needed the contact as much as he longed to give it.

His own thoughts were difficult to order—like chipped bricks that didn’t stack together anymore. Lost, was the feeling. Or it would have been, were he alone.

As the council finally adjourned, Ai whisked his records together. The boy shook out his hand, and
stretched his back. Somehow he had managed to make a cluttered mess of his desk during the meeting. Sousuke strode toward him to lean over it. “Now would be a good time for you three to scoot out, if you want to be sneaky about it.”

“What? I—!” Ai stammered, then nodded in gratitude. He wasn’t even going to try pretending.

The boy knocked the side of his desk, and Chigusa crawled from beneath, stepping clear of her dress hem. Face blooming red, she bowed to Sousuke, straightened her skirts, and scuttled around the corner out the door. Ai followed respectfully. At last, Momo stumbled out and jogged to a stop in the hallway.

“Jinbei?” There was a hollowness about him that didn’t belong. His cuts and scrapes from their trial together were long since healed, but fear left a deeper scar in him than Sousuke had thought. “What’s gonna happen?”

“Are you all leaving me?” Is what he’s asking.

“I don’t know, Momo. I wish I could tell you.”

Captain Kirishima was hovering clumsily around the far edge of the table. His vigilance had eased up once Rin’s hand was extended, but he was still watchful on his feet, glancing at Sousuke across the room. He had been doing it all morning long, and was nowhere near as subtle about it as he seemed to think. Sousuke shot him an answering glare. Their eyes met, and for a second, Sousuke thought he’d caught something he wasn’t meant to see.

Hearing the two of them talk about Tokitsu brought on a wave of homesickness he thought he’d left dried up for good in the Sano compound. It was strange. He remembered their visit, and the two Iwatobi ships docked in the harbor. They were gigantic things—heralds of hope. His parents had even mentioned the two teenaged boys who orchestrated the whole alliance over dinner, though at the time, Sousuke couldn’t be bothered to go meet them.

It hadn’t occurred to him that those boys had grown up—that the nervy little prince was now the king. Fate was strange, the way it turned and tangled.

Just as Sousuke was about to dismiss the distraction completely, Kirishima pushed away from the table. His presence was just as impressive up close. Strong hands, and a sure step. They were quiet. Sousuke could feel the man’s intent to speak to him bubbling in the air. Twice, Kirishima opened his mouth as if to try, but couldn’t seem to thread his words together.

He gave up.

A gentle hand came to rest on the captain’s shoulder. Serizawa was there—his face peaky, but posture regal as ever. They left together, walking a little closer than they had coming in.

Seijuuro gathered several guards stationed in the hallway. “Escort them to their rooms. Or, the library if they wish. Rin says they aren’t to leave the palace.”

“Yes, Sir!”

The chamber emptied. Gou and Seijuuro brushed by with solemn nods. Akira exited without so much as a look. Rin was left alone beside the table, holding himself up by the edge. Slowly, he raised his head.
“Get over here.”

Every second it took to reach to him was one too many. Sousuke heaved the door shut, crossed the room, and swept him into a tight embrace. Rin clung on like a drowning man, burying his face into the swell of Sousuke’s chest.

“Rin. You doing alright?”

He groaned against Sousuke’s shirt. It was answer enough. Tipping his head up, Rin searched his lover’s face for pain. “Are you?”

“I am now.”

Sousuke rocked them side to side, as if to music. The tips of Rin’s hair tickled his collarbone. For a long, quiet spell, they stayed that way—flush together, strength rebuilding.

“Tajiri,” Rin murmured at length.

“What?”

“Tajiri. It’s an island northwest of here. One of ours, actually. It’s where they...where I’d have to go to find them. To settle this.”

“…Oh.”

The idea that Rin was flying into battle was still almost too hard to stomach.

“I told Serizawa about Kisumi, too. The monster on the wall, and the forest.”

“What did he say?”

“The forest is Aomori. It’s like a…holy place, for them. But how it figures in, and any of the rest, he didn’t know what the hell I was talking about.” Rin sagged with disappointment. “I gave him access to the archives to look into it.”

Sousuke’s hope drained. If Serizawa didn’t have answers, there was no one in Samezuka who would.

“You remember what they did.” Rin craned upward, framing Sousuke’s jaw with a gentle hand. “And what they said. Once they take Iwatobi, they’ll come back for us.”

“If what Serizawa tells us is true, then I have to do something. I might be heading into a trap, but either way, I just…feel this is right.” His shaky laughs sank into a sigh.

“I’m coming with you,” Sousuke said. It wasn’t up for debate.

Rin held onto him tighter, like he was melding them into one.
Aomori was beginning to wither.

Haru could see it, and he knew Makoto had sensed it, as they left the center of the forest. Magic in the earth had already begun to drain—pulling out east, and no living body survived long without blood.

Traveling home with a Guardian was a strange experience, Haru was discovering. Flowers tipped to follow Makoto as he passed, branches pulled aside to let the group through, and bird songs pitched higher in the canopy. Everywhere they walked, it was as though the forest recognized Makoto as its protector, and was showing him thanks.

Four butterflies lingered in a halo over Makoto’s head before flitting into the shade. The light in his eyes shone even more brilliantly than before. Haru found himself speechless, and Makoto reeled with worry.

“It’s all sort of odd, but I’m still me!” He strode up to take the siren’s hand. “I’m the same…” There was such an earnest fear there, Haru almost broke into a laugh.

“Of course you’re still you,” he rolled his eyes, huffed, and tapped his green boy on the nose. “Stupid.”

Kisumi retold what he could of that night as they trudged up the remaining stretch of trail back to town. Beasts had descended upon the cliff after Haru and Makoto left: winged horrors made of glassy black sand. Where they’d come from, and why the sirens had attacked, he would not say.

“I have a guess,” He reasoned. “But I need to know for sure.”

Haru’s throat bobbed. Guilt, helplessness, anger—it was difficult to say which coursed strongest in him now. He’d been nothing but primed bait tossed out to pry open the world for evil. And he was through with it. Makoto was, too.

The villagers’ explosion of congratulations stripped them both to hollow husks. Haru couldn’t bring himself to face them, though he could feel Makoto’s shame tighten the vice of his grip. A whisper of bareness at Haru’s collarbone was a reminder of what they’d seen, and done. Moyajima’s sirens were moving. And if Kisumi was right, there would soon be no place safe from them. Haru’s halcyon days in this forest had run out.

They spent only a night at home—gathering supplies, and warning the villagers of what might be to come. They hadn’t believed him at first. It was difficult to process that four hundred years of peace had been uprooted in a single night.

“Sirens have killed in Aomori.”

“What do they want?”

“How could we have let this happen?”

Haru was prepared to run. They would chase him out of town, banish him for this, at best. But the villagers offered only sorrow and sympathy, and it wrung his heart empty. He lived here. He was one of them, and beneath any lingering sentiment, maybe he had been all along.
“It was my test, and my fault. Not Haru’s.” Makoto faced the wave of murmurs as people crowded the road. “I was weak, and a coward. Now the Tear, and the Cat are dead.”

“Makoto—” *That wasn’t true at all.*

“But we’re going to fix this,” his voice steeled. “Please forgive us; we’re going to save Iwatobi.”

The next morning, Aki joined the rest of town to see the trio off. She was still short, and slight, and smelled gently of larch leaves. Her staff was thinner than Makoto’s, and strapped to her back to free her hands for climbing. She looked them both over with wide, brown eyes.

“I…don’t even know what to say. Other than good luck, I guess. We’ll be praying for you.”

“You may need to do more than pray,” Kisumi warned. “Aomori is bursting with rare materials that some might deem valuable enough to attack you for. If word spreads that the Tear is dead, and we hope it *doesn’t,* then you’ll want to stay on your guard.”

Aki nodded vigorously, still flustered by the concept of speaking with a spirit.

Makoto leveled her a pleading look. “Will you watch over our family?”

She placed a hand on Makoto’s shoulder. “Of course.”

The Tachibanas had beamed with pride watching Makoto leave, not two weeks ago. They were teary and heartbroken now as they waved their boys over the bridge. Haru couldn’t help but feel he’d betrayed them—he’d ignored the rules, gone after their son, and put him through all of *this.*

“Wait!”

Haru spun around.

Ran and Ren jogged up the planks. Ren’s momentum nearly carried him straight into Haru. “Wait.” Catching his breath, he opened Haru’s hand, and folded a small bag into the siren’s palm. Haru worked the pouch open. Inside were two whittled songbirds, the paint still lovingly intact.

He shook his head. “These are yours. I made them for you.”

“I know. So return them.” Ren’s freckled cheeks lifted in a smile. “And keep them together for us. You’d better come home.”

Makoto walked backward slowly, almost like he was straining at the end of a rope. He watched the twins until they shrank into dappled shade. His heel hit the edge of the bridge’s last plank, and he paused. Haru waited for him. Filtered sun dusted his strong back and shoulders. Hope was building in him as a breeze kicked up, and Haru was hit with a sudden yearning for his paints. But they were packed away, and all he could do was commit Makoto’s beauty in this moment to memory.

Mustering his courage, Makoto stepped forward onto the path, leading the way toward the great outside.

Kisumi explained their quest in pieces, as he could.

“There’s a stone in Samezuka like Aomori’s Tear. *Dragon’s Heart,*” is what some called it once.
Before it was hidden.”

Makoto’s step bounced. “Another one?”

“Of course! All magic stones come in pairs, you know.” Kisumi plucked his purple orb from somewhere in his sleeve, and tossed it in his palm. “They help one another, balance each other out. So if we bring the Tear to its partner, they will be as two halves of a whole. Red will heal Blue, magic returns to normal, Iwatobi will be saved.”

Hope illuminated Makoto’s face. “Does it have Guardians to look after it, too?”

The spirit pondered aloud, tapping his fingers on his elbow. “Of a kind. My methods were a bit different from Miho’s. Samezuka Shrine is much more…independent. Anyone can enter. It’s just damn hard to find, and impossible to reach without me. As for the Guardians of Samezuka, they are—” he whirled around to walk backwards, “—rather large, and scaly.”

Haru shot up instantly. “Mackerel?”

Kisumi’s expression blanked. He threw his head back and shook with laughter.

The spirit’s ability to wrap them both in his wings and leap across miles was granting them a speedy advantage. Even so, Kisumi could not repeat the action infinitely. So while his wings rested, they traveled on foot.

Tiny seed tufts floated up from honey-gold fields as they trekked across a highland plain. Lumbering horned creatures were huddled grazing in the distance. Trees here were sparse and small in the grasslands, and Haru felt inordinately exposed. He tugged his hood up to shade himself from unforgiving rays of day.

Haru had come this way on his trip back to the coast. Bits and pieces he recognized, but traveling with good company was like discovering it all for the first time. They passed through a limestone gorge that whistled, and moaned. Locals claimed it was haunted, and Makoto despaired, clinging to Haru like a giant starfish. Haru traced the sound to its true source: a cavernous nest of peculiar birds, whose calls had echoed, amplified by the winding rocks.

Another day, Kisumi stopped them to rest at “Lovers’ Willow” beside a lake so clear, you could see all the way to the bottom. Haru thought it was a ridiculous name for a tree. Or he did, until Makoto looped him beneath the lush green curtains, and kissed him breathless. In the morning, Haru went swimming in the calmest water he’d ever felt. He made Kisumi fly over and fish him out when they needed to leave.

Makoto was wonderstruck by every swath of unfamiliar land, and Haru soaked in the earth’s beauty with new eyes alongside him. Dire as their adventure might be, Makoto stole joy in places Haru would not think to look for it.

A thought surfaced as Haru swam along the bottom of a lagoon. He popped up beside Makoto, who stood washing his hair.

“I want you to see the ocean,” Haru said plainly. It was such a long time coming.

Makoto laughed and dove in, paddling out toward the deep center to float on his back with Haru a little. Sun streaked down through the trees, and shimmered all around him. “I can’t wait.”
Today, they were pitched atop a rocky, broken hillside overlooking the road. Their trail was visible for a mile in each direction, and a dense brush offered them generous cover. Even so, Kisumi still kept a wary lookout. The spirit would chatter and joke, but there was a thin edge to his every move. He was running from something. A sorceress, he’d said—though he wouldn’t explain why, nor what would happen if she caught him.

Kisumi had fallen unusually silent after dinner, slouched on a fallen fir, absently plucking a song on his phantom instrument. Haru observed him from behind the cook fire as shadows licked over the hollowed planes of his face. He might not be the best at this, or even good at it—but Haru felt they should say something. Anything. Locking glances, Makoto shot him an unspoken agreement. He eased down onto the log, just the right distance away.

Somehow Makoto always just knew what people needed. It was moving, and fascinating, and left Haru in awe.

“You knew the Cat well, didn’t you?”

Kisumi’s grin crept back, but weaker now that he’d been caught without it.

“We go back a ways, sure.”

The spirit’s gaze skittered outward. “Should I add more wood? Getting a little chilly, isn’t it?”

Makoto pinned him with a frown, refusing to leave it there. “Kisumi look, I know you’re a…an ancient spirit, and we’re just people. But you feel grief and loss just like anyone else; we can see it. So don’t think that you have to suffer alone. You never do. We’re friends, and we’re all in this together.”

A robin’s evening song trilled from the treetops.

For a moment, Haru was sure Kisumi would clamp his shell shut again. But Makoto was asking, so the spirit hung his head, and relented.

“Miho was my master. Mentor.” He scowled at the net of stars across the plains as he strained to remember. “I was her apprentice when we were humans. A very, very long time ago.”

Makoto and Haru stilled to listen.

“It’s funny; we never got along that well. We were two very different people, with perpendicular philosophies. But it never crossed my mind that she would die.”

“Spirits aren’t gods,” he said, “nor are we completely human. It’s a weird place to live, in between. Cities sprawl and burn. Everything changes, and everyone leaves you behind. We’re islands in a sea of endless birth and loss. Even if we barely saw each other, Miho was the one constant in all of it for me—the friend I knew I could always come back to in the end. Now that she’s gone it just feels…” the spirit trailed, “…a little bit…”

“Lonely?” Haru set dinner down to roast, and made his way over.

Kisumi chuckled bitterly. “Yeah.” He swallowed. “It’s that.”
“Maybe we can get her back, too,” Makoto offered at length.

“Maybe.” The optimism snapped Kisumi back into himself—even if he didn’t seem to believe in it. He leaned in, and slung both arms over his companions’ shoulders. “You’re wrong, by the way.”

“Huh?” Makoto puzzled.

“You said you two are ‘just people.’” Flames glimmered in bright violet irises. “There are no such things as ‘just people.’”

Iwatobi’s capital city was even more terrifying than Makoto had imagined.

Negura. Eagle’s Roost, it was called. Though the great birds were elsewhere, scarce above gloomy streets at the base of Tottori Canyon.

“Move it.” A vendor shoved past, rolling a rickety covered wheelbarrow, and Makoto pulled Haru out of its path, nearly bumping into a drawn wagon.

“Get outta the road!”

“Sorry…!” Makoto called out. “Sorry about that!”

It seemed like regardless of where they stood, they were in someone’s way. There were so many people, and sounds, and wrong turns to take. Bridges lifted for boats to pass, and fireless lamps dotted the busier roads. There was a clock tower with a dial that seemed to move on its own. Makoto pressed a palm to the stone of a building, searching. Magic was everywhere. Channels of it still coursed through the ground, but it was extracted, warped, wrought by humans into things strange and unnatural. Sorcery.

Eventually, they swerved away from the main road, down a side avenue, and onto a ferry out of town.

Nestled a ways down the river, this distant arm of the city was, as Kisumi helpfully phrased, “more a spider’s nest than an eagle’s.” Here, the sun touched down only a scant few hours each day before surrendering to the ominous shade of overhanging canyon shelves. The roads were shadowed, chilly, paved with cracked cobblestones, and sodden with a stubborn stench. Moss and mushrooms crawled up the sides of buildings like ivy, thriving in the lightless street ends. Thankfully, it was quiet this time of day. The district was asleep—waiting to spring alive with dealing halls, dueling rings, and brothels, steaming in every strain of sin under the shroud of night. Kisumi warned they’d best be gone by then.

Makoto had long since given up on friendly gestures after receiving nothing but thorny scowls in
return for them. People here were dour, and defensive.

“Don’t let it get to you.” Kisumi noted. He kept his attention trained ahead, counting turns and lampposts as they advanced down the dingy boulevard. “The dark district is just…a different kind of place.” Harsh laughter boomed from a second-story window, followed by the ring of shattering glass, and howling.

Haru winced. “I’ll say.”

“Don’t let it get to you.” Kisumi noted. He kept his attention trained ahead, counting turns and lampposts as they advanced down the dingy boulevard. “The dark district is just…a different kind of place.” Harsh laughter boomed from a second-story window, followed by the ring of shattering glass, and howling.

Haru winced. “I’ll say.”

Drawling moans and tight squeals spilled into the street from a different establishment. Kisumi gasped in feigned distress, and clapped his hands over Haru’s hood.

“Oh nooo! Shield your ears, my sweet woodland sprites!”

The siren batted him off. “We know what sex sounds like.”

“I bet you do.”

“You two!” Makoto swiped his gaze anxiously over one shoulder. “I thought that sorceress you talked about lived nearby.”

Kisumi clicked his tongue, unruffled. “Huh? Oh yes, she lives here. In this city, actually.”

“Then why are we here?!”

The spirit hopped over a gutter, and dodged dripping rainwater from the edge of a roof, making it all look like some kind of dance. “Because the safest way to Samezuka is by ship. And the fastest of them sail from the capital.”

“Besides,” he added, “she’s abroad.”

Kisumi steered them through the street, sidestepping carts, and puddles of muck. “That said, it’s still best we avoid the main harbor. I’ve an old acquaintance here who owes me a favor, so we should be nice and cozy aboard a ship to Samezuka before the night’s up!”

Makoto couldn’t help but wonder how much of Kisumi’s cheer was genuine at this point. Though in any case, it was welcome. He trailed close behind with one hand on his linen-wrapped staff, the other fitted securely around Haru’s back. The siren had the hood of his cloak up, delicate webbed fingers curled into the hems of his sleeves. Makoto quietly wished there was more time to appreciate how cute that looked.

Somewhere in this towering metropolis was Haru’s shoreborn brother, Ikuya. Makoto wished they had time enough to meet him, but the boy lived too near the palace.

The trio passed another gloomy lane, and shivers pricked Makoto’s spine. He slid a sidelong glance into the alleyway.

Only a crumbled heap of scrapped brick.

“Do you feel it again?” Haru lifted the tip of his hood. “Is it…me?”

Makoto hadn’t sensed the other kind of cold since that night in the shrine. It had been kill hunger, Kisumi taught them—leaking through the seawater pendant around Haru’s neck. Kurou’s scale was gone now, and Haru fostered no such lust.

“No, Haru. It wasn’t that.” Makoto smiled down warmly to reassure him. “It was more like…”
“Like we’re being watched.”

“Here we are!” Kisumi swung his arm out to present a street corner tavern as though it were fine sculpted art. The building was battered and cracked, foul-looking burn stains scarring the weathered front. Haru got the feeling that this place was damaged at such regular intervals, the owner deemed repairs a futile investment. Sinister clouds of lavender smoke were curling up from somewhere under the roof tiles, and Haru scrunched his nose at the smell. A painted sign hung swinging on rust-crusted hinges over the entrance: *The Harpy’s Hollow.*

“It’s nicer on the inside.” Kisumi winked. “…Or maybe the lights are just dim. Anyway, I have to see to our ride. Once we’re at sea, there should be less to worry about. Before then,” he cast around down the road in both directions. “we can’t be too careful.”

To its credit, the place’s interior *was* nicer, if not the cleanest. Makoto grimaced as he toed over slate tiles sticky with spilled ale. The tavern’s walls were curved and rough, decorated with a pastiche of mounted nautical instruments and other outlandish objects. There was probably an attempt made here at some kind of theme once, but that had obviously been abandoned in favor of eclectic chaos.

A bar stretched across one side, smattered with people— some in engaged company, others dismally nursing lonely flagons. Conversations were wafting upward, melting together into a muffled stew of sound. Even at this time of day, it was lively. Purple fumes billowed from an area near the far end, trailing from the tips of long, lacquered pipes. The stuff stained the smokers’ mouths deep violet, and hung thick in the air. Muggy heat festered from the amber light of two giant sloppily-welded iron chandeliers, and the mellow crowd of patrons.

Makoto checked on Haru as they shuffled deeper into the place. The siren already looked absolutely miserable. He hoped this would be a brief stop.

Kisumi flagged down one of the serving girls with a foxy smile, and slipped a few whispers in her ear. She regarded Makoto and Haru with open surprise, and blushed hard. Setting down her handful of empty mugs, she showed them to a small stone table in one of the alcoves along the far wall. It barely fit there, tucked away between the brick inlet and a small window. She wiped it clean with a rag, and had two mugs of house cider brought in. Kisumi sent her off shy and giggling with a few extra coins, and a peck on the cheek.

“Sit!” He motioned. “You two wait here. I’ll try not to be long. If I’m not back in….say an hour, I’m probably dead, and you should run.”

Haru accepted his seat. “I honestly can’t tell if you’re joking.”

The spirit just laughed, which Makoto didn’t find reassuring at all.

Kisumi leveled them a stern look. “Really though, just…stay out of trouble? And try to keep your frisky fingers to yourselves.”

Makoto sputtered into his cup.

The spirit stole a gulp of Haru’s drink, and folded himself into the crowd.

Haru shrugged. “I didn’t promise him anything.”

They exchanged a loaded look across the cramped table. Makoto was too tall for it, and his legs were forced to straddle the base of Haru’s chair. It had been a long day, a longer week, and they were
spectacularly out of their depth. This brief spot of rest was a blessing, and they basked in each other’s nearness as they shared it. A dirty jar with two wilting daisies in it made a doleful centerpiece. Stems cut, and far from their garden, Makoto felt sorry for them. He reached over and brushed the petals with his fingers. They perked up prettily.

The cider was good. A tinge sour, and much stronger than the few Makoto had tried in Aomori. But it was cold, and sweet enough to savor. Haru sipped his gingerly, brows pinched, the way he always did when he sampled something for the first time. Makoto folded his lips over a laugh. Being close to Haru was a sensation he wished he could cup in his hands, and bottle for later.

If there was one good thing about the table’s confines, it was that Makoto could lean forward on his elbows, and meet Haru halfway. Foreheads nearly touching, they let each other’s emotions tide to and fro between them.

“Haru.” What’s bothering you?

Blue eyes narrowed at the pair of daisies. The siren wet his lips. “I’ve been thinking….that there’s something off about the way Kurou killed the Tear.”

“It’s what he does, isn’t it? Take life…”

“Yes,” Makoto followed.

“But I can’t kill it. I could glare at it all I want, and it won’t die, because there are no eyes to pull its essence from. The Tear is a rock. So how did he do it?”

“I…don’t know. I didn’t even think of that.”

“It worries me.”

Makoto hooked a foot around Haru’s shin under the table. “It doesn’t matter how he did it. We’re going to fix it before he hurts anyone else. One thing at a time, Haru-chan.”

Haru gave him a soft smile.

They weren’t often alone on this trip. It wasn’t as if Makoto didn’t enjoy Kisumi’s company, or couldn’t cap his affections, but he realized he’d been taking the forest’s quiet seclusion for granted all these years. Haru peered up at Makoto over the rim of his mug, sleeves still folded over his hands. The desire to be intimate pulled like a wave back to sea. The siren quirked the tiniest smirk, and edged forward.

“Haru-chan, don’t you dare.”

Makoto choked down a squeak at the press of Haru’s foot between his thighs.

“Don’t I dare, what?” The siren massaged with the balls of his toes, and Makoto couldn’t decide if he wanted to curse him or kiss him. Both, he’d wager—in that order. Haru rolled his heel.

“Th-that—!” Makoto watched condensation beading, dripping down his mug of cider, and he’d never felt such bodily kinship with a cup before. “Not here!” Haru was snickering through his nose, though it barely showed on his face. Makoto supposed it didn’t matter much that they were hiding in the corner of a dicey tavern, on a desperate quest—they still had each other, and if Haru was laughing, Makoto was happy.
Biting his own smile, Makoto snapped his legs together under the table, wrestling Haru’s foot down. “Would you like a glass of water?”

“Yes.”

“Be right back.” Makoto pushed up and made a line for the bar as Haru realized he’d just been baited into stopping.

Haru peeked casually out the window while he waited. It was caked with grime around the sill, and slightly fogged from moist heat inside the tavern, but he still had a view of the wide shipment alley, clock tower, and avenue outside. Citizens ambled by about their business, oblivious to his scrutiny. Someone stopped suddenly against the stream, and Haru sucked in a gasp. A lanky young man with dark robes, pearly skin, and a head of deep green hair that Haru recognized immediately.

_Ikuya?_

The other siren turned, and spotted Haru through the window; it was _undoubtedly_ him.

Haru jumped to his feet, and instantly searched out Makoto. His lover was still at the bar, and when he checked the street again, Ikuya was gone—like a wisp, swept into the current of people. Haru sank back down, and took a swig of cider to quell his nerves. Its odd taste burned a stripe down his throat. *He saw me. What was Ikuya doing in a place like this?*

“Lonely today, are we?”

Haru startled away from the window. A burly man pulled out Makoto’s chair, and noisily made himself comfortable. He thumped his stout hands on the table.

“No.” Haru said flatly, though his body tensed. “That seat is taken.”

The stranger’s fingers were gnarled and scarred as if from chemicals or fire. He had course features, but sharp eyes, and a wicked air about him. He licked his lips in an obscene circle, mouth glistening a sick-looking purple.

“Sure it is, sure.” The chair legs scraped as he dragged closer. “The big guy won’t mind if I borrow it for a bit.”

Haru shifted away, and leveled him a disgusted glare. “I mind.”

The man had a copper-brown tunic on under a wool coat, and Haru saw something glint from behind folds of rough fabric. The siren’s gaze flittered across the tavern to where Makoto was chatting with the barkeep, waiting for their water.

_Hurry up._

“Ain’t seen you around here before.” The man was crowding him over the table now. Haru caught a nose-full of smoke on his breath, choking back a dry cough.

“I’m easy to miss.”

“Oh, I don’t think you are. Just look at those gorgeous blues, boy.” Careless, the stranger picked up their jar of flowers and held one out for Haru to take. “Here. For you.”

*He wants to see my hands. He knows. Makoto, he knows…*

Haru could not guess how it was possible, or how the guy knew what to look for in the first place.
Fear spiked as he sensed the stranger’s focus closing in on him. He drew his arms in closer.

“Leave.”

“Leave? Already, eh?” Violet lips warped into a vicious grin. He retracted the jar, and reached into it with one leathery finger. The water within swirled and lifted away from the sides like wet clay, clinging to his hand in the air. “How cold.”

Haru knew it was coming, but he wasn’t fast enough.

A flick of the man’s wrist sent the water splashing into the siren’s face. He sputtered and stuffed his hood down. Scales were slicking over his tightened jaw.

“There you are, demon.”

“Makoto!”

Pain shot through Haru’s scalp as the hood was ripped back, and he was yanked up by the hair. Someone screamed, though he couldn’t tell from where. There was a quick clink, and the man whipped a glass vial from under his coat. He uncorked it with a pop. Poison. Acid. Haru tore at the iron grip, but it clench him in place with redoubled strength.

“Was told you’d be green, but to hell with it. I imagine they’ll be happy enough with ya.”

Wood splintered, ceramic smashed, and Haru staggered free. Momentum hurled him into the brick wall, and his head spun from the impact. He cracked his eyes open to see Makoto looming with the high end of his staff leveled at the hunter’s throat. Broken bits of the vial lay in a puddle of fizzling liquid that had eaten clean through the floorboards. Makoto advanced. Haru had never seen his lover like this—all crackling intensity, and anger. It sent a frightened thrill shocking over his scales.

“Fuck right off,” the man seethed through stained teeth. “Don’t care if you saw him first. I’ve been waitin’ all month for the little devil. His nasty head’s mine.”

Makoto’s scowl hardened, and he jabbed his staff into the hunter’s chest.

“Not on this earth.”

Tied as he was, the man refused to abandon his prize so soon. With his free hand, the hunter pulled on air, straining until the stone table lifted off the ground. Makoto swerved aside, and it narrowly missed him—colliding with the window, and shattering the glass in jagged sheets. The move threw his balance. Sneering, the hunter jerked the staff until Makoto stumbled forward—and raised a fisted hand. Makoto drove his elbow in with staggering force before the hit landed, and they collapsed backward, grappling, tumbling out the broken window to the alley below.

Haru heard them land with a crunch, and his chest seized. Bar patrons were hollering, and grouping into a stressed mass. He nearly forgot his scales were still plainly visible to all.

He flew to the sill. “Careful! Makoto, his coat! He uses magic!”

Makoto pushed to his feet. Mind racing, Haru scooped the Guardian’s staff off the ground, and swung up onto the wooden frame. He spared a last glance into the tavern. People ducked away from him, shrieking and tripping over each other for an exit. Haru caught only a glimpse of Kisumi, staring dumbfounded and a little pissed off from the rear of the bar before leaping down into the alley.
“Haru—!” Makoto wailed. “Stay inside!”

“No.”

Haru thrust the staff at Makoto, and took his place beside him. There were no further protests. Makoto recognized wasted effort. A short distance away, the hunter collected himself with a pained grunt.

Makoto squared his stance, grip firming on his staff. “Who are you? What do you want with him?”

He gaped at Makoto for a beat, then shook with a gut-churning laugh. “What do I want with him?! The question is, why do you want him?!”

Haru finally noticed the blood on Makoto’s shirt. Thin swipes of red beaded on his hands and arms where broken glass had cut him in the fall. He was balanced heavily on his left foot.

The man hocked, and spat on the ground. “Don’t think anyone puts up much fight when the sweepers squash a roach in the gutter.” He curled his arms in. “Same idea. Only this roach happens to be worth quite a bit more.” Shards of window glass lifted and rallied to him from where they lay scattered in the alley, glinting with reflected sky as they floated dangerously overhead. “So run along, mountain kid. Unless you fancy being a pin cushion.” Every sharp edge was angled toward Makoto.

Blazing fury flooded Haru’s veins—feral, and untapped.

_How dare he._

This could all end _now_. The human’s face was twisted with ruthless intent to hurt the one Haru loved with everything he was. Anger swirled into a sick strain of desire. He drew in a rattling gasp, pulling the atmosphere inward, and his scales crept higher.

Makoto gave a stiff shudder at his side, and Haru remembered himself like a slap across the face. He reeled back, ashamed.

Haru shook himself clear, and sprang into view to block his lover’s body with his own. The hunter swore as he was forced to tear his eyes away. Unable to aim, he let the glass shards clatter to the ground.

Haru swelled with victory, and Makoto seized their chance. He forced his lungs empty, and thumped the base of his staff on the ground. As he dragged in a full breath, the earth beneath him came alight. Veins of magic that wound under his feet shone white and green, like midday sunlight filtered through the canopy in Aomori. Haru stared in wonder.

“Shit.” The hunter backed away, eyes blown with terror-tinted regret. He flipped back his coat to snatch a vial from his belt, but too slow.

Makoto whirled his staff outward, and the glowing roots of ichor coiled forth around the hunter’s arms like hungry vines. Haru sensed the earth flowing under his feet. It sent an oddly calming tingle up his legs and over his shoulder blades, as he squinted through the brightness of it. Another push, and Makoto sent the man flying through the air. Yelling something foul, the hunter landed with a wet-sounding thump in a garbage cart outside the tavern’s side door.

Gasp and murmurs leaked from the broken tavern window, and chorused in the street.

They waited.
After a brief rustling, the hunter heaved himself up, and out. He was plastered in unspeakable filth, and sped away the instant his feet hit solid ground.

Makoto leaned back with a heavy exhale. The roots dimmed, and soaked back into the ground without a trace. Haru and Makoto snapped together immediately, scanning one another head to toe.

“Haru-chan, are you ok?”

“Obviously.” Haru reached up to angle his lover’s face to the side, and grimaced at a trail of blood near his right ear. “You hurt your foot, too.”

“A little. I fell on it funny…”

Behind them, the crowd was getting unruly, and the ruckus finally pulled their full attention.

“HEY!” A commanding voice boomed. “What’s going on over there?!”

Haru panicked. “City Guard.”

Makoto lowered his staff, eyes roving over the gathering throng for Kisumi. They couldn’t be caught by the guards. The lifeless heart of Iwatobi was an insistent weight in Makoto’s pack, and there was no easy way to explain why. With the fight over, they were lost again—two lonely leaves carried on a current too far away from home.

“Excuse me. That’s very nice, but it’s in my way, sorry—” Kisumi had wrestled a path to the window. He jumped, and landed lightly on his toes, looking harried. Haru loosed a begrudging sigh of relief to see him.

“Amazing, Makoto!” Kisumi huffed, brushing off his robe. “You use your sacred gift either fending off ultimate evil, or scrapping around in gutter fights; there’s just no in-between with you, huh?”

Makoto whined apologetically. He leaned on Haru’s shoulder, keeping his weight off his right side. “Ah, Kisumi, did you land us a ship?”

“Not in ten minutes I didn’t!”

Haru found his patience fuse worn dangerously short. “Whatever, we need to go. Do the wing thing.”

“Oh sure, let’s just do that here in front of fifty people—”

CRACK!

Smoke exploded into the alley with a whistling snap.

Makoto crashed into Haru to cage him against the closest wall. The fog poured from a point on the ground—impossibly thick, and spuming with dust like billows of fine sand in shallow water. Haru wheezed into Makoto’s robe, and tested his eyes open to peer though the haze.

“Over here!”

Tears were welling up, blurring Haru’s vision into muted smears of color and motion. But that voice was unmistakable.

“Ikuya?!”
The other shoreborn was a darkened form crouched behind a hedge of empty barrels.

There would be time for questions later. Affirming, the boy pushed on the drainage panel of the opposite building, sliding it back to reveal a passage large enough to duck through. He threw out an eager arm to beckon them inside. Alarm bells rang somewhere in the corner of Haru’s mind. Makoto stifled a hurt noise, and he ignored them.

In the alley, the smokescreen was already thinning. Haru pulled Makoto through, pressing a hand on his head to make sure he cleared the low entrance. Kisumi swooped in after them. Ikuya heaved the door shut, banishing both light and sound. Adrenaline was still hammering through Haru’s system. Their ragged breathing was loud and immediate in total blackness.

“This way,” Ikuya said, voice fading as he tramped ahead. Three clicks sounded from where he walked, and then they had light. A lopsided stone the size of a cypress cone glowed between his fingers like a tiny flame. “Come on! We can do introductions and explanations when we’re safe enough away from here.”

The siren turned on his heel and started walking, not pausing to check if they followed. The light of Ikuya’s stone didn’t afford much visibility beyond him, but stacks of pried-open crates, barrels, and cracked clay pots told Haru they were in some kind of warehouse facility.

Kisumi craned in close to him, one eyebrow cocked in question.

Haru paused, but nodded yes, and they filed after the other boy. Haru bolstered Makoto’s weight on the injured side as they went, moving carefully as he could manage. He prayed his shoreborn brother was leading them somewhere he could treat the wounds. Ikuya was even taller now—as long-limbed and graceful as Haru remembered from four years ago. Though he was walking with a jaunty bounce in his step that was markedly new.

“So you’re Ikuya, then?” Makoto beamed. “I’ve heard a lot about you!”

“Likewise!” Ikuya came to a fork in the passage—one staircase leading up, the other below. He considered his choices, eyes darting between them, before plunging down the second.

Air cooled as they descended. Stairs leveled off, and the tunnel gradually lost its definition, becoming rougher and rougher-made. Other walkways veered off elsewhere, labeled with numbers and words etched in an unfamiliar alphabet. Rusty water stains streaked down the walls, and trickling sounds tickled Haru’s ears from nearby. He guessed from the direction they faced coming in, that they were delving straight into the canyon shelf. Ikuya was humming a tune under his breath, which Haru found strangely comforting as they trekked into the abyss. At least he knew where he was leading them.

“Huh.” Kisumi glanced behind, and sniffed the air. “I didn’t know the old smugglers’ burrows were still being used.”

“They aren’t.” Ikuya snickered. “Which is why we’re using them.”

“Ikuya. That bounty hunter was after you,” Haru stated. “Why?” The rush from earlier had worn off, and he was growing impatient. Ikuya had never been secretive.

The other siren tossed his firestone and caught it again, mindlessly jostling the shadows. “I can tell you in a bit, yeah? Once we get where we’re going. Almost there, I promise. ‘Kay, Haru-chan?”

Haru’s blood ran cold, and he ground to a stop.
“Ikuya doesn’t call me that.” Haru bit down on his panic to swallow it raw. “He’s never called me that. Who are you?”

The boy stilled, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Aaaww, he doesn’t? Drat. He should!”

The light winked out, plunging them into total dark. Makoto shrieked, and jerked Haru closer. In a second it burst back to life, and the other siren had vanished. Haru blinked hard to adjust as he felt Kisumi’s wings spread behind him. A boy with fine golden hair stood in Ikuya’s place, rolling the firestone in his palm. They faced down the passage into round red eyes, and a devilish grin.

_____________________

Rin blew out the last candle at his desk, sighing into warm wafts of spiced citrus wax, and lingering smoke. It was finished. His speech lay written and waiting, ink dry, rolled neatly beside his cup of cold tea. Penned into that address were the first decrees in his legacy as ruler. Come his coronation day, magistrates from every pocket of the empire would bear witness. He was excited for it as he was nervous.

Here he would leave it, in Gou’s capable hands.

An order was out for the Imperial Fleet to sail at first sun in three days’ time for Tajiri. When the ships left port, so would he.

The day had left him worn as a wrung-out rag. He kneaded bleariness from his eyes with the heel of his palm, tired gaze wandering to a tapestry above his bed. The first Matsuoka Emperor and his winged dragon were blazing down its length in bright red and metallic threads, triumphant amidst a wreath of flames. Mountain devils burned screaming before them, as the legendary partners lifted evil from Samezuka. It was Rin’s favorite story as a little boy. His father had read it to him so many times, he knew all the best verses by heart. Afterward, he’d go to bed babbling to Gou with his head full of stars, knowing that someday he could—no, he would be a hero like that. Protecting Samezuka was going to be his purpose, so pure and simple to him then. The years since had taught him better. His reign was already mired in doubt and betrayal. The future was hard as it was hopeful.

Though not everything was so complicated. He stood and stretched his back, dredging up a yawn from somewhere deep. Sousuke was melted onto the sofa where he’d dozed off waiting for Rin to finish writing. A sailor’s log was open flat on his chest, and one leg and his free arm hung lazily over the side of the cushions. Rin crouched down, smiling to himself. He lifted the book away, and combed gentle fingers through dark, coarse hair. Sousuke’s guarded glower was smoothed over, his face soft in the hearth’s pulsing glow. Rin stole the occasion just to watch—like he did all those afternoons Sousuke would fall asleep cloudspotting in the grass with him when they were giddy teenagers. Irrepressible happiness welled up within, expanding in Rin’s chest and sweeping out to his fingertips. Rin wanted to wrap him up, and keep him here safe forever. But Sousuke would never have that. If Rin went diving after danger, his beloved would stay by his side.

Recalling their morning diversion in the spare room flushed Rin’s face rosy, and quickened his heartbeat. The need to touch again became a pressing ache that he gave into without a second thought. Sousuke’s lips were warm and pliant, and Rin brushed them with his own until they kissed him back. A hand glided up his spine to tangle in his hair, deepening the kiss until the two of them
were a laughing, twisting heap under the covers of their bed. Teeth and tongues teased over blushing skin as they breathed each other in, intoxicated and unhurried.

Finally, Rin broke away and rolled onto his back, panting lightly. They were both exhausted. He let Sousuke get comfortable before settling into the space over his scarred shoulder. Sousuke looped a leg over, stroking Rin’s calf with a heel. Nothing, and no one had ever made him feel so present, and fiercely treasured. Rin hummed, eyes fluttering closed.

Outside this bed, his world was constricting, crumbling down in a landslide; nothing made sense.

But of this, he was absolutely certain.

______________________

It has to be you.

He woke up in a lonely place.

Rin had never been here, though he felt like somehow he knew where it was. A temple—cavernous and dark inside, but light enough to see his breath puff out in frosty wisps. The ground swayed beneath his feet, and a colossal creaking sound stirred the lofty walls.

He lifted a hand to call out.

“Hello?”

Rin’s voice echoed back to him. There was a distant fluttering sound, like a bird’s wings in the domed ceiling, but no answer. Wind howled through tunnels, singing a hollow ballad. This hall was ancient; he’d never felt so young, or so small. Hugging his arms in, he shuddered, and plunged into the misty unknown. His feet were bare, and the stone seemed to leach the very heat out of him with every step forward.

There were roots on the ground that twisted up into springy saplings with leaves like lapis. Rin had never seen such trees in Samezuka before. Curious, he followed them along cracks in the tile to their base. There he found a staff—alive with tiny carvings, that had planted itself upright. The sight was strange and beautiful. Though it made him sad, for a reason he couldn’t explain.

He edged around it in reverence, until his toes pricked on something sharp and grainy. Black sand. It was scattered and shallow, but a steady hiss from somewhere nearby told him it would not be shallow for much longer. Hurry. He had to be here for something; there must be a reason. Urgency piling higher, he looked around.

Nothing.

Nothing.

There.

A tenebrous silhouette darkened the eddies of grey. Tall, and proud, and magnetically familiar. Rin’s heart dropped like an iron ball. He tore across the distance.
“Sou!” He skidded to a halt. “Sousuke…?”

*Red.* Blood stained Sousuke’s hands, up to his elbows, soaking into his shirt. Rin couldn’t tell if it was his. He skimmed his lover’s body for wounds, but found none.

“Oh gods, no…”

Sousuke’s face was pale, lips parted, eyes open and unfocused. Rin cradled his cheeks, and searched for him, but the sparkling sea green was colorless, and dim.

“Say something, Sou. I love you, *Please—*”

There was no response. Dread froze into claws, and raked against the inside of his ribcage.

Sand was flooding in, devouring, creeping toward them over the blue roots like a disease.

“What should I do?” Rin wondered to no one.

*It has to be me.*

*There’s no time, there’s no time—*

Reality breached the surface like a gulp of air after an icy dive. Rin lurched awake. He blinked up at the canopy of his bed, his muscles locked, and blood pounding. The back of his night robe was damp with sweat. He tossed around, scrambling for his bearings.

“Rin?” Sousuke mumbled into red hair. His voice was the only thing Rin really needed to hear right now. “What is it? What happened?”

Rin craned up to see Sousuke’s face. Worried, heavy ocean eyes met his, still bright in the morning gloom.

“Nothing. Just a bad dream.”

The arm around Rin’s back stirred, and rubbed clumsy circles into his shoulder.

“Tell me about it?”

“I…” The nightmare was already washing away with each pull of the present, slipping through Rin’s fingers as he grasped for its memory. Fleeting images, fear, and something about running out of time…

“…I forgot.”

Rin was intensely awake now. He sat up and checked the windows. Dense, fleecy blankets of fog had unfurled themselves over the city, swallowing the distance in an eerie haze. Something felt off. He peeled the covers away, and hissed as a sunless chill nipped at his bare legs.

Sousuke pushed up on an elbow with messy hair, and a pout. “Time to get up?”
“Not yet.” Rin dipped to kiss him once on the forehead. “Still early. I’ll be right back, Sou. Keep the bed warm for me.”

“Yes, your Highness.” Sousuke collapsed onto the pillow, back asleep in seconds. A surge of affection drew Rin down to hike the covers over him on the way out.

Cracks in the wood had been filed away, and Rin’s door made no sound when he closed it. The drop in temperature was dramatic once he backed into the corridor. Ghostly blue filtered in from windows to the private garden at the end of the hall. Crisp stillness was loud in his ears.

A stark figure was making its way to the doors. Rin blinked away the shock.

“Uncle?! Where are you going?”

The man halted. He clearly hadn’t expected to be seen. It was too early to fly, even for him. Slowly, he faced Rin, recognition steeling his strong features.

“Away,” he replied coolly.

“Away where?”

Akira had his coat on, and his riding pants. A light pack was strapped over a shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. Go on and crawl back into bed with your whitethroat pit boy, nephew.”

Anger flared up like a lit torch, and Rin seethed. “Don’t talk about him like that.” He walked out into the center of the hallway, and faced his uncle squarely. “Tell me where you’re going.”

Voice dripping disdain, the man resigned. “I am taking Sango and her family, and we are flying to that island. When we arrive, we will melt the mountain over the witches’ heads before they are within even a hundred miles of here.”

Rin reeled.

“There are six thousand people living on Tajiri! Our people! Citizens who don’t even know the Hazukis are using their land!”

“Unlucky casualties.”

“You don’t get to decide that.” Rin raged forward. “Our duty is to protect them. We will clear them out—get everyone to safety on the fleet before we attack. You’re not going to kill them all. Not again.”

His uncle rolled his eyes. “And how long will it take you to evacuate the island? Hours? A whole day? If it was not a trap before, it will be should we grant them that chance to prepare for us. You’ll lose the fleet. You’ll lose everything.”

“We’ll find a way,” Rin growled.

Something sparked in Akira’s stony countenance. “Is that so? Or will you jeopardize the safety of twenty million for six thousand?”

“It’s not that simple. Human lives can’t be boiled down to a fucking math equation!”

“You still don’t understand. When you rule over the largest empire in the world, that’s exactly what
they are.” Akira retreated a few paces away. “And there is no room for mistakes.”

He rounded, and headed for the door.

“I’m the Emperor, and I forbid you to go,” Rin commanded. “One more step and this’ll be treason.”

“Nephew, if you won’t defend Samezuka, I will. Whether you permit me to, or not. So if you want to stop me, you had better kill me yourself.” He snarled, baring teeth that were longer than Rin’s, and sharper. “Or can’t you?”

The look he gave burned under Rin’s skin. There was anger, pity, poison, and a challenge. Just outside, the gigantic shadow of Sango darkened the window in dusky garnet. Akira threw the door open wide, and wind whipped into Rin’s face.

“STOP!” Desperation was clawing to the surface, but he couldn’t back down. Rin rushed forward.

Akira’s thin sword was unsheathed with a tinny scrape. Eyes trained on the steel point, Rin realized mid-step that he was in his night clothes, and completely unarmed. He sprang aside, stumbling backward into something warm. Rin had not heard Sousuke come up from behind. Before he could right himself, a strong arm maneuvered him out of harm’s way.

“Wait!” Rin curled around Sousuke’s waist.

“Rin, stay back.”

Sousuke was simmering with quiet fury, dagger in one hand, balanced on Rin’s word. All the years Rin had known him, this wrath had been there—buried like permafrost in the bones of a little boy who had lost everything. Serizawa’s story had doubtlessly torn the wound open anew.

Akira’s mouth pressed into an unforgiving line. He tapped the point of his sword to the floor, each clack of steel on black marble reminding them which blade was longer. With the difference in their reach so great, the odds were staunchly in his favor. Rin’s world was narrowing, the pressure pulling him apart. He wrestled Sousuke’s arms down. It was like bottling a hurricane.

“This is for Samezuka.” Akira held Sousuke’s stare. “As it always has been.”

At that moment, crackling heat blew in from the open doorway. Sango landed on the balcony, and lowered herself to let Akira climb up into the saddle. She dipped her head, baring long fangs smeared with gore from an early hunt. The dragon’s breath fumed inside, stinking of smoke and charred remains. Three slaps to her scales, and she hurled her massive body over the balcony. After a few beats of her wings, the pair disappeared into a heap of thick fog.

Sousuke wrenched out of Rin’s hold. “The fuck was that for!? I could’ve stopped him! I—”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m not risking you like that.”

Sousuke’s protest dissolved before Rin’s naked fear. His face slackened, arms dropping uselessly to his sides.

Rin moved forward, cautious. “But I’m not about to let my uncle kill those people, either.”

Shafts of dawn speared through fog over the mountains, pale gold glistening across the tiles. Rin was
going to fight two battles instead of one. He reached down and pried open Sousuke’s vice grip on the dagger, replacing the weapon with his own hand. “It’s not gonna happen again. I won’t let it. We won’t let it.”

Sousuke’s eyes flashed with determination, though Rin could not say for what. He wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to know.

“Your Majesty!” Three sentries sprinted from the stairway into a halt. “We heard shouting! Is everything alright?”

“Yes.” Rin was terrified of what this meant. Even if he’d seen this fight coming, he was still facing down his own family. “Tell the armory and the storehouse keepers I want my armor packed, as well as three weeks’ provisions for both of us. Have my saddle ready on the wall as well. We’re heading out as soon as we can.”

One of the guards tipped her helmet up, confused. “Your Majesty, I thought your departure was set for—”

“Three days from now, yeah,” Rin clipped. “But circumstances have changed. The fleet proceeds as planned.”

The sentries swooped to bow their understanding before sweeping back down the stairwell. Their footsteps and the soft echo of metal spiraled into silence.

Rin shivered as a north wind slithered through the open doors and crept under his night robe. Fire in the air had burned itself cold. Sousuke was faced away from him, searching over the city where the mass of clouds glowed a haunting crimson. Rin remembered his nightmare in icy clarity.

_________

“Good morning, Princess.”

Nao set his book down. Natsuya was sprawled atop a pile of cushions in a sunny alcove, and scrambled to his feet. They hadn’t expected to see anyone this early in the palace library, much less the princess herself.

“Your Majesty. Captain Kirishima,” Gou acknowledged. “Might I have a quick moment with you, King?” She motioned to her handmaiden, and the girl settled cheerily beside Natsuya.

“Of course.”

Natsuya tensed, but straddled his unease. Winking sugar-sweet, Chigusa placed one hand on his knee and kicked up a playful conversation. The princess led Nao a few paces away, within view but out of earshot. Able to see him at least, Natsuya relaxed.

“How might I help you, Princess?” Nao smiled.

Gou did not.

“My brother is riding out this morning.” Her eyes were hardened ruby. All of her heat was sharpening, crystallizing in the shrinking space between them.
“Ah.” Nao swallowed, and battled his urge to back into the book shelf. “That is…I thought he was leaving in—”

“He’s leaving now. They are staking their lives on your word, King.” She waited, her stare severe and unwavering.

“You still don’t believe me,” Nao confirmed.

“I want to believe you. I was moved yesterday too, don’t read me wrong. But we both know that trust is a luxury not all can afford.” There was a dragon fang knife at her belt, worn openly, and sheathed in gold. “If my brother doesn’t come home, his throne falls to me.”

“I am aware.”

“Then let me make you aware of something else.”

The princess leaned in close, tilting her chin up to his ear. “If I find proof that you’ve set us up after all,” she circled around to his other side, stalking like a predator. “If Rin dies out there from some trick of yours...” Gou directed Nao’s gaze to Natsuya, who was laughing about something, golden and glowing against the window light. “…then your lover will burn.” The princess dropped her voice to a whisper. “And you will watch every agonizing second.”

Nao’s response lodged like thistle in his throat.

“So now is your last chance to tell me, King. Are you lying?”

Wordless, they saw through each other’s glass walls in that moment: two young people who had grown up too fast, and borne far too much on their shoulders. The princess was scared to death for her brother.

As were they all.

“Everything I told you in that meeting was the truth.”

“Good.” Relief sighed into her voice. “I’ll let you get back to your studies, then.”

The pair returned, and Chigusa flitted back to Gou’s side, some joke still on her tongue. With a quick nod, and a last fleeting glance, the Samezuka women left.

Natsuya kicked his legs up and reclined against the cushions again, absently uncapping another scroll. “The hell was that about?”

“I love you.” Nao let it tumble from his lips.

The parchment in Natsuya’s hands skittered to the floor, and curled. His shock twisted Nao’s heart. Even if Nao thought those words every day, he could probably count on his fingers how many times he had said them aloud.

“I love you, Natsuya. I don’t tell you that enough.”

Nao walked closer, his senses a blur around one single point, and sank into his lover’s lap. Natsuya circled his arms over the king’s back, burying his hands in threaded silver. Nao clung to him, and vowed to never let go. The baton had been passed to another; it was out of their reach now. Their long struggle would soon be over, whether in victory or devastation.

A piercing, thundering cry rent the sky over Samezuka Palace, reverberating in tremors through
Nao’s ribs. The Emperor’s dragon touched down on the rampart.

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Chapter End Notes

NOTES:

-The tune “Ikuya” was humming to himself was the Secret Tunnel song. Yes. That one.

-Just because, here are a few of the nasty terms slung around thus far:

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ringneck—A slur for a slave, either in service or freed.
whitethroat—A freed slave. It refers to the ring of previously unexposed skin around the collar area that tends to linger for about five to eight months after the strap is removed.
witch—The unisex term for a street fortune teller in Iwatobi. They are usually very weak magic users (it’s questioned whether some of them have any magical ability whatsoever), and are considered charlatans by the well-to-do. To call a powerful sorcerer a “witch” is grievously insulting.
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-Tajiri is named after Tajiri Shrine. Give it a quick search; it should look familiar ;D

Thank you for reading, and I hope you guys are all having a great holiday season!! (Sorry to leave you with such a heavy chapter, ayy).
The Rockhoppers

Chapter Summary

Rin and Sousuke leave the city, while Makoto and Haru meet some new (and old) faces.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An array of blades fanned out on the floor of Rin’s chamber with Sousuke quietly indecisive at the center of them. Thunder in his veins from earlier that morning had dulled to a throb, and ferocity festered in the lull.

He curled his hand around the grip of a sword, and lifted, testing the weight. A sea serpent snaked around the hilt of it, eyes piercing blue sapphire. These blades had belonged to bygone Matsuoka royals, forged in dragonfire infernos; one would be hard-pressed to find better tools for killing.

Even so. The sharpest spears in the most capable hands did not save Whale Bay from Akira ten years ago. Neither would they be a match for the golden-haired witches whose magic could uproot whole houses like garden weeds. Before the might of dragons and sorcerers, Sousuke was a bug with a sewing needle. He could not delude himself; he wouldn’t be able to protect Rin, in the larger scope of things. But that sure as hell wasn’t going to stop him from trying.

He rose to fit himself with a warm shirt for riding, and leather bracers. They would not face Matsuoka Akira today. With a start like this, and an army to muster, the chase would be hard. Preparations and packing could be sped up, but not skipped altogether, with two battles laid out like waiting spring traps ahead of them.

A decade ago, Sousuke had been marched up the main road of Samezuka like a prize, stripped of family and future. Blood-red banners lined the streets that day, the sun blazing onto them like columns in the halls of hell at the Emperor’s homecoming. Drums barked, and horns blared as if the murderer had won something. Sousuke had loathed this place: The Matsuokas, their beasts. Everything about it, and everyone in it. The Dragon Emperor’s life would be his to take. It was likely he’d die for the effort, but he was alright with that. When he turned himself inside-out, he found there was nothing that he liked enough to grow old for, anyway.

Then he met Rin.

That bright, ridiculous, beautiful boy—who had crashed through Sousuke’s barriers and claimed his entire world. Suddenly, unwillingly, Sousuke had let an enemy become the light of his life. Rin showed him love that took no sides, and knew no cages. That love was loud, and all-consuming. It shouted over his anger, pushed him ahead toward happiness in a future he never thought he’d have another shot at.

But when the lights went dark and he was alone, Sousuke admitted that his rage was still there—lurking cold and unresolved. Rin’s life was threatened, his parents’ bones lay unburied in an ashen graveyard.

He had never been quite ready to let those demons expire.
Slowly, he fastened his bag, and yanked the tie closed. He didn’t have much in the way of personal belongings: A few changes of clothes, his cleaning set, a carving knife, dagger, whetstones, and the illicit potions Kisumi had given him for his birthday. He’d bundled the glass tubes up in felted wool for travel, stowing a few choice ones just in case. His hand stilled as it closed over something small and round.

The glassy violet orb his sponsor had given him the night of the banquet shone between the pinch of his fingers. He’d all but given up on it ever working again, but Rin still held out hope, and he couldn’t bring himself to leave it.

Footsteps clacked in the hallway—satin-light and spaced too short to be Rin’s. Sousuke startled.

“Gou?”

Samezuka’s young princess leaned against Rin’s doorway, her lips set. “Will you take a walk with me, Sousuke? I have a favor to ask of you.”

Gou steered them out of earshot of any window. Sousuke let the princess stay a hand on his arm, and lead him out to the garden, down the leaf-littered stairs and stepstones.

It was probably proper to let her speak first, but the princess remained pensive and silent, the soft rattle of beads on her dress chiming with every step. Sousuke waited; the tension was gnawing at his patience. He cleared his throat, and said what he already knew.

“You’re gonna ask me not to kill your uncle.”

Gou slid a thoughtful sideways glance at him.

“No. I’m not. You may have to kill him; that’s really not for me to say.”

Sousuke opened his mouth with a question, but when he reached for it, the thought was vague and unformed.

“My brother’s leaving me with his coronation address,” Gou offered. “Which I read this morning. There are a few things in it that are changes he’s wanted to make here for a very long time.”

Sousuke prickled with interest. “Like what?”

“You’ll have to wait for him to give it!”

"Ugh.” Sousuke scoffed, leading her between the rows of swordplants along the waterside. A pair of wrens chased each other through the tree branches above, punctuating the spell of quiet.

“You never had the chance to meet our father,” Gou mused. “Rin is a lot like him, in some ways. Dad was a dreamer, too. A traveling writer and a singer, when Mom fell in love with him. Insufferable romantics, both of them. When we were little, he used to read us these stories that he’d picked up on his trips, and Rin adored them. I’m sure you know that much.”

“An understatement.”

She nudged Sousuke’s arm with her elbow. “Sometimes Dad would reach the end of one, and the heroes would die for some misstep or injustice. Every time, Rin would be so mad.” She bit over a breathy chuckle, aglow with the memory. “He couldn’t stand to see bad outcomes befall good people. Dad would say, ‘that’s how it is, son. That’s the story; things don’t always turn out the way they should.’”
Gou sighed, and continued. “So of course, Rin would go make up an alternate ending, and stuff his paper full of scribbles into records that were hundreds of years old. Just in case the regular ending made someone else sad.”

It was impossible not to laugh. Sousuke shook his head. “I can see that. Rin’s always marched to his own tune.” He felt a swell of adoration. “The concept of ‘That’s how it is’ is just never going to cut it for him.”

“Nope,” Gou agreed.

They rounded a corner, startling two ducks into the stream.

The princess lifted her skirt hem lightly as they descended a flight of shallow steps. “I think I knew early on what our roles had to be in this palace. Rin would lead the empire, and I would help him manage it.” She traced her gaze over the contours of her family’s stronghold, then up to Sousuke, with guarded intent. “I understand my uncle’s choices.”

Sousuke’s spine went rigid.

“Not agree with them all,” she clarified, “but I know why he thinks the way he does. Sometimes I wonder if I might turn out the same. Spend long enough in our court, and you begin searching for the ugliness in people’s hearts before anything else.” She skimmed a fingernail along the bridge rail as they crossed together. “You and I are much the same in that way.”

Sousuke seethed an agreement.

“Rin’s different, though,” he said. “He is.” There was a smile in Gou’s voice, as she faced into the trees. “My brother sees the very best in people, even when they can’t see it in themselves. When you think there’s no light left, he finds it, and holds onto it.”

Sousuke knew it better than most. “It’s one of the things that I…love about him.”

Gou squeezed his arm gently. “But that compassion has brought him no small amount of pain. People take advantage of it. They lie to him, abandon him, stomp him down.”

A flare of anger jumped up Sousuke’s throat, and tightened his jaw.

Gou met his eyes again, calmly burning. “That spark of hope in my brother that used to ask our dad for happy endings, that lets him keep dreaming for something better—is precious. So I’m asking you to protect that. I don’t know what you’ll have to do. But please protect him, Sousuke. That’s the favor I’m asking of you.”

A chill wind swept over the grass to tease their hair beneath the canopy.

Stunned, Sousuke dipped his head in a solemn promise.

“Rin’s strong,” Gou said, her composure loosening. “He’ll be as strong as he needs to be, for everyone. But with you, he…” She turned to Sousuke, peering up thoughtfully, gratefully. The rest of her sentence sank in unsaid.

They hit the end of the garden’s walking loop, slowing to a stop at a pair of overgrown lanterns.
They were rainwater birdbaths now, and tadpoles chased each other around the basins.

Gou let Sousuke’s hand drop, tipping her chin up to see him straight. “You have Rin’s whole heart in your hands. I know that it’s heavy, and it’s fragile. So please be careful with it.”

“He’s everything to me,” Sousuke said. It was a little forward, maybe. But true.

A smile like wisps of dawn clouds curled the corners of Gou’s mouth. “I know.” She pulled him down to press a kiss to his forehead.

“Gou.” Sousuke leveled the princess a calm look. “What would you do right now, in my place?”

She fell back on her heels. Sousuke sensed the turbulence of indecision. The question had caught her off-guard, though he knew it must have occurred to her before. After a beat, Gou formed a response for him, and leaned in.

“Gou! Sousuke! There you are.” Rin brightened the shadow of a ginkgo as he crossed the lawn. “Thought you got lost on the way back from the armory or something. You packed?”

The princess retreated, and Sousuke knew he would never have her answer.

“Guess so.” Sousuke joined him, untangling a stray leaf stuck in Rin’s fine hair. He straightened, and stilled trustingly, until it was tossed back to the wind.

“Saddle’s loaded, Tora’s waiting. Sooner we get out there, the better chance we have at catching him in time.”

Something intangible passed between the three of them. They knew goodbyes were in order; it felt unnatural to hold them in.

Then the princess placed one arm on each of them. “Come back whole, you two.”

They left Gou in the garden, a solitary slash of crimson silk in the nest of green. Sousuke peered back a final time to see her greet a mule-sized dragon that had perched on the lawn, whispering in its ear before sending it off with a wave.

“Ah.” Rin giggled through his teeth. “Gou’s calling her boy home.”

They trudged their way up the last few flights of stairs to the top of the palace wall. The steps spiraled upward, with room for only one at a time.

Rin stopped at a break in the stairs, one flight from the exit. Sousuke almost tripped into him. A grated lancet window brightened the space, letting outside air in, and warming the bricks that would have been dark and cold without. Sousuke stopped one step below, and Rin towered above him.

“What did my sister want to talk to you about?”

“She’s just worried about you, that’s all.”

“Hm.” Rin’s gaze swept out the window over the land, and lifted on a current. “She does that too much.”

“Well. Given where we’re going, I can see why she might be uneasy.”
“Are you sure you want to come with me?” Rin was refusing to make eye contact. A shadow of doubt hung about him, and maybe something heavier.

“What are you saying?” Sousuke pushed up to Rin’s level to share the step with him.

“I just think that maybe you coming along’s not the best idea. It’s gonna get crazy, and—” Rin shifted, distracted and unsteady. His voice was small. “What if you get hurt?”

“Then I get hurt.”

Rin bristled, and Sousuke stayed him gently. “But I will try my best not to.”

He curled an honest smile, and Rin looked like he might either cry, or bite.

“I’m being serious, you ass.”

“So am I.”

Sousuke leaned down, and dissolved any further protests. Rin squirmed in his embrace; Sousuke knew he wasn’t getting off this easy; the conversation wasn’t over, but they needed to go. He cupped a hand over Rin’s jaw, and coaxed his mouth open, urging inside with a low groan from the back of his throat. Rin’s breathing quickened in response. Sousuke’s other hand traced up Rin’s spine, making him arch forward into his arms. He gave in, and pinned Sousuke up against the rounded wall. Their muffled heavy exhales, and the scuffle of their feet echoed loud in the stairwell.

They parted with a sigh, and Sousuke grinning against Rin’s cheek.

Seijuuro saluted at the top of the rampart, directing his men at attention. They formed a straight path to escort the Emperor to his dragon. Ai and Momo were antsy, waiting at the end of it. Momo was still in his nightclothes and wearing plush house slippers, as if he’d sprinted here straight from his bed to make it in time. Both of them bowed to wish their good-lucks. Momo had even brought two large beetles with him in a paper box which, he tried to convince them, would be helpful. But battle was no place for the poor bugs; Rin promised to come back for them.

Lastly, somewhat surprisingly, King Serizawa and Captain Kirishima were there to see them off, and bid them godspeed. Most visitors were a shaky mess standing this high on the wall, but the Iwatobi emissaries seemed utterly at home. They had abandoned all pretense, with their hands clasped together, blue robes fluttering loosely in the breeze at the top of the platform. Serizawa’s collar was undone, as was his immaculate braid. His elbow-length silver hair shadowed his face; he looked haunted.

Tora was ready, with a new saddle strapped to her back, and fire in her eyes. Rin craned forward to stroke her face, and level his gaze with hers. She shifted on her feet, grinding her claws into the rock, and releasing several sharp huffs of steam. The dragon was nervous, and her anxiety buzzed in the atmosphere. She was not the largest dragon in Samezuka, and far from the oldest, Rin said. A battle call was no small test of faith.

He leaned into her. “Let’s go, girl.”

Rin mounted the saddle, and pulled Sousuke up behind him. He raised a hand, and the soldiers on the wall gave a shout in response, clattering the butts of their pikes on the tile. Tora thumped her heavy tail, loosening dust and gravel with each strike. The air stirred as her muscles flexed, and
she pushed off the platform.

Samezuka Valley was every bit as vast and unknowable now as it had been when Sousuke first beheld it. Only the edge of its expanse brushed with civilization. The treetops whispered, leaves and fronds swaying, saturated with bird calls and insect trills. Beyond this valley lay the uncharted wilderness from which no rider had returned. This was no place for humans. Yet, it would ever be their salvation.

They glided along the rim of red mountains as Tora roared from deep inside, her voice driving like thunderclaps into the land’s ancient bones. She tipped her jaws up, and set the sky ablaze with a signal that could be seen for miles around.

They hovered, gliding in a wide circle as they waited. She expelled more steam.

An answering call.

Then another, and several more spaced from within the caves, and along the river.

A whoosh of wings, and the gravelly scrape of claws on rock, trees shifting—Samezuka was coming deeply, ferociously alive. One by one, other dragons peeled away from the cliffs, and lifted off from the wetlands, falling into formation behind their new alpha.

“They’re coming!” Rin whooped. “Look at that, girl, they heard you.”

Ten minutes later, Tora sliced through the clouds with a triumphant growl, and seventeen dragons in her wake.

Some were smooth and sharp like she was, others rough with armored sawtooth skin, horns, and massive tails. Several hailed from the tropics to the south: thin-limbed and brilliant in color, with patterns on their wings like dyed silks. Some had frilled fins, or heavy jaws that could bite a building in half, others round eyes like polished gems. A few were of Tora’s breed—sleek and quick, with opaline flecked scales that shimmered with every roll and flex of lean muscle.

Sousuke twisted around to see more dragons join her with booming, barked battle cries. The sight of them all racing forward with such speed had him clinging a little tighter to Rin’s waist.

Samezuka’s mammoth war horn bellowed from the city plaza. Three times it sang, the sound sinking into the capital, shaking the stone, heating its blood molten. The empire’s eyes were turned skyward, and Rin’s spirit soared with their voices underwing.

As a child, Rin had bounced around at his balcony, and watched his uncle depart the city to the sounding of that horn. People seldom knew where the Emperor went, or what he did out there. But they cheered, and they knew that he did it for them.

Tora and her flight circled over the capital in a cyclone, their colored shadows swimming over rooftops. Drums beat out from the Grand Temple to rattle the walls of every avenue. His city was enormous, and beautiful, and beating in tune with his own heart. Rin would see that it stayed that way. He steered Tora out of the air tunnel, and toward the rolling reach of ocean.
Water was dripping from a passage behind. Misty drafts were blowing in from the air shafts. And Makoto was stopped dumbstruck in the dark, before a full-blown sorcerer.

“Pretty wings!” the boy chirped.

“Thanks.” Kisumi’s answer was more reflex than response, as he folded them into thin air. The kid must have mistaken them for some conjuration, and Kisumi was sharp enough not to let a good lie go to waste.

It was hard to see much of the sorcerer in the weak glow of orange from his firestone, but his silhouette was slight against the cave wall, his movements springy.

Haru tensed under Makoto’s arm. “Who are you, and how do you know Ikuya?”

“Mmmm can we walk and talk? It’s gross down here, and I’m getting hungry.” The boy sauntered ahead, pulling a handful of candy from the pocket of his vest, and letting silence settle behind him in electrified eddies.

“Name’s Nagisa though,” he said over his shoulder between crunches of sugar crystals. “I may not be Ikuya, but I do live with him. And I’m sure he’ll be over the moon to see you, Haru, once we get home.”

The siren brightened with hope. Makoto knew that, for better or worse, they would be seeing this through. The glowing stone was being tossed between nimble fingers while Nagisa popped candies into his mouth two at a time. Makoto watched him nearly mix them up and swallow their only light source. This kid was a strange one.

“Dang, I almost had you guys, though. So used to hearing Ikuya use ‘chan, haha!”

Haru frowned. “-chan?”

“Yeah for Haru-chan.” Nagisa supplied. “He named his cat after you. You’re kind of his hero, y’know. Don’t tell him I said that; he’d be mad.”

They pushed on. Makoto’s ankle throbbed; it was probably sprained. Haru hiked his arm higher to support more of his weight.

“He spoils that cat like you’ve never seen,” Nagisa chattered. His gestures fluttered all over. “Catches him fresh fish every morning, brushes him at night…”

One of his hands was outfitted with the strangest piece of jewelry Makoto had ever seen: a bracelet and five jeweled rings—one on each finger, unique in their color and style, and attached by a star of thin chains. The metal jingled softly as he danced quick fingers along the wall. Laughing, he scooped up a handful of dust, set it alight in pale violet, and tossed it behind him to float into tiny stars along the ceiling.

It was beautiful, Makoto thought. But never had he witnessed someone use their magic this way—like a distraction, a toy. Sorcerers were a different sort. Aomori lessons taught that they were arrogant and irreverent people, wasting the earth’s blood for warfare, pleasure, and money. Makoto
had no right to raise judgement here, but watching Nagisa, he was finding it difficult to ward off the whisper of old enmity.

Nagisa motioned at them to wait, and skipped ahead a few paces to check the route again.

Makoto seized the opportunity and huddled his trio together in the shadow. “So,” He gulped, checking that the kid was still busy. “Do we trust him?”

“Probably not,” Kisumi whispered. “Look at him, he’s too…chipper.”

Haru made a face. “So are you.”

“Exactly.”

“This wa—-y!” The sorcerer whistled, pointing emphatically.

All they had to do was keep close together. Kisumi snuck them a reluctant nod, and they continued. Another twenty minutes passed. Then all at once, Nagisa’s singing cut to a stop. The slam of silence sent chills spidering up Makoto’s arms, and his ears prickled.

Dust settling, water dripping.

A deep thumping vibrated from somewhere beneath them, followed by a swirling hiss. Kisumi spun around at the rear, searching hard into the gloom. The way these tunnels wound and dipped like an anthill, the sound could have come from anywhere.

“Was the hunter alone?” Nagisa brightened the light, and shone it down the passage they’d come. “At the tavern.”

“Yes,” Haru answered. “Far as we know.”

“Hmm…”

The sound faded, and the boy relaxed, but not all the way. “Let’s keep moving then, friends!” He hovered the firestone, and quickened their pace.

“Wait!” Makoto panicked. “Who else could that have been? What was it?”

“Doesn’t matter!” Nagisa sang. “I’ve got enough charms rigged around the house that we’ll be nice and safe when we get up there.”

Makoto spared a moment to register Haru fitted against his right side, Kisumi behind him, and a relic beyond measure of value stowed in his pack. Their options at the moment were few.

The shortest way out of the smugglers’ labyrinth was an old lift with a busted pulley that shot seven hundred meters up a narrow shaft into sooty shadow. All four of them crowded into it, shut the rusted iron door, and the sorcerer sent them rocketing to the top. Solid ground was long out of sight beneath them now, and Makoto’s gut did a somersault every time the mechanism ground over a notch in the chute. Haru shifted uncomfortably under his arm, tucking himself closer. Makoto wondered if Kisumi even had room enough to unfold his wings in here, should they need him to. But Nagisa was unfazed. He cleared his throat, and kept his arms flexed, concentration converged on his task as he floated the lift up.

They shuddered to a stop, and hurried to disembark. Makoto’s ankle smarted sharply with the added pressure of haste, and he could feel it swelling in his shoe. Haru had been taking part of his bulk this
entire time, and he knew it was no easy task. The siren’s brow was beaded with sweat, and his breaths were short as he tried to level them off.

Nagisa walked his fingers over the surface of the surrounding wall of the landing platform, chains jingling with each flick of his hand. He found what he was looking for. Easy as carving a stick of butter, he pushed the wall outward. Street sounds seeped inside. “Follow me! Giants watch your heads!”

Makoto assumed ‘giants’ referred to him and Kisumi, and they were careful to duck. Light blared into their eyes as they emerged onto a lofted walkway. Below them, a quiet city avenue pulsed with pedestrians. Small shops and apartments were cropped up on either side, curving out of sight around the corner. The place was lit by dim purple lanterns, and cutaway openings to the sky outside. Noise vibrated with an intimate echo, contained and safe in this carved-out haven. Crisp evening air whisked in through crystal sky vents, and Makoto breathed deep, chest light with relief to be out of the tunnels.

“What is this place?” he wondered aloud.

“Uuh, the street?” Nagisa popped the firestone back into its slot on his ring. He swerved ahead, and beckoned them forward. “You guys are easy to impress, I like that.”

In full light, Nagisa looked much less threatening: shorter than most, but athletic, dressed in loud pinks and violets. He exuded an unapologetic carelessness that Makoto sometimes feared Ran might catch in her teenage years.

The scent of something hot and garlic-spiced wafted from one of the apartments below, reminding Makoto that they hadn’t eaten a proper meal since that morning. He felt like a withered candle wick, but they weren’t out of the water yet. He could keep going as long as he needed to.

“Here we are! Not so bad a walk, right?” At last, Nagisa halted below a door that was fixed into the stone, roughly two meters above their heads. It opened into nothing, like some kind of dumb prank.

Makoto scanned their area for a ladder before realizing what he ought to have learned by now. The tile beneath their feet loosened with a turn of the sorcerer’s wrist. Kisumi gathered Makoto and Haru closer to the center as they were lifted straight upward to hover neatly at the doorstep.

“Watch your feet.” Nagisa twisted two fingers to click the locks open, and knee’d the door ajar. “And shoes on the shelf, please. Rei will kill me if he finds gunk on his imported rug.”

Still a little disoriented, they filed in after the kid. Makoto noted the rows of footwear along the entrance—all different sizes—some were boots worn and mud-caked, others spotless slippers trimmed with lace. How many people…?

The house was cavernous, wrought in seamless sandstone striations, as if by the flow of water. Chunks of crystal punctuated the walls, and they brightened like glass torches with a snap of the sorcerer’s fingers. A wide, oval-shaped living room opened before them, with a plush rug, hearth, and a long sofa. Cushions were strewn about—glittering with beads, metallic threads, and colorful stamped silks—mismatched, collected, but all beautiful. The place was clean, but lived-in, and shared. It was beyond doubt, a home, and the feeling put Makoto a little more at ease.

“Rei-chan’s in the kitchen, probably. I’ll introduce you~” Nagisa whispered, and winked. He pinched two fingers to still a hanging chime over the back door, then led them into the house.

Makoto pushed aside a curtain that hung over the doorway, mindful not to catch his staff in it as he
ducked. It was rude to snoop about a stranger’s living space, but he couldn’t help himself. Peering around, he noticed a stairway that sloped down to a quaint storefront. Shelves reached floor to ceiling, stocked with boxes all ordered by color, cases, and books. Rows of glass jars lined the shelves nearest the counter. The whole place smelled pleasantly of mellow herbs and vanilla. In passing, he caught the skirt of the outdoor sign: “Butterfly’s Trove,” hanging over the street.

Something soft brushed insistently at his shins, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. A robust black cat with a healthy-looking coat, and bright lime-green eyes rubbed his face affectionately against Makoto’s leg. A rush of adoration almost made him coo out loud; the cat was so cute.

“That’s Haru-chan,” Nagisa mouthed. He hushed them with his finger to a grin as they passed through a hallway, and into an open kitchen area. Echoes of manic laughter were coming from somewhere inside.

On quick tiptoes, Nagisa made his way to the open pantry door. “Rei-chan, I’m home!!”

“NYAAAAUUGH!” A distressed yell blared from inside the larder, followed by a clang, thump, and the drawling hum of round objects rolling across the floor. “Nagisa-kun you agreed to ring the bell when you come in the rear way!”

The boy reached an arm back to ring the hanging chime in the other room.

“It’s too late!!”

“But Rei-chan, ringing it ruins the fun surprise.”

“THAT IS EXACTLY THE POINT.”

An exasperated man stumbled out of the pantry and dusted the starch from his shirt. He was flustered and disheveled, with a half-empty basket of apples under one arm. Two tiny windows shielded his eyes, the wire frame skewed oddly left. The squared glass magnified his surprise, as he made a sort of choked squeal at the guests in his kitchen.

“Hello!” Makoto waved apologetically. “So sorry for the intrusion. I take it you’re...Rei?”

The man looked the group up and down several times over, then startled awkwardly to life again, pushing the crooked lenses straight. “Yes! Yes, I am! Ryuugazaki Rei. A pleasure to meet you.”

Kisumi sparked with recognition at that name, but he kept the reason to himself.

Makoto could practically hear Rei’s mind filing away notes as they shook hands. “You must be friends of Nagisa’s, then?”

“Yes!” the kid piped. “Well, Ikuya’s, but he can share.”

Rei was a gracious host, and more than a little impressed by Makoto’s station. Guardians seldom travelled this far afield, and he was the first one Rei had ever seen. If Ikuya lived here, Haru figured it would be fine to show his hands when Rei shook them, and the man marveled at the bright blue hues, where Ikuya’s were green.

Rei was a vivid splash of color against the sandy chamber walls—robed in rich, vibrant purples and powder blues. His back was rigid as a soldier’s, though nothing else about him called to a military background. Twilight blue hair stuck out in wisps, and inky stains smudged his fingertips and the outside of his hands. He was an apothecary by profession: a master at the mixing of soothing salves, sleeping drafts, incense, and shelves of other materials. His goal was, in his words, “to make life a
more beautiful experience.” Makoto thought he could get behind that, even if Rei himself was rather frantic for a man who bottled calm for a living.

“I apologize for any trouble Nagisa might have caused you. I know he’s quite…lively.”

Nagisa didn’t argue. He searched the kitchen and the living room, swinging around corners and banging through open doors. “Where’d they go? Still in the shop?”

“I believe so,” Rei guessed. “I’ve only just closed the storefront.” He faced his guests. “Your friend Ikuya and Asahi are out building, but they should be home before dark, in a couple of hours. Please, make yourselves at home. I’ll fetch you some salve and a roll of linen, and we’ll see what we can do about that ankle.” The apothecary set to it, rummaging through his shelf, ticking by alphabetized jars and boxes, snatching things into a bundle.

Makoto leaned toward Kisumi. “How long should we stay?”

The spirit shrugged. “We don’t have a ride at the moment, and it’s probably smart to lay low for a little while at least. They actually seem…alright.”

“Ah!” Rei’s sharp glance whipped over them, processing every detail. He smiled, and “Why don’t we acquaint ourselves later over dinner? I’m sure our guests could use some privacy for the time being, and a chance to wash up. Nagisa, show them to the bedrooms, if you would.”

“My pleasure~” The sorcerer skipped ahead.

A row of several chambers opened up along the hallway, and Nagisa let them choose. The building had been an inn before Rei bought it, though most of the extra space was used for brewing, fermenting, and storage of his wares.

Haru shuffled them gratefully into one of the spare guest rooms. Rei brought in a bowl of water and a few labeled jars. There was a large bed against the far end, two chairs, and —praise the gods—a bathtub. Nagisa didn’t even ask if they wanted it filled. He unstopped a fixture in the wall, let the thing run until water filled the deep basin, and pushed it back into place.

Makoto kindly turned down additional help with, “This is more than enough, thank you.”

Kisumi was shown upstairs to a lofted bedroom above the study.

Quiet was a sweet relief when their door was shut, leaving them alone at last. Makoto sank into the chair next to their dresser. With the mayhem long settled, he bowed over himself and let his tension bleed out. He was practically folded in half, head held up between his knees like he was going to be sick. Haru knew that he wasn’t a fighter. Even as his Guardian training required some base proficiency in combat, he avoided violent confrontations with others as often as was possible. The stress had him a wilted wreck in the seclusion of their room.

“Do you think I hurt that man badly? When I threw him in the dumpster?”

Haru dropped to his knees. “I hope so.”

Makoto chewed on the moment, but let it go.

Lightly as Haru moved, a little discomfort was inevitable when the sock came off, and Makoto winced as he freed the swollen ankle. Haru cradled the foot tenderly, blowing cool air on the hot
skin. A dark bruise was purpling over the knob of bone. It looked incredibly painful, though Haru hadn’t heard so much as a whine about it.

“Stupid.” Blue eyes narrowed. “Be more careful. Don’t just go jumping out windows. What if the glass had cut you?”

Makoto sighed a laugh. “Sorry…I got a little caught up.” His expression was fond, but hard around the edges; unforgiving. ‘That hunter was going to kill you, and I would never let that happen.’

Haru wrung one of the washcloths damp in the bowl, and set to work. The water cooled his hands, as scales flushed smoothly up his arms. He pressed the wet cloth to Makoto’s foot, smirking as the man released a grateful exhale.

“Heavens that feels amazing,” he murmured. “Thank you, Haru-chan.”

They’d brought a bundle of herbs from home that Haru had tucked in his belt pouch. He unclasped the flap to make something for the pain. Not to mention the jars Rei had left on the table. The labels were penned in an impeccably neat hand, but Haru didn’t recognize any of the names. He supposed he could just smell each one for components.

“Wait—” Makoto pushed up on his elbow. “Let me have a go at it first?”

Haru wavered, uncertain. “You’ve never healed anything before; what if it gets worse?”

“Still better that I test on myself, right?”

Haru scowled his opposition, but Makoto ignored it and reached around him for his staff, excited. He tapped its base to the ground, and began to whisper a hymn under his breath. It was too soft for Haru to pick out any of the words, but the melody was cycling, soothing. He lost himself gazing entranced at Makoto’s mouth as he tried to follow along. A light from below drew his eyes back.

Vines of energy sprouted up to wrap lovingly around Makoto’s ankle. Smaller roots unfurled like fern fronds, encasing his foot in pulsing light. When they retreated, there was no trace of the injury.

“I did it!” Makoto rolled his ankle in happy circles.

Amazement and relief washed over Haru. “On your first try.”

Spurred by impulse, Makoto swooped down to steal the smile from Haru’s lips. He stayed there, leaned in close enough that Haru could see the tiny flecks of mint green peridot glinting in his irises, and feel his elated bursts of breath.

“Those are new, Haru.”

“Huh?” The siren snapped back into himself.

“Your scales. You have a few new ones around your eyes. I don’t remember those being there.”

Haru froze.

“Riiiight here.” Gentle as a midsummer breeze, Makoto brushed his thumb over a patch around Haru’s cheekbone.

“Ah—” Haru held his breath under the touch, his senses amplified to focus on the spot. The skin was slippery there, and more sensitive. Makoto was right. “There are.”
“Part of getting older, maybe. They’re very pretty.” He tipped in to kiss them for the first time—left side, then the right.

The playful nuzzling tickled, and Haru twitched. “You need a bath. You smell like that bar.”

“Ouch”—Makoto just deepened his teasing, and Haru huffed.

“Getting your stink all over me.”

“I think we’re both gross, Haru.”

Haru glanced back at the bathtub in the corner, and wondered if it was big enough to fit the two of them together.

They would make it work.

An hour later, Haru remained soaking in the tub, utterly disinclined to get out. Makoto dried himself off, taking his time with a towel around his waist, and another on his head. His skin had a glow to it that Haru loved—warm, and earth-toned. The plane of his back rippled with strength as he toweled off his hair. Basking in the sight from behind, Haru kept his eyes above water. He had half a mind to grab his lover, and drag him back into the bath.

Rapping at the door broke their spell of comfort.

“Pardon me,” Rei’s polite voice came in muffled from the other side. “I presume you’re both tired, and I hate to bother, but Asahi and Ikuya are home for the evening! We shall all be in the kitchen preparing supper if you would care to join us.”

“It’s no bother, Rei,” Makoto assured. “We’ll be out shortly, thank you.”

Rei’s steps faded down the hall.

Haru was actually a bit nervous. He sank beneath the surface. Ikuya’s maturity after their decade apart had come as something of a shock. In the four years since their return to the human world, they had done little more than exchange letters, at the beginning. But after the first year or so, Ikuya stopped writing, and Haru wasn’t one to push him. Now the boy was living with sorcerers, on the run from assassins. He dreaded what kind of danger enveloped Ikuya’s life now.

They had drifted apart when he wasn’t looking.

“Ready?” Makoto’s voice came in muted and watery from above the surface. Haru could make out his hand open, waiting.

He exhaled a tired stream of bubbles, and took it.

They met Kisumi in the corridor. His peony hair was still damp, and he smelled of flowers and warm bath steam. He noticed Makoto’s healing work instantly, and gushed his congratulations. Grating as Kisumi’s personality could get sometimes, Haru was glad for his unfailing positivity; the spirit lavished Makoto with the sort of loud, open-armed praise that he deserved to hear.

Regrouped, they trailed Rei back to the kitchen. The apothecary’s mess was tidied, and an array of ingredients spread unpacked beside a simmering pot of broth. Haru’s stomach growled with
renewed impatience.

“Yo!” Nagisa hailed them from a stool near the other door that was clearly a spot he occupied regularly. “This is my shame chair.” He wiped off an invisible tear. “I’m not allowed to help with dinner anymore. They just leave me out; isn’t that cruel?”

Rei grumbled a sigh. “You know what you did, Nagisa—”

“Hey loser, you’re back early.”

Haru’s ears perked up at the familiar voice. Footsteps, followed by the lanky, but composed shape of Ikuya.

“Did you find the hunter?”

He was clearly older now, Haru noticed—hair grown out longer, and his features more severe. Dark lashes heightened the sharpness of his eyes as he narrowed them warily in Nagisa’s direction.

“Don’t I always?” the sorcerer crowed. “I had help this time, though.”

“What do you mean ‘help?’” Ikuya puzzled. “From who?”

Makoto was stamping down laughter, and Haru couldn’t stand it any longer. He curled his finger, and flicked the back of Ikuya’s head with just enough force to make the boy jolt.

“Haru?! What the—” Shock was schooled into shallow disapproval. “Oh fuck off, Nagisa. Nice try.”

Nagisa doubled over, giggling. The other siren craned in to observe Haru like he was some kind of temple artifact. “Looks perfect, though. Exactly as I remember; like it’s…really him.”

“It is me, Ikuya,” Haru pressed in. “And what’s with that dirty mouth?”

Emotions on Ikuya’s pale face shifted like chameleon skin. He gasped, and flung eager arms around his shoreborn brother. Haru let himself smile hard into the boy’s shirt while Ikuya grabbed fistfuls of his cloak, rocking them by the shoulders, overjoyed.

Ikuya’s smile was bright when he pulled away at last. “What are you doing here?”

“Long story.” Haru said wearily. “It’s good to see you.”

Relaxing his hold, Ikuya glanced over Haru’s shoulder. “Is this—” He ignited with approval. “Built like a tree, handsome, green eyes. Is this your Makoto?”

Heat seared up Haru’s cheeks, and he angled away before the man in question could notice. “Yes, this is him.”

“Aah, hi…” Makoto reached down to clasp hands, caught a bit off his guard. “It’s great to meet you, Ikuya. For real this time, I think.”

A dull thump followed by gnashed curses came from behind the curtain. Having spent fourteen years with the Tachibanas, Haru knew the sound of someone hitting their head on a doorframe with certainty. Groaning, a man nearly Makoto’s size stormed into the kitchen, rubbing a tender spot on his forehead. Haru took in his wild red-orange hair, scar stitched across one eyebrow, sunburst smile, and knew exactly who this was.
Ikuya had told Haru everything about his best friend in the capital. Asahi Shiina was the son of a famed master shipbuilder and an estranged mistress. The boy had been raised in a dark district brothel with his mother until Lord Shiina elected to fold him into the household in order to pass on the family trade. At seven years old, it was a tough transition for Asahi. But around the same time, the Shinas took in Ikuya as a favor to the king. The kids had become easy friends—both of them outcasts at home, largely left to their own mischief.

Asahi introduced himself enthusiastically (clasping Kisumi’s hand a few seconds too long), and the room was brighter for his presence.

Preparing meals was a team undertaking. Ikuya, Rei, and Asahi flitted like hummingbirds around the kitchen. Haru knew that Ikuya had his own life in the big city just as Haru had his in the forest, but observing it in person stung him with a cold wrench of outsidersness.

Nagisa rocked backward in his chair, watching it all with a toothy grin. “Gee Rei-chan I wish I could help you guys out; if only I wasn’t banned from the kitchen.”

“It’s a ban you deserve,” Ikuya jibed. He pushed a knife and some purple carrots in Haru’s direction on the counter: an invitation to join them. Makoto slid Haru an encouraging look, and nudged him gently.

“Go on, Haru-chan. You know him.”

Cautiously, bottling his reservations, Haru stepped up to the counter beside the other siren, and accepted. Ikuya relaxed in an instant, a faint smile teasing at the corners of his mouth as he cut into a pear. Haru did know him.

Makoto was leaned up against the wall, radiant with pride. That soft-eyed look was going to make Haru blush in the middle of the kitchen if he wasn’t careful. He scoffed, a little annoyed at that, and snapped back to his task.

“Makoto is also banned from cooking.”

“Haru!”

Haru made quick work of the carrots. “One night, I told him to fetch shiso leaves for our grilled fish. He brought back an entire stalk from the garden, and instead of soaking it for later, he dropped it on the griddle whole.”

“Aahh there’s no need to tell this story—!”

“The branch caught fire and almost burned our house down.”

Ikuya had to set his knife down to laugh, and Nagisa leaned his head into Makoto, cooing, "it's ok, Mako-chan, the exiled can stick together. If I sit on your lap, we can share the shame chair.”

This whole room felt right somehow, Haru thought.

He couldn’t place why.

The dining chamber opened up to a glorious view of the canyon that wrapped around the curved
walls. A snap of Nagisa’s fingers flicked a perimeter of quartz light fixtures alive, and the place glowed in honey prisms. At the heart of the room was a circular table with a plate in the center that spun each dish around to share. Pheasant stew filled the pot in the middle, flanked by bread, onion cream, mixed fruit, and sweet potato.

“Make sure to eat enough.” Makoto spooned a larger serving of soup into Haru’s bowl.

Haru rolled his eyes, but ate it all the same. It was good, he’d admit, even if there was no fish present.

Makoto sat to Haru’s right, Ikuya his left, then Rei, Nagisa, and Asahi, who was already chatting animatedly with Kisumi.

They ate. Conversation lifted, then lulled.

The pot cooled.

And Haru’s question was eating him alive. Finally, he took a long drought of water, and rounded on his shoreborn brother.

“Why’s there a bounty out on your head?”

Ikuya’s expression tightened, and he fell silent. But he seemed to be expecting this; all of them were.

He inhaled, exhaled. “Haru, I’m sorry that happened. I’ve been…well, things have changed since we saw each other last.”

*Obviously.* “Who was he?”

Ikuya’s eyesdarted to the window, where Haru-chan was watching buzzards circle the rooftops a quarter mile down. “He was…a mercenary. Recruited by a sorceress who…would rather I disappeared.”

Haru’s mouth pressed into a line. The whole table had gone mute. “Explain.”

“I know something about her that I shouldn’t, and she wants the information to die with Asahi and I. Before we can bring it to the king.”

Kisumi set his cup down soundlessly. “What sort of information?”

Ikuya mulled over his options for a beat. “What do you know of the Hazuki sisters?”

“Some,” Haru said. “There are three of them. They’re mad, and they’re up to something awful.”

Across the table, Nagisa laughed, a twinge stiffly. “That about covers it!”

“Right, well…” Ikuya started. “Their *something awful* is a violent overthrow of humanity that almost no one believes will even happen, or is willing to do shit about.”

“….Oh. Okay,” was all Haru managed.

“My brother Natsuya, and Nao—er, the king, had been fighting hard against them, but they weren’t gaining any ground. They *couldn’t*. There were so many moles at court, and in the military. Anyone able to oppose the sisters was too afraid of them to make a move.”
Ikuya pushed the remaining food on his plate into a neat pile. He flickered with embarrassment, and Haru glimpsed the shy little shoreborn boy he spent his first years with. “After I came home from the den, I... I was kind of... inspired by you, Haru. The way you stood up for yourself in the face of the enemy. I thought it was time I did something brave, too.”

Makoto brushed his heel playfully against Haru’s ankle under the table.

Ikuya drew his height up and cleared his throat. “So Asahi and I took his first ship out to find the Hazukis ourselves. Nao had narrowed their locations down beforehand. He’d worked out the area they’d have to be hiding in; it was just a matter of getting close enough to be exact.”

Asahi put his food down for the first time that night. “And we did find them! On this tiny island in north Samezuka called ‘Tajiri’, inside an old volcano with the warship they jacked. We booked it home, and warned Nat and Nao. So they know where to attack when the time’s ripe.”

Makoto was incredulous. “Just the two of you?! That’s extremely dangerous!”

Asahi shrugged, but couldn’t fake being sorry. “One expedition yielded that valuable bit of help so,” Ikuya gulped, “naturally, we went back for more.”

Ikuya and Asahi laid out the rest of their story—how Asahi had stayed the ship safely a kilometer out, and Ikuya plunged in to swim the rest of the distance. Underwater tunnels bled directly into the mountain, and the siren surfaced inside unseen. Spying from the periphery, he saw things that made his gut roil just to remember.

When he’d gathered enough, and tried to leave, he found his exit blocked off; he was stuck inside the volcano. Days edged by, and there was no way to get out undiscovered.

“I told Asahi to leave me and go home if I wasn’t back by second sundown,” Ikuya huffed. “But uh.”

“No way in hell would I do that,” the shipwright blurted. “I docked, walked up there, and—”

He’d set off a barrage of flare fireworks at the front gate.

The madness he stirred up was barely enough, and Ikuya slipped out from under it. They raced onto the ship, with two of three sorceress sisters on their heels.

“We weren’t gonna make it home,” Asahi shook his head slowly, “And then this guy shows out of nowhere, sneaks us out right under the Hazukis’ noses, and our asses were saved. We got pretty damn lucky.”

The sorcerer pressed one hand to his heart. “I’m blushing.”

“He was on his way out, and recognized us from a party at my dad’s place ages ago. Without him, we probably wouldn’t be here.” Asahi was brimming with energy now. “So, we trudged into the city, in hiding, with nowhere to go, and no way to get our message to Nao.”

“We were stuck in the street, basically,” Ikuya said. “Then by some miracle, Nagisa found Rei wandering around near the docks acting like he’d never seen dirty water before, on the market for an excursion ship. Asahi offered to build it for him, and Rei was kind enough to let us stay here while we carry out the contract.”
“It’s no trouble,” Rei tidied the collar of his shirt, and smoothed the buttons. “The building is a small inn, after all. There was ample room.”

Nagisa scoffed. “You tell it like it wasn’t a romantic encounter for the ages.”

“You were not subtle with your advances.” Rei remembered with a pinched frown. “But yes, I was happy to take them in, given the situation. They’ve built me a fine ship as promised, and…are quite…an amazing group of people, I’ve come to realize.”

“So there you have it,” Ikuya finished, throwing an arm out for dramatic presentation. “The origin of our fresh band of undercover weirdos that Asahi’s lovingly named, ‘The Rockhoppers.’”

Nagisa clapped.

Haru let that soak. Like downing a strong gulp of cider, he let the events sink in, wash over. It sounded like a complete story, but he knew that it wasn’t.

Kisumi seemed to share the same gnawing curiosity, and was less willing to put up with it. “That’s great and everything, but…What was it that you found?” He crowded over the table, unworldly rings of light in his eyes that Haru had seen only the night they met him. “Why are the Hazuki sisters hiring magic-wielders to murder you two?”

Asahi and Ikuya gave the request a spell of consideration. Makoto sat drawn and silent with captive energy that Haru could feel, almost hear.

Nagisa’s gaze hardened, as he resolved to hand the truth over cold. “The Hazuki sisters are building a living horde.”

The spirit was shocked into silence, and slumped back down.

Haru wondered at that that. He didn’t know much about sorcerers, or magic’s use outside the forest. Makoto treated magic like something sacred to be borrowed and returned. Here, it was difficult to say. He looked to his lover for a reaction, but Makoto appeared to be just as lost. Nagisa picked up on their bemusement.

“Sorcerers use magic to change stuff.” The boy spidered his fingers, letting his jewelry flash dangerously. “We move, transform, enhance, deceive. There are loads of ways to use it, but no matter what, we can’t create anything real.” He swiped his napkin off the table, folded it once, and opened his hand. It fluttered gently over to land on Rei’s finger with dainty wings. Rei let it perch there fondly.

“I can make the cloth fly,” Nagisa illustrated, “but without me, it’s just a piece of cotton.” He dropped his hand, and the napkin slid down to the table, shapeless. “It moves because I move it.”

Makoto cut a solemn silhouette as he observed the imitation of life before him. These pieces were forming a picture he did not like.

Nagisa noted Rei’s disappointment, and reanimated his linen butterfly. “The sisters wanted life to move without their control, yet still definably beneath it. They wanted an army with which to conquer, made up of…things that don’t exist anymore. That shouldn’t exist.”

“Only the gods can do that,” Makoto reeled, openly appalled.

“Pure, true creation is impossible, sure.” Nagisa swallowed hard. “But they don’t make life, exactly.” The atmosphere constricted and thickened around them as the sorcerer fixed his gaze on
Haru and Ikuya. “They use what’s been taken.”

A craggy beach fought its way up from the depth of Haru’s memories. Corpses of Moyajima sirens lay strewn about the rocks, their leader humbled in surrender to those three young girls with golden hair and fine dresses. Five-year-old Ikuya’s hand was shaking and clammy in Haru’s own. Kurou had been afraid, he thought, as the boys were bargained away like some sort of princes.

That truce had been a lie—all of it, down to its flimsy bones. Demons did not stay their hunger for peace. There had never been a treaty.

Only an alliance.

“Atal: course.” Kisumi seethed. He was blanched, crumbling; Haru had never seen him so tormented. “The sirens have been helping them all this time; of course. That explains the ogre on the wall, the attack on Aomori—”

Ikuya winced. “Once a siren drains the life from someone, that essence can be given over somehow and manipulated like anything else. The witches can put it somewhere, use it to fill a new vessel that they make out of any material they please.”

Rei pursed his mouth primly, as though remembering something foul. “They’re very capable of producing the ‘vessels,’ if you will. Hideous things…” He cupped the butterfly protectively.

“They’ve never been artists.” Nagisa grimaced. “It’s all uncomplicated in theory, less so in execution.”

“In short, Kurou has been helping the Hazukis acquire power for fourteen years,” Ikuya explained, “so that they can use that power, and that army to wipe out the greatest enemy that evil still has. They both win, and everyone dies.”

“Honestly, if we’re lucky, we die,” Asahi added.

“But!” Nagisa snapped his fingers for impact. “They would need tons of magic to build up an army strong enough to wipe out the dragons, and they don’t have it. I can’t see them finding the means anywhere, so we’ve got a bit of time to figure something out. A few years, at least.”

Haru met Makoto in a look of shared horror.

“No we don’t,” Kisumi said softly. “We don’t have any time at all.”

Makoto reached into his bag. Preciously, painfully, he produced the dead heart of Iwatobi, and placed it on the table.

Haru leaned up against the window, absorbing the view of lower Negura at night. From here at the top, he could see the canyons plateau into rolling sand dunes that smoothed out into faint stars on the horizon. Greenery crawled up the precipices, and thrived in the cradle of the river, as if the desert had cracked open and bled life. Tiny lights clustered at the bottom of the canyon, settled there like glowing piles of sand up against the cliff face. Each light was a window—a house, workshop, or a tavern like the Harpy’s Hollow. Inside those buildings were people at their desks or kitchens, with their families, enshrined in their own worries—all of them unaware of the darkness that gathered.

The outcome of it all was looking bleaker, and more hopeless by the second.
With the Tear displaced, the sisters would be able to draw out every drop of the land’s magic, and use it to build their horde of ogres, giants, and gods only know what else. Together with Kurou and the sirens, they could rain immeasurable suffering.

“We have to get to Samezuka as soon as possible,” Makoto said. “We’ll tell the royal family what you’ve found, and warn them to guard their stone with everything they can spare. If we’re fast enough, we can stop all of this from happening.” He rounded on the Rockhoppers. “Where can I find a fast ship?”

Asahi rubbed his chin. “I mean, the fastest ships are small ones. But…taking a small ship over that route is dangerous as hell. Unagi will eat you for a midday snack. And I don’t know of any cargo galleons leaving to Sano…”

“Take her.” Rei said.

All eyes converged on the nervous apothecary.

“Take *Catherine*. She’s faster than anything on the water.”

Asahi gaped. “I mean…she would get there quick alright. But…she’s your dream boat. You wanted to see the world in her someday.”

“I know.” There was no doubt in Rei’s decision. “And I will see the world. With all of you, as we save it.”

The group processed what that implied.

“Thank you.” Makoto said, clear and captivating. No part of the sacrifice was lost on him. “Truly, thank you.” Light emanating from the walls washed him in gold, and Haru thought in that moment, that he fell a little more in love.

“We can leave as soon as tomorrow,” Asahi suggested. “Sooner the better, right? When we get there, we’ll find a way to tell everyone what we’ve found. Tajiri is crawling with sirens, and a whole lot of other freaky shit. If Nat and Nao are out there rubbing elbows with the Matsuokas, and Nao tells them to leave now, he’ll be sending them straight to hell.”

The group shuffled. Rei’s bell chimed over the back door.

The moment petrified.

Haru skidded out of his seat just as a solid mass collided with the house—an impact that made the whole structure shudder. Lights flickered, and went out.

He didn’t remember getting there, but Haru was shuffled up against wall farthest from the window, breath trapped, and Makoto’s arm across his chest. Nothing moved, but something was there; he could feel it. They were mice in a cage.

“I thought you said there were charms on your house,” Makoto hissed.

“There are.” Nagisa materialized next to the table, a stark shape against the hazy deep blue. “And they’re working.”

“Well then what is that?!”

As though in response, a tenebrous shape oozed over the window glass. Its full form was hidden,
but heard—a noise like the rattling tails of a thousand snakes. The breath of the whole room hitched as it slid down, sludge-like and languorous. Rei choked on a cry. Makoto reached under the table to curl a fist around his staff.

Then the thing detached from the wall, and slammed onto the cliff outside Asahi’s room.

“Ah, it’s one of these,” Nagisa mused, his back to the rest of them. “Nice timing though; I gotta give it that. We were just talking about ‘em!”

“That’s what we heard in the tunnels.” Haru shot.

“Wouldn’t bet against it.” Nagisa wiped his mouth with someone else’s napkin, drained his glass of water, and whisked toward the back door. “Stay inside, and try to keep away from the windows. I’ll see you all in the morning!”

He swept out of the chamber.

“Ikuya,” Haru shattered the silence hotly. “Who is that guy? You didn’t just find him, did you.”

The glow of Ikuya’s eyes answered Haru in the dark—like blue fire burning behind red glass.

“…No.”

Makoto chased Nagisa to the doorstep, where the boy jammed his shoes on without untying them. “Wait! Nagisa, wait. I’m coming with you.”

The ceiling creaked, and dust trickled down to pool on the carpet.

“Mmm offer’s appreciated, but that’s a bad idea.” Nagisa stopped him with a finger. “No worries, okay, Mako-chan? Someone’s gotta do my share of dish duty before we leave tomorrow.”

Makoto’s big brother instincts flared. “You are not going out there alone. You’re just a kid.”

Nagisa sparkled with amusement. “Just a kid? How old do you think I am?”

“I…dunno, fifteen, sixteen?” He couldn’t be much older than Ran and Ren

“Try twenty.” Laughter trilled at Makoto’s expense.

“You’re twenty?!?”

Humming, Nagisa emptied the dust from his pouch, and flung it high. It settled and formed around his face, melting like wax over the rest of him. When he checked his work in the wall mirror, he wore the skin of a stranger.

Makoto gaped, then remembered himself. “I’m still going to help.”

The sorcerer fixed Makoto with a piercing stare. His irises still flashed a dangerous fuchsia under the blocky brow of his disguise. Makoto felt a full-body wave of something grip him by the blood in his veins—his own magic responding to the measured release of another’s. It wasn’t pain, nor a threat. Nagisa pressed a hand to his arm.

“Thanks. Really. But I’ve got it, Mako-chan.”
The door clicked shut, and Nagisa vanished.

Makoto wrestled with his nature in the unlit room. He wavered by the door, bite gritted, already reaching for the handle. A roar and a hiss thundered outside.

“Hey.”

Kisumi rested a firm grip on his shoulder.

“If he says he can handle it, let him.” The spirit pushed Makoto’s bag into his hands with calm insistence. “He has a way to hide, and you don’t. You know what your real task is.”

“Makoto.” Haru appeared in the hallway. Makoto let Haru draw him away, sparing a last look at the back door.

Asahi lead Kisumi up the stairs, and pulled back the curtain to the loft for him to walk through. With all the excitement, he figured he could do at least this for their guest. Their gorgeous, smart, unworldly guest.

Questions were chasing each other through his head as he struggled to make sense of this man he’d been talking with over dinner, who’d just appeared in his kitchen. The whole spirit thing had come as a shock—though he supposed it made sense, seeing how beautiful he was. It wasn’t often Asahi lost his nerve with people, but being around this guy damn near immobilized him with shyness. Every sharp glance he matched felt like being caught in the street without his trousers or something. He just hoped it didn’t show.

Kisumi moved like wind into the room, shrugging off his outer robe, and settling into the desk chair. “So you’re really sure it’s no big deal?”

Asahi jolted. “Oh! The uh, golem? Yeah, it’s nothing to sweat over. We used to get worked up too, but…I don’t think I’ve ever seen Nagisa really…struggle with anything before.” It sounded a little odd, when he said it aloud.

“Hm,” Kisumi hummed thoughtfully. “If you say so.”

There was something unsettling about him, but magnetically so; Asahi couldn’t look away.

Kisumi stretched, and pulled the lantern to him across the desk. “Might I borrow a quill and ink, please? Sorry to trouble you.”

“Ah, yeah, no trouble. There’s actually some of that stuff in the bottom drawer next to you.” Asahi was sure Rei wouldn’t mind.

“Fantastic!” Kisumi extracted Rei’s scribing set with care.

This was probably the cue to leave, but Asahi stalled instead, standing ungainly in the middle of the room. “Wh-what for? Sending a letter home?”

“Leaving one, actually. My parting letter, instructions and all that.”

“Oh, cool.” Asahi backpedaled. “Wait, what?!”

“Mouse voice please,” the spirit hushed, one long finger to his lips.
“Sorry.”

“The entity Nagisa is fighting outside killed a dear friend of mine,” Kisumi said evenly. “One that I knew for a very long time.”

A pause stretched. “And I’d rather not lose any more friends.” He flattened the leaf of parchment on the bedside table, and popped open the ink bottle.

“Wait! You can’t leave!” Asahi wanted to suck the words back into his mouth the moment he’d said them. Momentum had carried him across the room, up to the desk.

Kisumi’s eyes flicked upward. “And why’s that?”

“Uh….” Asahi said intelligently. He hadn’t actually thought this far ahead. “I…mean, you shouldn’t go.”

Kisumi cut him an interested look. “*What’s it to you?*” danced in the coy quirk of his brow.

“It’s dangerous out there, and—you just got here…” Asahi stumbled. “ ’Least stay the night.”

Confusion warmed into humor, and Kisumi set down the quill. “Are you trying to seduce me into staying?”

“No! I mean, not saying you aren’t *worth seducing, but I—* Is it working?”

“Kind of.” Kisumi pushed away from the desk, and drew up to his full height. He stood nearly at eye level with Asahi, who suddenly felt every bit the mortal that he was.

“I’m only saying, those monsters have mucked around here looking for Ikuya and me a bunch of times before. Who even knows if that one’s after you?”

“And…” Asahi lowered his voice. “It may not be any of my business, but Haru and Makoto—you’re like their guide, and they’ve come all this way because they trusted you, right?” He was sweating now; he had no idea where he was going. “Don’t…don’t you owe it to them to stick around ’til the end?”

A full five seconds crawled by at a snail’s pace. Ten seconds. The paper snapped back into a curl against Kisumi’s hand when he released it. Asahi felt the spirit studying him, really *looking* at him for the first time that evening, and baring a bit of himself in the process.

“I was too quick to flee,” Kisumi lamented at last. His shoulders slumped, and he settled heavily on the desk. “Again.”

“H-hey,” Asahi mumbled. “We all make mistakes, right?”

“I think I’ve made a few more than most people.”

Perched on the edge of the desk, Kisumi was comfortably close now; Asahi could reach up and rub a hand on his back to console him, and it would be a natural thing. He looked like he could use it. Asahi inhaled, hovered his arm, and touched his hand down between the spirit’s shoulder blades. Indisputably natural, and not in any way stiff or awkward.

Kisumi paused, then huffed. “Thank you, Asahi.”

“Anytime. I mean, you know. Only if you’re not gone.”
“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Hand still light on Kisumi’s back, Asahi changed the subject. “D-do you hear people’s prayers?”

“Wh—” Kisumi smothered a snort. “No, I don’t. I’m not a god.”

“Ah, ok. I mean, that’s great. That’d be kind of embarrassing, if you knew what I’d…yeah.”


“Yeah—HEY!”

Giggling, Kisumi snagged Asahi’s collar, and smacked a kiss on his cheek.

The shipwright staggered back, floundering. He sputtered for a response with all the grace of an overturned turtle.

Legs crossed lazily, Kisumi pursed his lips, savoring the taste. There was a light flush creeping up to his ears, beneath rose curls. “I’ve always had a weakness for freckles.”

A feathery feeling lingered on Asahi’s cheek; he covered it with a hand to keep it from fading.

Kisumi breathed an airy laugh. “I’ll see you in the morning, Asahi.”

Asahi let Kisumi’s curtain fall closed behind him, and thunked against the outside wall. He tensed, sensing someone.

The unlit hallway cleared into focus, and he finally noticed Ikuya was there—with a cup of water and a late snack of apple slices that he’d stuck between his finger webbings like bear claws. He blinked. Then curled a wicked smirk.

“How much of that did you hear?” Asahi fumed.

Ikuya took an infuriatingly slow sip, and waved at Asahi with his apple hand. “Enough to know that you’re the only source of comedy I will ever need in my life.”

Asahi lumbered after him around the corner to their rooms. With his nerves in knots, and Ikuya’s taunts in his ear, he missed the blast of a single explosion against the distant cliffside.

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Sleep skittered out of Makoto’s reach as he stared dead-eyed up at the ceiling.

The rumbling had faded into the distance some time ago.

He rolled over what Ikuya said.

“He’s their little brother.”

Haru was fitted peacefully in a perfect moon against his back, thankfully untroubled. Reluctant, Makoto slid out of his arms, and padded out of bed. He toed into the dark hallway, using muted reflections on wall crystals to lead his path.
The front door clicked shut. With a jolt, he flattened himself against the wall and into the shadow.

Nagisa. The boy removed his shoes quietly and emptied them of sand, using the dim glow of his rings for light. His disguise melted into his belt pouch, and he straightened with a stuttering inhale. Fear was frozen over his features.

Makoto watched him disappear down the opposite corridor, and into his room.

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Haru was sitting content with his back against the headboard, braiding a tiny good luck charm. A blessed sight to wake up to. The siren’s fingers wove intricate blue and green dyed cords in the sunless room; he needed no light to see them. Voices jumped and hushed in the living area already, but he wasn’t willing to give up this peace just yet to mingle with the group alone.

“Good Morning, Haru-chan.”

He stopped weaving, and peered down gently.

“Hm.”

Makoto moved a lazy hand up Haru’s leg, teasing the edge of his night shirt. Haru’s skin was impossibly soft and warm beneath the covers. The muscles of his thigh tensed, but he kept tying his knots. The charm between his fingers looked vaguely fish-shaped. Feeling bold in his murky state of half-wakfulness, Makoto kept going, trailing his hand higher. Heat pulsed in the space between Haru’s legs as the siren stole a sharp inhale.

“You’re brave first thing in the morning,” Haru relaxed and let his thighs fall loose.

“Maybe,” Makoto hummed. “I do like waking up with your perfect legs next to my face.”

They shared several long, slow breaths.

Events from the day before amassed like starling flocks above them; they’d have to get up now. Haru ran his hand through Makoto’s hair, brushing the fringe aside. He let his fingers sift through the soft strands, adoration playing in his dark eyes.

Ruefully, they heaved out of bed.

Makoto and Haru joined the others for breakfast, awestruck by the volume of belongings Rei had stacked at the doorway to bring along.

“Ready to go, lovebirds?” Nagisa was as bouncy as he’d been the evening before; no sign of a fight marked him. Makoto wondered for a blink if he’d only dreamed it all. He let his nightmares seep into reality more often than he’d be willing to confess.

Venturing outside, though, it was obvious that something violent transpired. Black sand was piled up along the path to Asahi’s workshop. It was coarse, and crunched under their boots like charcoal eggshells. One of the handrails along the stairs was splintered in half. A few paces away, Makoto noticed a sizable crater of soot on the smooth rock, as if something large had been burned.
Haru gave him a look, and they left Rei’s house behind.

The shipwright’s makeshift workshop was secretive and spacious—filled into a natural hollowed-out cavern. Every sound bounced off the high walls, and the air was peacefully still. Drawn notes and designs were pinned up everywhere: boats, diagrams of birds, dragons, bats, butterflies. The reason for them all soon made itself apparent.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Rei gushed dreamily.

*Catherine* was mounted with majesty on a scaffold in the middle of the shop: an elegant trekking vessel, painted in swirls of blue, her sails neatly furled—

—and *wings* outfitted into her hull. Four of them. Two larger, two smaller, with stretches of thick canvas over hinged steel frames. Asahi jumped to work collapsing them into their proper compartments.

Rei was already hauling his luggage up the gangplank, followed by Ikuya toting Haru-chan in an excessively fluffy padded box.

Haru looked suspiciously at the ship, then the water below the scaffold. “Do those things actually…”

“Work?” Asahi chirped. “Of course, probably! And we’ll get to Samezuka in a fraction of the time it would take something on the water. So hop aboard, and hang onto somethin’ big!”

Haru curled a hand around Makoto’s bicep, expressionless.

“I got something big.”

“Haru…”

A thought emerged. “Nagisa, how are we supposed to get the ship down from up here?”

“Down?” Nagisa skipped onto the bow, and spun on his heel. “Who said anything about getting down?”

“No. We are not doing this.”

Makoto cling to the mast, frowning at pure, undiluted insanity.

*Catherine* was in the water now, ready to leave. A curved, smoothed track lay out ahead of her from Asahi’s shop, that carved steeply down the rock, terminating into empty air and a sheer, gut-churning drop over the lower city.

Makoto was making himself dizzy visualizing how high up they were. “You think we’re just going to plunge off a waterfall?!”

“Don’t worry, Mako-can I’ve done it before,” Nagisa assured breezily. “This is our second run. Well, third run, but second success.”

“Why is success a given?!”

“I just need a push to get us in the air, is all.” Nagisa stretched and hopped a few times, like he was warming his muscles for a morning stroll, and not gearing up to fly an entire ship over Tottori
“It’s hard to dead lift off from the water at sea level. Especially with Rei-chan’s luggage, seven people, and a fat cat.”

“He’s just got a lot of fur!” Ikuya yelled from below deck.

Asahi thumped heavily onto the starboard side, hammer over his shoulder, face smudged with dirt, and looking even more excited than Nagisa to do this. “All set!”

“Aye, Sir!” Kisumi saluted from the top of the main mast. Makoto hadn’t even noticed him fly up there. He was perched with two lengths of rope lashed to the ship like a bucket handle, to help with lift-off. Though Makoto had to wonder if it wasn’t so he could lift himself off should things get dicey.

Asahi grinned skyward at him, trying to wipe the dirt from his cheek, only to smear it over his nose. Rei was loading his trunks into the hold, practically floating on his enthusiasm.

Makoto took a deep breath. This was lunacy. But there was no turning back.

Everyone packed the cargo, and secured themselves to the ship with knots that Asahi checked, and double-checked. Rei was already rattling off a safety brief that had morphed into a history lesson in less than a minute. His eye glasses were tucked somewhere safe into his coat, and he blinked at his blurred surroundings. Makoto envied him a little. This might be easier if he couldn’t see the sharp drop-off ahead quite so clearly. Haru was lashed by the waist tightly at his right, unperturbed.

“Makoto.” he prodded. “Don’t be scared.”

“I—”

Haru’s fingers found Makoto’s hand, and twined together. “Do you remember when we jumped into the river a little while ago?”

“Yes…”

“This isn’t that different. We could’ve died then, but we didn’t.”

Makoto stilled.

“You asked the water. And we lived.”

So, ask.

Nagisa untethered the ship, bounded to the bow, and spun around with his arms thrown wide to welcome adventure. He beamed toward the passengers.

“Rei-chan, start the countdown!”

Rei jumped at the chance to list things.

“Everyone ready? Five!”

Haru oh gods—

“Four!”

We’ll never get to Samezuka if we’re dead—
“Three!”

The ship pushed off the dock, and exploded through the dam.

“NAGISAAA!!” Rei’s scream ripped through the rush, “THAT WAS ONLY TO THREEeee —!!” and trailed above them as they hurtled downward with the surge of water.

“Doesn’t everything go on three?!” Nagisa teased over noise.

“NOT IF YOU’RE COUNTING DOWN FROM FIVE!!”

“My bad!” The sorcerer ducked, and spread his arms, digging wind up from below, and behind. There was dirt in the cargo hold that he was using to steer. The ship groaned under the strain twisting on its way down, and nearly knocking into the rock buffer before Nagisa could correct its course. Every turn and pitch had Makoto’s insides constricting as he braced for impact.

“Almost clear!” Nagisa warned. “Aaaannd here we go!!”

Makoto could feel the keel scrape against stone as they mounted the precipice. And tipped over the ledge.

Keeping his eyes open was a mistake that nearly cost him his breakfast. Catherine creaked as the horizon climbed higher and gravity swung in a nauseating limbo. The distant base of the canyon was dead in front of them. He turned to Haru, who was perfectly still, with a sour frown. Makoto thought it a little bit funny; he must be going crazy already.

“NOW!” Asahi bellowed. He and Ikuya heaved their weight backward against the levers, and the four enormous steel-framed wings unfolded outward from the ship’s sides. Kisumi yanked up on the ropes in his arms, beating his own wings hard and fast. Shutting his eyes, Makoto sang a tune under his breath.

A mounting gust surged up from the canyon. Catherine rose with the updraft, and Nagisa latched them onto its current, cheering loud. They were airborne.

Kisumi slid down to the deck. Rei strapped his eye glasses on at last, gasping in wonder at the city disappearing behind them, far below.

“YYYEEESSSS!!” Asahi exploded with triumph. The wings he’d designed were spanned out, sailing just like the diagrams in his notebook, and the models in his workshop. He leaped to one side of the deck to admire them, then the other, slapping palms with Ikuya and throwing his head back to shout. “I’m a genius!! HAHAHAHA WE’RE FLYING! I’m a fucking GENIUS!!”

Makoto laughed so loud, it made his head spin. Haru was shaking with high-pitched giggles as the wind whipped his bangs around his smiling face.

There were worse ways to travel, Makoto thought.

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The brackish northern ocean churned like bedsheets on a sleepless night.
Tora skimmed low through the cloud of steam she’d made, and dipped her head to collect her seared meal. Heat from her fire warped the waves, and burned the evening chill away, warm on Rin’s cheeks. The fish in her maw was as big as a full-grown bull. She took the thing in her front claws and tore into its fleshy flank, barely losing speed as she did so.

“Does she cook everything like that?” Sousuke said over a cough through the smoke.

“Mhmm.” Rin leaned back into his arms in the saddle, pulling on the new belt strap. This one was made to fit around the two of them.

Other dragons plucked out meals from the school of tuna, smoke curls dripping off their wings as they rose again.

Six days, and five nights, they’d been chasing the former Emperor of Samezuka. At the rate they were flying, the group would overtake him in barely two more. Fresh scorch marks on the rocks, and bone scraps piled under a tree told Rin the gap was shrinking. They were closing in.

How they would stop Matsuoka Akira once they found him though, was its own question. Rin planned to call his uncle down to settle human matters with human means. But if the man would not dismount—if he chose to fight with fire…

Tora’s flame was hot enough, and there were none her size more agile in the air. Though where she was sleek and quick, Sango was a wall of solid muscle. Akira’s dragon remained the largest of the winged giants—her teeth were longer than Tora’s, her back mailed with scales like red diamond plates. Rin thought about that jaw snapping shut over his girl’s neck, and felt his gut lurch.

The other dragons would jump in to help if he asked them to. But if they joined the conflict, Sango’s clan would follow. It would be an ugly, bloody battle whichever side claimed the victory, and a loss too great to bear. Should Rin arrive at Tajiri with a meager force after that, the Hazukis might very well wipe out the rest. He could not involve them.

“Hey. You alright?”

Sousuke seemed to know the answer was ‘no,’ but it helped to hear his voice.

A weight nestled onto Rin’s shoulder, and the strong arm around his middle hugged tighter. Sousuke slipped a hand under Rin’s shirt, and massaged firm circles into his wound-up shoulder, working up to his hairline. Tension loosening, Rin sighed into the kisses against the back of his neck. Rin gathered the reins into one hand, and rubbed the other gratefully on Sousuke’s knee.

He scanned the infinite folds of ocean as they sped onward.

“Don’t look at the water.” Sousuke lifted Rin’s jaw. “Please. It’s getting late.”

Rin peered back, a tinge annoyed. Sousuke had grown increasingly unsettled as they flew closer to the gulf. His reasoning was sound, but they were riding a dragon, flanked by twenty more. They shouldn’t need to worry about a gaggle of screechy fish creatures. If only to put Sousuke at ease, Rin urged Tora higher.

The day waned, and a few of the other dragons were trailing behind as they ate. Now was as good a time as any for a break. The chase might be dire, but Rin knew better than to ride to war with his army starved and exhausted.

They made camp at the next island that they saw—a dusky, crescent shaped slice of volcanic land with room for the flight, and mountains to conceal them. After a wordless dinner of tough bread,
salted beef, and dried peaches, Rin had Sousuke help him remove Tora’s saddle. They covered it, and unrolled their bedding beneath it to sleep while the campfire flickered and died outside.

Sousuke’s heartbeat was steady against Rin’s ear as they lay in silence. Rin ran his finger up and down his lover’s arm, absently tracing the veins and curves of muscle. He skimmed over the inside of Sousuke’s elbow, making him twitch. It was cute for some reason, and set Rin off. His eyes welled with emotion.

*I can’t lose him.*

Sousuke grunted, and kneaded the crick in his scarred shoulder while he waited for their water to boil. It was the side Rin liked to tuck his head against, and the bed mat hadn’t quite padded out the unforgiving soil beneath. Another long day of riding ahead wouldn’t afford him much relief either, but having spared Rin this discomfort was consolation enough.

Early morning clouds strangled the island, curling around jagged mountains, smothering the foothills in a grey, wet chill. A few of the dragons were out flying already—gliding below the mist where visibility was good enough. One of them eyed Sousuke lazily. It was heavy-set with plated scales, and spikes that made an earth-shattering mace of its thick tail. Another nearby groomed its wings with a vivid violet tongue. Spiny frills crowned its head and trailed down its back: a breed that spat venom in lieu of flames. The dragon noticed Sousuke struggling to keep the campfire strong against wind from the mountains, and extended a wing to shield it.

Sousuke could see Rin a ways out, threading alone between the rocks, with a blanket cloaked around him. He wandered absent and unsteady, his eyes on the ground. For the third day in a row, Sousuke had woken alone. Heaving a sigh, he set to work on breakfast. As much as it pained him, he knew Rin needed this time to sort out his thoughts. Rin was hunting down his own family, before a battle with the most powerful sorcerers in history. If he lost, and Samezuka fell, the rest of the world would not be far behind. Failure on either front was not an option.

When Rin slogged back to camp, haggard and wan, dusky circles rung under his eyes, it was pitifully clear that he hadn’t slept nearly enough last night. Sousuke’s heart ached helplessly. He was cupping candle flames in a blizzard.

“Tea?” Sousuke blew the cup, and nested it in linen.

Rin blinked in Sousuke’s direction to float his gaze on some vague shape overhead. “Oh. We… have to go. We—”

“I know. I already packed up while the water was heating. Drink. And eat.”

Rin’s fingers were stiff and wind-chilled when Sousuke pried them open to push the cup into his palms. The orange spiced steam tickled his chin, and warmed color back into his face. This journey was wearing him thin. When they flew today, Sousuke would make Rin sleep against him in the saddle. He could manage the reigns for a while now, and Rin needed the rest.

The cup rested still in Rin’s hands, his food untouched. A distant numbness clung about him. Sousuke cupped one cheek and kissed the other—leaving his lips there a couple seconds longer than usual.

“Come on, love.”

It worked, and Rin sighed a laugh, finally locking eyes, a little shy to be caught so out of sorts. The
rest of him glowed back to life, and he sat to finish breakfast.

“Thanks.”

“Want me to feed you?” Sousuke was only half joking.

Rin scoffed, and kicked at his ankles.

“Eat it, though. Please.” He swept Rin’s stray fringe behind his ear, and left to pack the last of their things.

The food was flavorless.

Sousuke was a good cook, and Rin was sure breakfast tasted fine, but it ground like dry cotton in his mouth. He needed to bathe. He was so tired.

Tora flexed her wings, heating herself as sea water steamed off of her body. The saddle was already fastened on her back. For a moment, Rin puzzled at that. Getting it on was usually a two-person job.

“You put her saddle on alone?”

“Hm? Ah…” Sousuke tied up the bed mat, and stowed it. “A couple of the others helped me with it, actually.”

Rin’s chest warmed at the thought, and he finished breakfast.

Sousuke sat under a stripped tree beside one of the smaller dragons, sharpening a sword he’d brought. The whetstone sliced expertly over one blade, then another, the scraping sound sending chills up Rin’s back and into his skull.

One more night at most, Rin figured, and the flight would overtake their target.

Neither of Rin’s weapons had ever tasted blood.

Sousuke’s eyes flicked up to meet his. He froze, and pocketed the whetstone.

The air thickened with unsaid words.

“Look Rin, I… I was thinking.” Sousuke began. He leveled an unreadable look. “I know it’s gonna be hard for you to fight your uncle. He’s your family, you’ve known him all your life, and it’ll be no easy thing to face him.” He shifted, and Rin felt it like a hairline crack in a glacier. “So let me do it.”

The ice shattered, and roared into an avalanche.

“What?”

“Let me kill him,” Sousuke repeated. “And you won’t have to.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Of course I am. It would hurt you…to have to do that. You don’t want to, and—”
“And you do.”

The bolt of bare loathing in Sousuke’s eyes told Rin all he needed to know.

“When he dismounts, just say your peace, and step aside. You don’t have to watch.”

“You want kill him.” Rin murmured. “That’s why you came with me, isn’t it?”

“I’m here to protect you, and stop that man from torching an island of innocent people.”

“No you’re not,” Rin said evenly. “Look me in the eyes, and tell me no part of you came to get revenge.”

Sousuke matched him, his blue stare hard as diamond. “He burned my parents alive, Rin. I watched him do it; I can remember the sight, the sounds. He killed everyone, and you’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’ll forgive him for it.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive,” Rin argued.

“Then what?” Sousuke’s patience tightroped on a knife edge. “He wanted you dead.”

“No he didn’t.” Rin ran a weary, shaky hand through his unwashed hair. “He’s never wanted to kill me, he just…thought that he had to.”

Unbridled disgust twisted Sousuke’s face. “Listen to yourself.”

“Look, I’m telling you I want to talk to him, and learn what I can. He could still help us against the Hazukis.”

“Why.” There was so much spite in Sousuke’s voice, Rin could taste it in the back of his own mouth. “Why are you giving him a chance?”

“Do you have any idea what murdering him would seem like to the people I preside over? They’d see me claim the throne, and kill my uncle not even a month later? That’s insane. It looks like incompetence, instability,” Rin reasoned. “I think you forget that most of this empire still trusts and respects him.”

“Who cares?!” Sousuke threw his hands up, tight with tempered fury. “The Emperor’s job isn’t to be liked by his people; it’s to protect them.”

“I care, Sousuke! And I don’t believe that I have to choose one or the other! I thought you understood that. Uncle will listen to sense; I know he will.”

“That man doesn’t deserve your compassion, or your mercy. He deserves to watch steel twist in his gut. To leave this world screaming, helpless, and afraid, the way everyone died beneath him.”

Sousuke loomed closer; Rin had never felt the towering presence of him with such force.

“And yes, Rin. I’d love to kill him myself.”

Rin swallowed hard. A well was pooling—deep, icy, simmering. This wasn’t battle spirit before him—when the enemies lunged for your veins, and you found theirs first. It was calculated and exacted in cold blood. Sousuke was a killer, and he wanted to be.

“I should’ve known you would be like this,” Rin stormed, rounding on Sousuke. “If you wanted to solve everything with slaughter for the rest of your fucking life, then you should’ve just stayed in the
Sousuke reared backward like he’d been kicked.

*That was cruel.*

*Why would I say that to him?*

Anger was blinding as wildfire, and Rin forced out all else.

Sousuke collected himself, collapsing the universe inward around him.

“He’s right about you, isn’t he?”

Armor pried apart, Rin felt the words like a knife between his ribs. His head swarmed into a mess of hurt and fury, all of it boiling over with nowhere to go but out. He curled a fist into Sousuke’s shirt, and slammed him with bruising force against the tree trunk. Sousuke grimaced. Uncaring, Rin crowded forward, baring his teeth like a wolf before the killing lunge. The side of Rin’s face tingled, awaiting Sousuke’s retaliation—

But it did not come.

Sousuke went still, stone-faced, and swallowed Rin’s outburst like bitter medicine. Rin watched it sink in all the way, saw the tendons of his neck tighten, that hard jaw set as Sousuke closed himself off.

*There was blood on his hands, and death in his eyes.*

“Fine, then.” Rin unhanded him. “Stay here. We’ll pick you up on the way home.”

Tears seared cold against his heated face. He wasn’t sure when they’d started, but to wipe them away was to admit they were there. He edged the distance wider, every footfall a new crack in the earth, and turned his back.

“Rin—!”

Sousuke called out after him. He could goddamn yell all he wanted. Rin gathered his weapons, and left the spare supplies on the ground. This was his family, his fight, and he could resolve it alone. Clumsy and rage-numb, Rin climbed his dragon’s flank, swung into the seat, and gave Tora the signal to fly.

She stalled.

“The fuck are you doing, I said let’s go.”

The dragon ground her claws into the dirt, and growled her dissent. He didn’t need her giving him hell, too. Sharp red meeting deep violet, he shot her a scathing command. He never commanded her. They were partners. Friends. It hurt to be like this with her, but he was leaving, and they could not waste another second here. Any longer, and Rin feared he would change his mind.

Tora glanced around. The other dragons were watching. To defy her partner before the group was to shake the foundation—to bare weakness at the core, and Rin knew she would not do it. Her eyes flicked to Sousuke, and to back to him, hooded with sorrow. Then she faced ahead, unfolded her wings, and called the others to depart.

“Rin, wait!” Sousuke’s ire was abandoned; he despaired. “Don’t do this! I’m trying to help you!”
“I get it! You think I’m weak! Just as Uncle, and everyone else does. Well fuck you, I am the Emperor; I’ll do this my way.” He fastened the strap, pulling it tight. “And I don’t need the kind of help you came to give me, Sousuke.”

Tora crouched, and beat her wings hard. The force of it was enough to blow Sousuke backward, where he braced himself against the tree. His voice was drowned out in the storm of wind and dust as the flight took off all at once, and Rin was thankful that he couldn’t hear it. He’d never been more in need of the sky’s embrace.

They caught an updraft into the clouds, and the island diminished behind them. The saddle felt empty.

Blinking away the sting in his eyes, Rin pulled his cloak tighter, and faced forward.

________________________

Sousuke stumbled down the trail on feet that didn’t want to carry him. Pieces of himself cracked away like brittle bark, and scattered into oblivion. Aimless, he followed the untended path as it plunged downhill, weaving between jaggy, sheer-faced rocks jutting out of the dirt that he could twist an ankle on if he wasn’t careful.

Rin would never see things as he did, and couldn’t even make the effort to try. The boy’s father had died young, too; it was a tragedy Rin still wore like a scar. But Sousuke’s loss was carved in the shape of murder, and somehow he’d always known he would need blood to fill it. For all Sousuke thought he and Rin fit together, in this they were reaching for one another in a void.

Sousuke wanted to protect him, and fight for him, and if he could deal evil the justice he was owed, there was no good reason he shouldn’t.

“Fuck.” He stumbled over a wedge of stone.

“—should’ve stayed in the pits!”

Sousuke had no idea where he was, where to go, or what to do next.

“I don’t need you.”

Venom was bleeding into his ears. He wasn’t even sure anymore, if those were Rin’s exact words.

“I DON’T NEED YOU.”

It was true. Rin had wanted him there, maybe, once—but Sousuke was a paper lantern to Rin’s inferno. The longer he stewed, the more his molten anger with Rin cooled and hardened into a shell of frustration with himself.

He was angry.

In love.

Desperate. Why can’t Rin understand?

The fight played back in his head again. And again.
He’d pushed Rin away, made him feel worthless; of course Rin got mad. That promise he’d made to Gou only took him six days to blow to pieces. Regret burned like a gulp of acid. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Loose stones dotted his path, and he kicked one clear into the sloping gorge below. It did less than he’d hoped to divert his anguish.

An urge to check the sky became a nagging itch that Sousuke had stopped resisting. He checked twice every minute, scanning the empty blue, straining his ears for the drum of Tora’s wing beats. Maybe Rin had changed his mind, turned around and flown back for him. He loathed how pathetic he sounded, wishing for that—but found himself waiting all the same. Though setting the course back to retrieve Sousuke would allow Akira even further out of range.

After two hours of wandering, Sousuke was forced to admit that Rin had really, truly left him behind. His love would return a victor, or not at all.

Gulls and murres crowed in a throaty refrain, dipping in circles and flocking along the cliffs. Sousuke’s instinct had drawn him to the ocean. The roiling crash of waves against dark crags was a soothing wash of noise as he walked.

A village reared into view. The settlement was tucked around the towering elbows of rock, smattered with modest houses of wood and thatch reed roofs. Patchwork gardens fit together like a motley quilt—perfectly imperfect, and strung with net to keep out the birds. Curious eyes followed Sousuke down the road through town. Doors and windows clattered shut with his advance, and it occurred to him that he must make for a menacing sight, belt brimming with weapons, and the Matsuoka jaws loudly emblazoned on his coat.

He passed through the gate to observe the quiet harbor that opened up ahead, where boats were swaying, tethered to a narrow dock crusted with limpets. Washed-up seaweed heaped in grimy tangles on the shore over gnarled knobs of driftwood. Not even one of the boats looked like they would get him anywhere far, or fast enough to be of help to Rin. He was stranded here, useless, rusting in his own rancor.

Sousuke wandered along the sea wall. It was low, gull-stained, and rough-hewn—the edges skirted by sand. Coarse, young sand—not the sort of beach to walk barefoot on, so he hoisted himself onto the lookout rail, and let his mind drift on rolling white caps.

They roared toward shore, only to waste themselves splayed out in foam lace on the beach.

In, out.

In, out.

He imagined the salt water swallowing him whole.
“Excuse me? Sir?”

Gritty, uneven footsteps and a curious voice drew Sousuke away from the ocean. A thin, dark-haired man in a patterned juniper robe was making his way over. He looked confused—scared even, squinting at Sousuke as if trying to place him.

Remembering his attire, Sousuke supposed he should introduce himself as a soldier of the Imperial Guard, but the man didn’t seem interested in hearing that sort of thing. He approached, mouth slack like he was staring at a ghost.

“How do I know you?” Sousuke puzzled.

“……Sousuke?”

He stumbled back. Expelling the fog from his head, Sousuke hopped down and inspected closer. A long nose, laugh lines, ears pierced all the way along the shell. He’d seen this face before, somewhere. Many times. Though he didn’t remember it being so drawn and sallow, nor the stubborn black hair salted with so much grey.

The answer struck him like a hammer blow.

“Mister Nanase?!”

The man gasped.

“Minizaki?! It’s really you, isn’t it? You’re alive!”

The jewelry-maker advanced, blanched with astonishment. He scanned Sousuke head to boots, boots to his blue-green eyes.

“Gods above you’re big,” he breathed. “You look so much like your father.”

Sousuke allowed man closer, still not entirely sure that he wasn’t dreaming.

After a beat, the man, Nanase, asked, “How on earth are you here?”

“I…” A dozen explanations fragmented and shattered like broken glass. Sousuke fumbled.

“I…..”

I was abandoned.

I broke Rin’s heart.

I don’t know.

“I’m lost.”

Nanase’s deep indigo eyes jumped wide, and softened. He reached a quivering hand out, taking a grounding hold of Sousuke’s arm—

And then crushed them into an embrace. The jewelry-maker was slight-framed, and the top of his head barely grazed Sousuke’s chin, but his grip was strong, and Sousuke crumbled into him. Heaving, he threw his arms around Nanase’s back, clinging on like the wind might scatter him out to sea if he didn’t.
“There there, boy,” Nanase cooed.

Hold unrelenting, the jewelry-maker craned back, the sides of his face wet. He motioned behind him, toward the town.

“Come on, Yamazaki. Let’s go inside.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m back! *profuse sweating* Hope you’re all doing well! Thank you so much for being patient, and for sticking with this story <3

Notes:

“Rockhoppers” is a term borrowed from the nation’s history. The first settlers in Iwatobi were exiled sorcerers from Samezuka, who chose to leave the empire in order to practice magic as they pleased. They jumped from site to site, and their nomadic lifestyle earned them the nickname, “Rockhoppers.” Eventually, they made Tottori Canyon’s magic-rich stone their permanent home. The group choosing to use the name is a hearkening to both their free-spirited wandering, and a loyalty to the crown.
The trek to Nanase’s home was a watercolor well of greens and browns of which Sousuke was only half aware. He walked numbly behind the jewelry-maker, following like an abandoned boat being tugged to port. They cut away from the main road past a sparse smatter of other houses with tented thatch roofs. Reedy grass bowed with the breeze at their ankles. The village hummed with activity that seemed to freeze in time as Sousuke was led by.

Nanase stole backward glances at him often, as if Sousuke were a specter that might blink out of existence just as quickly as he’d appeared. They spoke little. The jewelry-maker had been on his way back from the market that morning, and Sousuke offered to carry the sack of fresh rice for him, hefting it easily over a shoulder. He assured it was purely out of courtesy, and not for the subtle limp he noticed when the other man walked. Nanase had ever been on the thin side, but now that Sousuke towered over him, he seemed almost wispy, and frail.

“Ah, Mitsu should be home soon!” Nanase took the left path at an unmarked fork. “You remember my wife, don’t you? Boy, is she in for a shock.”

Sousuke caught his toe in a ditch, and stumbled to catch himself. “Wait, both of you made it out alive?”

“Careful! These trails are gonna kill somebody one day, I swear…We did, yes.”

“How is that possible? Were you not on the ship south?”

The front gate whined on rusted hinges as Nanase kneeled it open. “How about we swap stories inside when we’re all three together, yes?”

Sousuke agreed. He could wait. There was no place else to go, in any case.

Violet morning glories still in bloom sprawled up the front of Nanase’s house, reaching for low,
sturdy-looking eaves. The roof was pointed like two giant hands in prayer, with a wide base and lofty attic. A quaint storage shed was raised in the side yard, beneath which a garden of cabbage was sprouting, and a stray cat was watching them lazily from the shade.

The jewelry-maker kicked off his shoes in the genkan, ushering Sousuke inside after him.

“Ah, Mister Nanase? where would you like the rice?”

“Kioshi.”

“I’m sorry?” Sousuke removed his boots and set the bag in the open cedar bin.

“You’re grown now. No need to ‘Mister Nanase’ me. If I use your name, you can use mine.”

Nanase’s warm laugh soaked in bone-deep.

The man busied himself depositing his grain, and mulberry leaves for the silkworm trays in the attic.

“Now sit down and rest. You sure look like you need it.”

“Thank you.” Sousuke didn’t argue, wilting cross-legged onto a cushion next to the low table.

The living area was spacious and earthy—bright where netted windows fluttered open to air out Kioshi’s workshop. There were whittled ornaments mounted along the walls, and paintings of nature expressed in his loose hand. Sousuke hadn’t spent much time in the jewelry-maker’s old shop as a kid, but the scent of his trade was still familiar: fresh-cut wood, dye, and cool, wet clay.

“Can I make you something to eat, Sousuke? Bet it’s been a while since you’ve had good saba nitsuke.”

“No, thank you. I’m not hungry.”

Nanase’s brow tightened with concern. “Just tea, then.”

He filled a ceramic pot, and lit the stove. Sousuke let the sound of him bustling about the house melt into the atmosphere, trying with everything in him not to think about Rin.

The entrance to the backyard scraped open, and a woman padded lightly inside.

Nanase Mitsu looked almost exactly as Sousuke remembered. She was a diver—tan with a round, kind-looking face, and large hands. An indistinct serenity emanated from her that the years had left gracefully untouched. She tugged her hairband loose, shook out her damp chin-length black locks, and set down her catch basket in the kitchen. She froze when she spotted Sousuke, dusk blue eyes jumping wide for a moment only. Then she relaxed with a nod, and a mild grin.

“Ah, Sousuke, Mitsu’s back!” Kioshi crossed the room again, wiping his hands dry on a rag.

“Love, look who I found wandering around near the beach. If you can believe this, it’s—”

“Yamazaki,” she said with a narrow hint of surprise—as if she’d only seen Sousuke yesterday. Her voice was rich, expression mildly assessing. She knelt down and craned in awkwardly close for a better look at her guest. Sousuke held his posture rigid, letting her take in his whole existence at her own pace.

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“Ten years is a long time,” she said at length, and curled an arm over his shoulders—gentle and unhurried, before settling across the table from him. The scent of salt water lingered in her wake.

“You really look like your father. Prettier, though.”
Kioshi shot her a panicked ‘you can’t say that!’ sort of look which reminded Sousuke fondly of Ai. Mitsu breezed by the hint. She set three ceramic cups on the table. Sousuke took his graciously. This whole situation was dreamlike in its strangeness.

“What happened?” He curled his palms around his cup, dryly aware that he’d employed the same comfort for Rin mere hours ago. “How are the two of you here?”

“Ah, right. That...” Kioshi rifled through his box of tea leaves, scooping some into the pot with popped kernels of brown rice. “Suppose some explanation is in order.”

Sousuke waited patiently for the man to gather his thoughts.

“After you ran off, we blocked ourselves inside the shop.” Nanase frowned hard, drawing the memory out of a stitched seam. “There was a lot of shouting, screaming. Fire outside the windows. Our roof collapsed on us.”

Shifting back, Nanase hiked up the hem of his robe, baring aged burn scars that streaked across his calves, and sprawled upward beneath the fabric. Skin over his right knee had healed glassy and taut. After a quick glance, Sousuke averted his eyes politely.

“I don’t remember much after the house came down, but Mitsu dragged me into the creek. We swam down past the west bridge, and hid in the gutters until the storm burned itself out.”

Their water hissed to a gentle boil. Mitsu fetched it from the stove and fed it to the teapot, leaving it carefully to steep. Sousuke was certain her recollection of that night must be far more vivid than her husband’s, but she seemed content to leave it buried. He couldn’t blame her.

His gaze wandered awkwardly along the shelves, over Nanase’s half-finished driftwood sculptures. “Then how’d you end up here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Not much to that, I’m afraid.” Kioshi stroked the ghost of stubble around his jaw with a thumb. “In the days after, we and a few others salvaged a boat, and set out for Iwatobi. They would take us in, if nowhere else could. But winter waters had other plans; we wound up here, and just stayed. Laid low, and made a life.” He traded knowing nods with his wife. “Things were hard at the start, but dust settles. It’s been...good.”

Sousuke sensed Nanase’s eyes tracing over his jaw, collar mark, and down—the guilt in them dragging like dull claws.

“I’m...so sorry, Sousuke. Last time I saw you, you were headed for the beach, so I thought you must have been...” he floundered for the rest. “If we’d known you were alive, we would have gone after you.”

“It’s ok,” Sousuke assured. “Even if you’d known, there wasn’t much that could be done.”

“Still...” Nanase trailed off. He frowned at the window, his cheeks hollowed in weary chiaroscuro. “When it was all done with in the morning and everyone was gone, the whole bay was so... deafeningly quiet. I don’t think I’ll ever forget what that felt like.”

Mitsu reached under the table to take her husband’s hand. Sousuke wondered if the Nanases missed home as much as he had. A decade was a long time apart.

Sousuke offered to help serve the tea. Warm roasted scents, and mellow wisps of steam cleared his mind some when he brought the cup to his lips.
“So Minizaki,” Nanase cleared his throat, and leveled his tone. “Tell us what you’ve been up to. Married yet?”

Sousuke coughed into his cup. “You’re asking me that first?”

“I have to ask you something first. Might as well start with the easy part, right?”

“Then, no. I’m…not married.”

_Not likely I ever will be._

Nanase leaned his chin into his palm with a smirk. “But there is someone, I can tell.”

“There is.” Sousuke admitted it without a blink of hesitation. “His name is Rin.” He paused suddenly, acutely aware of the reaction this name could yield. “Emperor…Matsuoka Rin.”

Kioshi’s brow creased slightly, his lips pressing firm. The man glanced over Sousuke’s coat, then the grip of the serpent sword at his feet. “You didn’t come here by ship, did you?”

“No.”

“Hm,” he resigned with a thin sip of tea.

Sousuke chewed his lip, and waited for the pair to toss him out for such betrayal.

Instead, Nanase beamed with an honest, if a little disbelieving, smile. “Well, tell us about him. What’s he like?”

Tears of relief stung Sousuke’s eyes.

“He’s…incredible. Passionate, smart, selfless, and…_Gods_ he’s gorgeous. I love the way he laughs.”

It was impossible to talk about Rin and not imagine him. Sousuke blushed up to his ears, heart aching; his arms felt empty. The Nanases were biting back sympathetic snickers at the state of him.

Sousuke grimaced. “But then I said something that hurt him. So he left me here.”

Retelling his life was an uphill mess; stories and speeches did not come easily. Sousuke forgot things, rushed others in too late, shrouded years with terse words. Even so, the Nanases listened, and fit the half-formed shards together. The Valley, the sakura tree, his first kiss at the festival. Then six years in the stadium compound, and his enigmatic sponsor. The Mikoshibas’ trial, the Hazukis, and the Silver King’s friendship. Most everything circled back to the beautiful boy that he’d spent half his life longing for. The love that he’d poisoned with his own wrath.

Watery remnants of tea puddled lukewarm at the bottom of the pot when Sousuke had finished. He took a long drought of it, biting down the bitterness, and checked his audience for the last time.

The Nanases’ stares were blank; silence stretched like spider silk.

They shared a look.

“You’ve been quite busy, then,” Mitsu noted finally, her tone cloudy.

“I guess.”
Sousuke tensed, anxiously wetting his lips. “Are you really not angry with me for this?” He plucked at the dragon-tooth embroidery of his uniform.


“But Rin is—”

“—The love of your life. And an amazing person, from how you talk about him.” Nanase raked a hand through the smooth hair that swept over his ears, winded. “Honestly, I don’t even know what to say to a story like that.”

Sousuke hung his head. “I miss him.”

Kioshi swirled his clay cup, absently finding a chip in the paint with a fingernail, and smoothing over it.

“I’m sure that Rin misses you just as fiercely; and when he flies back here, you both can make things right.”

Rin’s return was not a guarantee. Sousuke couldn’t stand to think about that.

“I’m not even sure Rin wants me back,” he wrung out painfully. “He’s so strong, but he chooses to be kind. And I’m…just violent.”

“Sousuke…”

“I hurt him when he needed me most. I made him think I had no faith in what he stands for, all because I still can’t forget what happened.” Saying it aloud to someone else was cathartic, after echoing the words between his ears so many times. “I just can’t let go.”

A soft gust clinked the wind chime outside.

Mitsu looked up from her tea to lock Sousuke with a sad, simmering stare. Her distant demeanor sharpened, dark eyes zeroed in on him with alarming depth.

“Demons drowned our son two months after his first birthday,” she said quietly. “We thought there could be no greater loss to bear in one lifetime. Then eleven years later, the dragons came. It was natural to want retribution. For the sirens, the Matsuokas…but wishing death on them would not recover what was taken. The present would not change.”

“But things could change. It’s what’s right,” Sousuke seethed. “If I have the chance to win justice for everyone who died, I can’t leave it.” That kind of peace was simply not in him, and his own nature was tearing him in two.

“Win justice…” the diver mused. “When you say ‘justice,’ you think of a hammer, or a brick wall—something hard and absolute, but it’s the opposite. It slithers, and warps, and withers with venom. Every man thinks he knows it, and that he is owed it, but to fight for justice is to fight only for yourself.”

Sousuke bristled hot. “Rin’s uncle is going to kill him. If stopping that man cold isn’t the right thing to do, then nothing is.” Embers of his fight with Rin earlier were reigniting.

Mitsu was unfazed. “I didn’t tell you not to stop him.”

Sousuke scowled. This cryptic advice was fucking impossible to deal with. “Then what.”
“Not that you should stand down before your enemy, of course not. Only...consider what really drives you toward him. What you do it all for. That’s what will be left, when all is over. When you know this in your heart, I think you’ll find that justice, and vengeance have no part in it whatsoever.” She took a delicate, meditative sip of water. “If that helps to calm the battle inside of you.”

Midday warmed the room in bright blooms.

Sousuke hunched beside the table, feeling like an upended bag with the contents of his whole self spilled out in a mess on the Nanases’ floormats. He probably looked as bewildered as he felt.

“I’m gonna take a walk,” he blurted clumsily. “Just...need to think.”

“Of course,” Kioshi nodded. “Take your time.”

Sousuke pushed to his feet, and let sensation needle back into his numb legs. “Thanks, I won’t be out too—”

A roar pierced the shell of calm from outside.

It filled the rocky village basin, vibrating in the clay walls of Nanase’s house, and rippling the surface of Sousuke’s water cup.

He bolted for the door on pure instinct. That cry could only belong to one creature. Sousuke didn’t bother with the front gate, vaulting the low fence, and turning skyward.

“RIN!!”

His heart was jumping into his throat. He prepared himself for the sight of Rin landing at the end of the road, already waiting for him to dismount, and meet him with open arms. There was so much to say.

“Wait!” Nanase barked from inside. “Minizaki, wait-!!”

The cry belonged to a dragon, though not the one Sousuke was expecting. The beast soared too high to see clearly, but low enough to rustle the pines, and send clotheslines nervously astir.

Thick skin spanned across the bones of its wings, midnight black—so dark, no light filtered through them; the village was plunged into a fleeting eclipse. Sousuke stared, petrified, until the monster was lost behind the clouds.

“Ah, you saw him!” Nanase jogged across the yard, stopping at Sousuke’s side with a hand on his shoulder. “We have a dragon on the island; I probably should have mentioned.” He adjusted his robe where it had shifted askew. “Thing must’ve got here a few years ago now; just appeared. Trust me, I feared the worst that first season, but it’s never bothered with us. Got bigger, juicier things to eat. If anything, the water’s been safer than ever since it—Sousuke?”

“I know him.”

Nanase blinked expectantly, but no clarity followed. “You know the dragon. As in, you’re friends with it?”

“Not sure I would say friends.” Sousuke tore his gaze from the sky, surging with resolve. “Where does he live?”
“Around the other side of the island….Why do you ask?”

“I can’t believe I’m being forced to watch you sprint to your death again, Yamazaki. You’re just the worst.”

Nanase’s brush dipped into his palette, and back to Sousuke’s face.

“I’ll be fine.” Sousuke was sure of that. Mostly.

“Mhmm. Exceptionally common last words. Stop moving your mouth a moment.”

Sousuke squirmed at the wet touch of Nanase’s brush painting dots and lines over his cheekbones. Impatience welling, he struggled to sit still. Before, there had been nothing to do. Now there was everything at once, and he was already late. As soon as Mitsu returned with the neighbor’s horse, Sousuke would set out.

“Do I really need this?”

“If you’re going to challenge a dragon, you should wear Jinbei’s face.” Nanase refilled his brush, and paused there. “You are the last to wear it, after all.”

Sousuke dissolved any more complaints.

When he was done, Kioshi angled a mirror up. Coal-black warpaint formed a stripe across Sousuke’s eyes, fading into grey, and then spots of white—night stars on the whale shark’s back, reminding him he would never face the enemy alone.

“Here. Take this as well.” Kioshi looped a string of fitted hemp and green shells around Sousuke’s neck. The beads clacked together as he thumbed over the designs. It was odd to be wearing something at his throat again, but this time, not unpleasant. The past stared back at Sousuke through his own steely face in the dusted silver glass.

He had a dream once, too, just as Rin did. The years had washed it out, like a faded song that cycled through his head, though he’d forgotten the words. Who he’d wanted to be, and what he fought for—none of it had changed.

His purpose was to stand between evil and his home—wherever, whomever, home might be. This, he knew.

All else, he let go.

Nanase checked over his work with an appraising nod.

Sousuke returned the mirror. “It looks amazing, thank you.”

“You’ll have to let me sketch you when I see you next.” The jewelry-maker rinsed his hands in the basin, and sat back fondly, just as a horse whinnied outside. “Looks like it’s time.”

Mitsu was leading the borrowed mare down the street by her reins. The horse looked healthy, her coat a cool grey with bright spots dappling her back. She bayed and stamped, as if she knew Sousuke was leading her somewhere she wasn’t going to like.
“Suppose there’s no point trying to convince you to stick around,” Kioshi started. “But if you change your mind, just…come in. No need to knock.”

“Thanks.” Sousuke meant it, deeply. He hoisted himself into the saddle on a swell of rekindled hope. “But I have to get to Rin. He needs…No, I need to be with him.”

Mitsu stood aside, leaving the road wide open. “This Rin is a lucky man; I hope he knows that.”

Sousuke smiled as he secured the woven belt that crossed over his chest. “I’ll always be the lucky one.”

He thanked the Nanases for everything, and waved them goodbye.

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*Catherine’s* flying was reserved for nighttime hours after her first launch. She would be easier to hide from curious eyes then, as the Rockhoppers steered through the tall twists of Tottori Canyon toward the ocean.

“*Once we’re further out, being airborne helps us avoid eyes in the water too,*” Ikuya warned. Thus Asahi had them split into two crews: Nagisa, Rei, and Ikuya (plus Haru-chan) at night, Asahi, Makoto, Haru, and Kisumi during the day. There was only one cabin, and five beds, so arrangements were tight. Makoto struggled to find sleep in such cramped quarters. The feeling of walls so close around him, and the ceiling suffocatingly low made his skin crawl; it felt like being stuffed into a toolbox. If this continued, he might ask Haru to sleep on deck under the stars with him, when the winds died down.

Asahi assumed the role of captain, naturally. Ikuya was first mate; the pair knew seafaring better than anyone else here. *Night watch,* was Ikuya’s unspoken task, and Haru was loath to let the boy do it. But Ikuya had spent two years voyaging, off and on, and hard experience won out. He was vehement about filling the position—almost strangely so. Haru pouted about it the first night, and Makoto had to lock him in bed with heavy arms to stop him trying to chaperone.

The second day was darkening, and the night crew had only just begun their shift. Evening hues painted everything warm. Kisumi was perched coyly on the rail with his long legs crossed, telling a story that made Asahi laugh from his core while he checked the wings. The spirit was in a loose, plain shirt from Aomori, with no jewelry save his bright teal earrings. Without all of the gold, and layers of white silk, he looked much smaller—lighter, and relaxed in a way that didn’t feel like he was forcing it for others’ sake.

Haru spent his downtime with Ikuya when their shifts overlapped. They were talking quietly on the rear deck as sun weighed the sky down. Makoto smiled to himself to see them reconnect.

Rei and Nagisa were at the bow while the sorcerer flew the ship, bickering over something about dinner.

“*Soup is a meal,*” Rei said with conviction. “*Meals are to be eaten.*”

“It can be a drink, too,” Nagisa parried.

“No, it cannot. That is odiously illogical.”
“If I pour this soup into a flask and drink it, it becomes a beverage. Watch!”

Rei shrieked. “NO! STOP!! STOP THAT!!!”

“Next, I’ll dump the apple juice into the bowl, and eat it with a spoon. Now it’s apple soup.”

“YOU HERETIC!!”

Makoto shook his head and left them to it, but Rei caught him on his way out.

“Makoto-san!” The apothecary was ground down to his last nerve. “Would you please help me quell Nagisa’s anarchic inclinations and explain to him soundly that soup is food!?”

Makoto stifled a laugh.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.” Rei stormed past him, and made for his lab.

Nagisa was letting the wheel spin untended while he steered with one arm, sunset dripping hot amber down his back as if it were melting from his hair. His wrist swept like a chorus instructor’s with the wind—the only outward sign of his efforts. Makoto announced his presence with a warm chuckle.

“You and Rei get along well.”

Nagisa snickered with his mouth full. “He’sh sho much fun. Worriesh heaps, though.”

The boy could use a little of Rei’s caution, though, Makoto thought. He folded his arms heavily, searching outward at whatever Nagisa was seeing. Their group was making impressive time moving east across the continent. Sandstone walls sailed by on either side of the ship, shaped by rivers and lacy waterfalls that spidered over them and spilled from the sheer faces. From here, it almost looked as if the cataracts were moving slowly, or not at all, even though Makoto knew they raged with force enough to smash the vessel apart.

He peered sidelong at Nagisa, and spoke up.

“Ikuya told us who you are. Where you’re from.”

The boy didn’t react. He hummed, taking his time. “Did he? Guess you must have some questions. I’ll warn you though; good runaways are first-class liars.”

“No questions.” Makoto approached with caution. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry you had to flee your family. And it’s very brave of you to be out here doing this.”

The boy scoffed. “You don’t need be sorry, Mako-chan. Not like I have any other friends to annoy.”

“I mean it,” Makoto insisted. “Once it’s all done with, you won’t have to wear any more disguises. You can be Nagisa, and Iwatobi can finally know you.”

The boy faced Makoto, looking for the first time, unsure of himself. He kneaded a response with his tongue, then turned away. “Yeah, I…maybe.”

There was something else hanging here, out of Makoto’s reach. He knew when he was being shut out. Haru had done it too many times.
“Well,” he resigned. “We might not have known each other long, but if you ever need someone to talk with, you can always come see me. It doesn’t have to be important, or...have to do with the quest. We can just talk.”

Nagisa went sharply quiet, and Makoto feared he had overstepped a boundary.

“Well, it doesn’t have to be important, or...have to do with the quest. We can just talk.”

“Okay,” he said at last. “Sure.”

Asahi broke into ebullient song inside the cabin, joined by Kisumi in his sugary voice. Their music lifted the mood along with it, and Makoto was grateful. They sounded good together.

Nagisa lit with energy as though it were contagious. “Hey! you ever play ‘Five Fingers?’”

Makoto curled a wide smile. “How do you play?”

Haru’s hazy morning whispers were close to Makoto’s ear, but not urgent.

“Mmmm. What’s wrong, Haru?”

“Nothing wrong. I wanna show you something, so get up.”

The siren was already out of bed, wearing his shoes and one of Makoto’s outer robes, prettily disheveled.

The cabin was dark, and vibrating with the snores of the night crew. Faint dawn seeped in under the door. Day shift must be starting soon. Makoto checked the stone in his bag, then stuffed it back under the bed.

Nagisa was sprawled on his stomach in his raised bunk, mumbling his way through a dream. Ren used to sleep like that, when the twins had strung up hammocks in the house once. He’d fallen out during the night and bruised his elbow. Sighing, Makoto stretched the tightness from his back, and pushed out of bed. He was careful not to step on people’s clothes as he crept across the cabin floor to nudge Nagisa’s leg away from the edge.

When he turned back to Haru, the boy was smiling in that soft, knowing way he did sometimes.

Haru slid into Makoto’s space. “Follow me.”

His expression gave little away, but his grip was burning. Makoto caught his heel on the door frame, and stumbled onto the front deck. Facefuls of crisp air hit them immediately. Asahi was already at the wheel, the sails were flushed with wind, and a strange noise all around echoed like an infinite exhale—quietly loud.

“Look, Makoto.” Haru whirled to face him, brimming with emotion. “I’ve always wanted to show you.”

Makoto stepped into the open, and a gasp hooked in his lungs.

Water.
Water, stretching as far as he could see into a clear lilac horizon. It had the presence of a massive living body, and the boat was moving atop it, gently rising and falling.

“This is—"

*The ocean.*

*Oh Gods, it’s the ocean.*

Makoto hurried across the deck, taking in the grand sweep of blue, Haru's hand still in his. There was only water in all directions, unending.

“It’s…huge,” Makoto whispered. “I never even imagined…” The majesty of it made him shudder. Wonder was quickly freezing into apprehension. So much pure, powerful unknown was terrifying. He hoped Haru wouldn’t pick up on his insecurity.

The siren trailed a reassuring touch up Makoto’s arm, past his elbow.

“When I first came to the forest, I was scared too,” he said calmly. “People were yelling, the earth was strange under my feet; it didn’t want me. I was sure those ten years would hold only misery,” He leaned in a little—a gentle weight that fluttered Makoto’s heartbeat. “Then you were there. And I thought, even if I never belonged in that place, maybe I could belong with you.”

“Haru…”

“You don’t have to be afraid of the ocean, Makoto.”

Makoto’s trapped energy bubbled up into laughter. Haru stilled with a question in his eyes; he wasn’t sure what to think.

Then Makoto whisked down to kiss the seam of his mouth, and smirked against it. “Do you want to go swimming?”

“I’ll…stay up here with you.” Haru blushed.

“What if I want to go swimming?”

“You don’t. It’s too cold.”

“Sure, I do.” Makoto peeled his nightshirt up and off. “You don’t have to come, Haru-chan.”

He swung over the rail and leapt off the ship before any second thoughts could stop him. He was seized by an urge to prove *something;* he wasn’t entirely sure what. Hitting the water was an icy full-body shock. He caught the slipstream shape of Haru diving in after him, then broke the surface with a shivery, gasping laugh.

*Bleughgh! Salty! Why is it salty?!”

Haru shot him a flat stare. “The salt.”

Snorting, the siren slipped under, and teased his fingers over Makoto’s legs. A firm, two-handed squeeze on Makoto’s ass startled a sharp yelp out of him. Haru resurfaced, looking unfairly pleased. Makoto had never felt the siren’s happiness with so much intensity—as though it surrounded them in the rolling swell of every wave.

It was too cold to stay still, so Makoto took a breath and swam under, kicking hard. Haru surged up
from beneath to meet him there. Strong hands framed Makoto’s shoulders as Haru anchored himself, and warm, soft lips collided in a flurry of bubbles. Makoto held his exhale a moment so he could see Haru clearly. Sunrise in motion filtered feathery silver against the siren’s face. Makoto had to keep treading or they would sink, though Haru made no effort to help. He draped an arm over Makoto’s back, spreading a hand behind his head to hold their kiss in place fiercely, pouring all of himself into it.

Makoto jumped up for a full breath, then dropped back to where Haru was waiting. This time, he did not bother trying to keep them afloat. He enveloped the siren like honeyed amber, and let them drop. The water grew colder. Light dimmed overhead. Makoto was scared; he was powerless here, but he found all that mattered was Haru’s body flush with his, their heartbeats melding into one. His arms were fitted tight around narrow shoulders, and Haru tucked his face into the dip of Makoto’s neck as the deep swallowed them both.

Pressure pulsed against Makoto’s ears as he sank farther, his life in Haru’s hands. When his stream of bubbles thinned and his lungs ached, strength circled around his middle, and swam him upward.

They shattered the surface together, and Makoto gulped air hungrily, light in the chest with love burning all over him. Haru’s smile was blinding as full sun.

Breathless, Makoto fell onto his back, and Haru did the same. The current carried them gently and cupped their ears in little splashes.

“It’s deeper than the lake, isn’t it?” Makoto faced the brightening sky.

“Yes.” Haru reached an arm upward to trace silky shapes with a finger. “See those clouds? The space between us and them.”

“Uh-huh.”

“In some places, the water runs deeper than that. The sea floor is so far down, even I can’t reach it.” Back home, Makoto’s whole being was rooted in purpose. Sprawling and ancient though the forest might be, he was an important part of it, grown deep into its fibers. Keep the garden healthy, be a strong brother, a good son. Protect them all. Here, he and Haru were drops in an ocean that spanned the earth, and sank into depths he couldn’t fathom. The sea would be here still when the woods withered, the mountains crumbled, and humans were but memories. To live in this expanse was to exist completely for yourself—swimming raw and unfettered until the day you died, sank to the bottom, and that would be all.

“I don’t regret my choice,” Haru said over the roaring silence.

“Really? This is so much to give up.”

“It is. But I don’t regret it.” Wet fingers wove between Makoto’s, still sending sparks up his arm after all these years. “Freedom is meaningless without you.”

The surface was calm. Makoto thought of a tent, a nest of blankets, a blue glass lantern, and how even in this universe spinning unhinged, some good things were just constant.

“The ship’s going to leave us behind, Haru.”

“Hm. I’ll swim us there.” Haru murmured, unworried. His eyes were still closed in bliss. “Or we’ll make Kisumi come get us.”
Riding a horse felt strange to Sousuke after long days spent on Tora’s back—like they were slogging up the trail with weighted ankles, unbearably slow. Rin was flying further out of reach; the hours were trickling down a drain. Sousuke urged the mare faster.

This path was easy enough to follow. It scooped around dense coastal undergrowth, wove across the beaches, then crawled steadily higher. The waves here waged war upon the cliffs, raging into hungry sea hollows. A fitting home for a wild dragon. Sousuke climbed his gaze up the side of the rock shelf, puzzling out a course for himself. He could walk up at least halfway, but where the footing steepened, ascent would be dangerous.

At length he reached a narrow, jagged stretch, and the horse could carry him no further.

“Get home, go.” Stowing the reins, he directed the mare back around. “Thanks for the practice, girl.” She trotted off without a fuss, tossing her head once to the side as if to tell him he was mad. She was probably right.

Black basalt towers speared out of the ocean into heathery curtains of mist. Sousuke could see now where the dragon must roost: a high cavern mouth that delved into the cliff. Even from this distance, he could make out marks around the entrance where claws had dug into the ledge. No birds nested here, and the stark absence of their calls flushed a chill over Sousuke’s skin. He hiked the trail as it snaked severely uphill, steepened, and petered out. It would be a climb from here on.

One hand before the next. A leg, pull, another hand. All he could do was keep going, and for the love of everything living not look past his boots. Footing was unpredictable. The rock formed feathered columns near the bottom, forcing him to edge around them and search out patches of rough surface—some of it wet where low clouds kissed the heights. He could rest where he needed, but not for too long. The sun was sinking.

Sousuke reached a stretch of rock that bowed in slightly, the shelf jutting over a drop. He numbed his nerves, and just moved. The pull of his bodyweight dragged leaden as he grasped a handhold and hauled himself up, dangling over the ledge until he found purchase for a foot. There was no way to climb back over that. Whatever fate awaited him when he reached the top, this would be a one-way trip. The knowledge sent a rush of recklessness through him. He heaved up onto a thin outcrop, and squinted ahead.

“Almost there.”

Clinging, catching his breath, Sousuke felt a vibration in the stone where his hands were splayed against it—a rolling noise like thunder and the earth groaning, its bones shifting. He wet the dry walls of his mouth with a swig of water.

Tamotsu was this dragon’s name—the lumbering, surly creature that Tora had known since she was a hatchling, and wanted for her lifelong mate. Sousuke had thought him difficult and unsociable at best, downright aggressive at worst. But Rin saw something in him to love (of course he did), so
they tolerated one another begrudgingly.

Today Rin was not here, and this dragon was feral. He was bigger than Tora, and fiercely territorial, even as a teenager. His willingness to attack was what got him into trouble in the first place, and Sousuke dreaded what kind of beast he would face once he reached the cave. Confronting a wild dragon without Rin present was going to be a dice-roll with death.

Evening fog was ghosting upward in gossamer layers. What scarce heat the rocks had absorbed during peak day was leaching out quickly, and the cold seeped in under the sweat-damp neckline of Sousuke’s shirt. He was going to run out of sunlight if he didn’t hurry. Somewhere over the water, he hoped Rin was making camp, curled up under Tora’s wing, warmed and safe. Whether or not he ever wanted Sousuke back, he was worth all of this.

Sousuke’s arms were scorching with exertion as he heaved himself onto the final precipice, and collapsed against the wall. The cliff above him was torched black in places, then clawed with brutish X-patterns: a dragon’s boundary marking, not to be crossed under any circumstance.

Wind moaned into the cavern gullet, and something shifted, deeper inside—something breathing and colossal—the shudder of muscles flexing, and claws scraping across loose earth. Sousuke gulped hard. This thrumming surge of adrenaline was not unlike those moments waiting for stadium gates to screech open. There was no other way to Rin in time.

The smell of burnt coals and fresh blood poured from the cave mouth, and Sousuke strained to adjust his eyes to the well of darkness ahead.

“Hey!”

He waited for his voice to sink in, feeling smaller with each passing second. Every sound echoed intimately around the lofty space and into the back of his skull.

A body moved in response—enormous, snaking, smoldering. In the mire of shadow, a single glacial blue eye snapped open.

And found him.
Sousuke’s heart froze into ice pins; he wanted to run, though there was no place backward to go. He breathed deep, and willed his limbs into motion. If this was going to work, he could not waver.


The beast’s nostrils flared and huffed, snaring Sousuke’s scent in the air. Recognition took a moment to settle in.

“I’m here because I need your help.”

Tamo drew away—a dark mass of untamed power. Sousuke could hear exhales steaming through bared teeth.

“Will you listen?”

A glow lit the dragon’s throat, filling its mouth like an iron caged lantern. The fiery brightness glinted off of his scales, and splashed flickering shadows over the walls.

Then Sousuke saw his face. Tamotsu’s left eye was milky white, and dead. Scarred-over claw gashes trenched from brow to lip, where the skin was slashed in a permanent grimace. Patches of scales around the base of his throat were mangled in the tracks of another’s fangs, the sheen warped where scorch marks smeared.

Sousuke swallowed his horror. He wondered if he should stare—if the creature wanted him to see. He got the grating sense that his life depended on whatever he did next. Stealing a lungful of courage, he advanced.

“I know it’s been a while. But I remember you. We used to be alright.” Sousuke skirted the ledge artfully, eyeing the burns beside the entrance. The dragon glanced around him, unsure of how to react. His anxiety buzzed electric in the air. He’s looking for Rin.

“Rin’s not here. It’s just…It’s just me this time. He’s far away.”

The nervous pupil stopped roving and narrowed to a needle.

Sousuke’s insides lurched. Walls quivered as the dragon reared back, towering up to the ceiling of the cave like a massive cobra-

Oh, fuck fuck fuck—

—and he lunged. Sousuke had a blink to register what was coming before diving sidelong out of the cave. Right. Go right. He skidded down the ledge. A foothold extended just far enough that he could steady himself there, scrambling for his balance. There was no way down, and no cover to duck behind. The scuffs of pebbles he’d knocked loose were lost in the fog, and he could not stop himself thinking their end could be his. He slammed his back to the rock; this wasn’t over.
Tamotsu melted out of the cave mouth like a tongue of tar, and snaked his head down, searching. Steam jetted from his slitted nostrils, and Sousuke stifled a cough. By some divine stroke of good fortune, sea winds were scattering his human scent in the opposite direction. Flicking its head left, the dragon brought itself closer to the cliff. The unblinking blind eye was level, only a leap away. It was now or never, and Sousuke didn’t come all this way to fail. He launched off the ledge and crashed onto the creature’s head.

“Listen to me!” He bellowed. Clawing for an anchor, he found the spines at Tamo’s neck. The beast growled, and thrashed, but Sousuke threw a leg over in time, twisting so one arm could loosen the long knife from its belt. Tamo’s roar erupted, fire crackling furiously in the hollow of his throat. Sousuke flicked his blade steady, hovering over the blue iris, and the dragon froze.

He intensely did not want to stab Tamo’s remaining eye out, but prayed the creature couldn’t tell that.

“I said LISTEN,” Sousuke fumed. “Rin’s out there, and he’s about to be in a lot of trouble. They both are.”

The thin pupil dilated at the mention, and a clear eyelid shuttered over it. Compassion was fighting to resurface.

“I need your help to get to them.” Sousuke lowered the blade. “I wouldn’t be asking if there was any other way.”

Rage was forced to a low boil, and the dragon coiled back inside with Sousuke balanced carefully on its head. The moment Sousuke’s knees hit solid earth, Tamo’s foot was on him, pinning him flat between two taloned toes. Sousuke cursed and writhed under the suffocating weight. The creature made a simmering grumble into his face, exhale like the swelter of a blacksmith furnace. Sweat beaded at Sousuke’s hairline, and slipped over his jaw.

“I know uuggghh fuck... I know you understand me,” Sousuke gritted.

If the dragon wasn’t moving, he was paying attention, at least. He wasn’t rearing to kill.

Yet.

Struggling to pull a breath, Sousuke wormed his arms into position under the massive foot and
pushed back. Tamo was punishing him—toying with his catch just to watch it resist, like an enormous stray cat.

“Rin’s…ugh…going to fight his uncle.” Sousuke did not have time for bullshit. “Would you fucking let me talk, you giant ass?”

Tamo paused, then eased the pressure off, as if stubbornly impressed by the insult. Sousuke heaved to his feet.

“You know exactly who I’m talking about,” he rasped. “Rin and Tora are planning to challenge him alone, and we need to get to them now. Go with me, and I’ll tell you where.”

The dragon hissed defiant embers.

Why not? How can he be like this?

Sunsweet recollections gathered behind Sousuke’s eyes: Rin teasing him as they played in dappled-light river shallows, giggling because he thought Sousuke and this monster were similar. Both stubborn and stony, repelling each other like matching poles of two lodestones. Sousuke hadn’t seen it then, but he did now: the doubt, loneliness, rage, regret—all spearing through layers of shadow in a violent ice-blue mirror. We’re the same.

He hoped that Tamotsu realized it, too. And if Rin had been right about that after all this time, only one thing would rein his damaged soul in.

“They looked for you, you know,” Sousuke said, strong enough to ring clear through the space. “Missed you, waited. For a long time, they searched everywhere.”

He knows now, how the emptiness rakes you hollow when you are the one left behind. He inched nearer. “But they still hold out hope that you’ll come home.”

Tamo’s eye darted, all of him on edge. Sousuke’s nerves were pulled like warp strings. “You ran from them because you’re ashamed to go back. You think that you’re broken, and undeserving of your place.”

A rumbling growl, and a jet of hot steam.

“I know because I’ve been there, and I’ve been wrong.” Sousuke walked forward, this time unchallenged. “So trust me. They love you. And she’s not better off without you.”

No human could ride a dragon without the wild in their veins. There could be no bond, Sousuke could never read what the creature was saying to him, nor be partners in the way that Rin was with Tora. He and Tamo were just two broken, scarred exiles; but perhaps they didn’t need magic blood to know one another.

“We both made our mistakes, but we don’t have to leave things in pieces.”

Even if Rin never forgave him, Sousuke’s purpose was stone-set. “No matter what happens, we can be there for them the way we’re supposed to.”

The sun slipped lower, filling the cave with dull, dying light.

“So what do you say, Tamo? Can we be a team, just this once?”

The dragon seethed from the torn side of his mouth, heat distorting the air. He blinked with his clear
eyelid, then the second. His throat tightened. Sousuke waited at his feet to either be accepted, or burned alive.

He took one deep, measured breath.

Then two.

Like a tidal wave receding, Tamo retreated, extinguishing the atmosphere around him. He lowered into a crouch.

Sousuke was still pinned in place by that searing blue eye.

He had come all the way here to ride on the dragon’s back, but now that Tamo was actually letting him do it, the task loomed surreal. Stiffly, he rounded on Tamo’s good side, and cautioned a hand out to touch him. The dragon flinched at his cold palm, the muscles tensing in rejection. Then he settled, and Sousuke pulled himself up.

The sensation of an unbonded human on his back must have been uncomfortable for the creature. Tamo writhed and Sousuke felt every tiny flex under the dragon’s thick hide. There was no belted saddle this time, nor reins to hold. He would have to keep his ass here with whatever remained of his own strength.

Finlike spines speared down the beast’s back in three rows, some just long enough to be an awkward handle. Tamo grumbled at having them gripped; Sousuke imagined it must feel like having his hair tugged. Whispering curses through clenched teeth, Sousuke flattened onto his stomach, and arranged his legs at the juncture of neck and shoulders. This was as secure a seat as he could hope for. Part of his mind was still stuck on the ground, unable to believe this was happening.

Fuck, what now...

There was something Rin did to make Tora to take off—a set of touch signals he used when the wind was too loud to hear over. Three slaps to the left side. Or was it the right….

Would a dragon with no rider even know them?

“Uh. Alright, I think I’m—”

Tamo dove out of the cave. Sousuke’s grip nearly jerked loose as the dragon dropped into swirling mist without warning, plummeting outward with his wings tucked to keep from snagging them on the crags. Curving above the tide at last, he threw them open, and rose with a long, thundering cry that left Sousuke’s ears ringing.

“Shit! SHIT!! Slow down!”

Tamo sped up.

Sousuke clung on harder, tucked his head down when the wind hit. Doing this without Rin in his lap was an entirely different experience. He dared a look backward, and vowed not to look again.

They coasted past the edge of the island, and Sousuke remembered his end of the deal.

“North!” He shouted. “They’re flying north to Tajiri!”

Tamo snorted a hot flare, and swerved in the right direction.
Lights were coming alive in the village basin below—scattered and flickering like beached stars. One of those hearth fires must be the Nanases’ house, and Sousuke waved as he sailed out of sight, chasing the fading edge of twilight.

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Indigo dawn raveled into being with the distant roar of water. Sousuke’s whole body ached. They had flown hard all night, stopping only briefly for food, and he prayed that this push would close the gap.

*Today.* He felt it in his core. *They would find Rin today.*

He trusted that Tamo knew the way. Where the others took their meals, they dropped gnawed bones, and scraps of prey. Gulls and sharks formed seaborne beacons where they converged to scavenge the discards of larger hunters. Dragons left a bloody trail when they traveled in numbers, and Tamo locked onto it with instinctive ease. His eyesight, now halved, did not measure up to his keen nose. Anything too far in the distance would be on Sousuke to spot first.

A louring cloud bank was rolling in from the far north horizon. It was crawling across the ocean, dragging its belly as pregnant storms did; they were going to pierce right through it. Sunlight cut off in a hard-lined curtain at the edge. Straining, Sousuke delved his gaze into the gloom. Smears of motion reared into range: A smoky pillar spewing up sick and misshapen from a dark mass of land. Thunderheads were funneling into it as shapes circled in a wide berth. They almost looked like birds from this distance, but Sousuke knew better.

“There they are!” He bellowed. “Ahead and right, that’s them!” He flattened himself against the dragon’s back, locking his hold.

*GO.*

Tamo responded with a flare of strength, and sped into the shadow.

Chapter End Notes

This update felt different to write, but hopefully still enjoyable to read!

Also, Dive to the Future!! The new episodes have been SOMETHING ELSE, and I hope you’re enjoying the hell out of them like I am. It makes me cry a little inside that this fic was all mapped out before the arrival of Hiyori. His vicious, cutthroat ass would have fit right in…
As always, thank you so much for reading! <3
Snow After Fire

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Samezuka Palace wore its duality with an enduring pride. Brutal, beautiful—it was a beacon balanced between two worlds, not wholly belonging to either. The fire-haired, ruby-eyed Matsuoka royals born into its ancient halls had been heroes, tyrants, legends, and seldom much in between. With the land unfolded at their feet, every step they took left an echo, a ghost, a scar.

Soaring over the dark northern sea, Rin felt the weight of their legacy like the sky sinking on top of him. Bitter wind clawed through his hair, and he shuddered in the half-empty saddle.

"Hang ‘em up, that’ll do for today!"

Mikoshiba whistled, clapping the dust off his hands. “And make sure you drink enough water after this. Can’t have you two drying out on me!”

Rin tossed his twin bokken up against a pile of larger ones, deflating onto the lawn with adequate dramatic flair. The damp grass cooled his skin through his shirt. Cicadas droned from the old oak tree’s canopy, but Seijuuro talked loud enough to be heard above them.

“You brats aren’t half bad,” he teased with a brazen grin. “Makes my job easy.”

Mikoshiba was an Imperial Guard trainee, and new addition to their combat lessons. Bronze skin and golden eyes—he was bright as sunflowers soaked in summer. And as of his arrival last month, also Gou’s future husband, apparently.

“I’ll tell the master you did a good job filling in today,” she said.

Beaming, Mikoshiba bent down to her level, flicking one of her toothed emerald earrings. “Thanks for puttin’ in a good word, Princess.” He winked and erupted into hearty, nasally laughter. Gou stared after his back with an appreciative pout as he sauntered off the field, running a hand through his hair.

Rin snickered into the grass.

“Shut up!” Gou snapped.

“I didn’t say anything! …But he’s still sixteen, and you’re ten. You’re like a baaaaby~”
“Did I ask you, bugbrain?” She sat on him.

A bubbly group of girls called the princess over and fanned around her like butterflies. Gou fit in with the other kids seamlessly, effortlessly, and when he let himself admit it, Rin was jealous. He was eleven years old and hadn’t made any friends half as close as his sister’s. He talked too loud, he annoyed them, his teeth were too sharp. People liked him, but he was ever, “Your Highness,” and never just, “Rin.” Maybe he was destined to stay adrift on this side of the mountains forever.

Rin splashed his face, and changed shirts while the girls whispered and giggled behind him.

“Gonna bring Mom lunch,” he announced over his shoulder.

“Wait!” The group scattered as Gou broke away. “Wait, I’ll come too.”

“But you-”

“I can come.”

Rin hoped she knew he was grateful. “Sure.”

An icy chill sank down Rin’s shoulders as the doors to his mother’s chamber clicked shut behind him.

Matsuoka Miyako was exactly where Rin guessed she would be: sunken into the sofa against her balcony window, hair uncombed, and narrow shoulders wrapped in undyed wool cloth. Her quilt bunched around her lap, father’s poems stacked on the stand beside her with a vessel of watered-down wine. A sliver between the curtains let in just enough sun to highlight the elegant planes of her face. She looked insubstantial—like a memory, Rin thought. Her color had been brighter once.

“Lunch, mom.” He set one of the lacquer boxes on her nightstand where she could see it, and dutifully untied the string for her. “Fried noodles!”

She lifted the cup of wine to her lips. “Ooh. Thank you, honey. How were lessons?” Her voice was still sweet.

“Good. The new assistant’s a lot of fun.” Rin smiled weakly, though his mother’s obvious disinterest always hurt. “Gou thinks so too.”

The princess gave him a look sharp enough to slice brick.

Giggling, he looped an arm around the luxurious crimson curtains and walked them wide open to let in the sun. Light flooded the room, laying its somber emptiness bare to the outside. Miyako closed her eyes against the brightness. Rin settled there on the balcony beside the open door with his own lunch. From here he could see Sumire gliding over the Valley, circling to the palace and back on blue-lilac wings. They ate in silence. Spending a meal with their mother was better than letting her eat alone, even if she had coveted her solitude these past years. Rin was sure it made a difference they came.

With a groan, the double doors opened again, and fast footsteps echoed inside with a rush of motion.

“Miyako!” Uncle Akira claimed the whole space with one word and a confident stride. The atmosphere warmed. “Excellent, you’re home; I have exciting news.”
Miyako expelled a weary sigh under her breath.

“How are the kids taking to Mikoshiba by the way?” He radiated energy, oblivious to the tomblike stillness. “That boy will be good for them, and…useful to keep around, I think. He’s much sharper than he seems.”

Rin crouched were he was, concealed behind the thick velvet curtain, Gou hidden behind him. Uncle couldn’t spare the attention to notice. Inspiration was gleaming in his eyes, brightened by the red pigment slashed to his hairline, and the keen set to his mouth. His long dress cloak was thrown to one side, baring a leather riding vest, and a belt fit with blades that said he’d just come from someplace dangerous. He looked like a marble conqueror from the Grand Temple nave that had walked straight off its pedestal. Rin was in awe of him, wondering how long it would be until he could achieve a presence so commanding.

Akira made his way to the old map mounted on the wall. He traced a route into thin air over it, one finger tapping pensively against his chin. “You and I can set out at sunrise tomorrow. It would be good I think, for the people to see you after…so long.” He stole a quick look at the anemic state of his sister’s room, but said nothing of it. “Leave the giants to Sango and me. And then we will remind the rest how quickly we quell an insurrection.”

The queen stared vacantly at the green horizon, her younger brother’s reports piling like dead leaves at her feet. “I know what you’re thinking, Akira, and I don’t want to watch you do it.”

The room cooled as the man’s enthusiasm ironed flat. He backed away from the map. “The criminals’ fate was of their own choosing.”

Miyako shook her head heavily. “It’s mindless-”

“Mindless?” Akira rounded on the sofa, crowding his sister against the curved armrest. “Pirates would never be so bold when Mother sat the throne. And do you know why? It’s because the very thought of her would turn their blood cold before they so much as raised a sail.”

Miyako cut him a severe look. “Mother was a monster. Sometimes I worry she’s left her poison in you.”

His eyes narrowed, silky voice dropping to a rumble. “If I did nothing, nothing would be done.”

“I know.” Miyako deflated. “I’m sorry.”

Akira retreated, rolling his eyes, and the tension loosened. “I’ll consider other options.”

“Thank you.”

Gou shifted at Rin’s back, craning for a better view. Rin kept his breathing quietly measured.
“You really should come with me,” Akira said.

Miyako took a swill of wine, frowning into the cup. “I’ve done enough already.”

Her brother groaned with impatience. “Would you stop blaming yourself? You could play that game until the end of time and nothing would change. Your husband is dead, and you’ve mourned him long enough”

Rin’s temper flared. He surged forward, but Gou tugged him back in by the sleeve.

Their mother’s eyes were lightless as she twisted pale fingers into the folds of her quilt. “He showed me what it was to live with a full heart. And I can’t…take that from other people, I can’t.”

The prince hissed through long, bared teeth. “That man made a ghost of you.”

Miyako snapped up, and her voice dripped venom. “What would you know? You’ve never loved anyone in your entire life.”

Akira backed away from the window, reclaiming his spot in the center of the room. Raven caws rasped outside. Miyako inhaled, as if to apologize, but let the words steep instead.


He made for the desk, collecting his documents.

“Wait.” Miyako stood at last, letting the quilt slip off. “I want you to serve as regent until Rin comes of age.”

Akira’s tone soured. “Absolutely not. The empress is you, and this duty is ours to shoulder together.”

“Not anymore. I’m…I’m done. With this, with all of it. I was never cut out for it.”

Confusion, disgust, and pity chased each other over the prince’s face. He retreated further, and his cloak shifted closed. For a flash, Rin saw the sting of abandonment set upon him—a haunted panic, as a lifeline to shore had been severed. “Why are you doing this?”

“You were always the strong one.” She gave her younger brother a sad smile. “I trust you.”

Uncle stalled with his fingers hovered over the bronze door handle, as if he had something more he wanted his sister to know. Whatever that was, went unspoken. He walked backward on his heel into the corridor, his steps loud and leaden. Frozen behind the curtain, Rin felt Gou staring at him wide-eyed and lost, searching him for what to think. He clasped her hand in both of his.

Rin found his mother’s letter two years later, sealed neatly and waiting for him on her desk.

He glazed over the words she’d written, his thoughts scattering. He read it once, and then again to make sure it truly said what he thought it did.

A soft fluttering of pearly curtains drew his gaze out the balcony doors, over the sloping sea of jungle. He imagined an invisible string stretching across it that the empress might have left—with one side tied here to the balustrade, like a trail Rin could follow if he chose to. The wild claimed the other end of it, as it had her. She hadn’t so much as hugged them goodbye.
Shadows were crawling up the wall when Uncle found Rin despondent on his parents’ empty bed. The Emperor plucked the letter from the floor, expression darkening at the tear tracks on Rin’s cheeks. Ashamed, Rin wiped his face with the heel of his palm. He wanted to scream, “She’s out there; go after her! It’s not too late!”

Akira alone could travel far and fast enough to catch Miyako on her way east to nowhere. Though Rin knew without voicing the plea, that he would not drag his sister home unwilling. He faced outside, a stern pillar cut against the afternoon sun. It was impossible to read him.

“My mom will come back someday, right?”

“No one ever has.”

Rin ached for something he couldn’t bring himself to ask for. The man two steps from him felt an ocean away.

Akira left his sister’s letter on the covers on his way out.

“She stayed longer than I expected.”

Rin spotted Sango’s deep wine red scales against the glowering swarm of clouds. She had sensed them on her trail some time ago, and diverged south from their course to Tajiri. The detour meant she deemed Rin a threat, and she was going to do something about it. He heard himself breathing harder, pulse picking up as he steeled his will for what was to come. Their pursuit had led him here, to settle things for good. Rin’s thoughts veered back to Sousuke, left behind on the rocky camp flats, and he wondered if he’d really done the right thing. Their argument wrung his insides when he remembered it.

A shell-shaped mass of coal-colored rock cleared into view, and Sango swerved downward to meet it. Her wingbeats slowed to a stop as she lost height in wide, graceful curves. Her family followed her—five other dragons, all near her in size, with thick plated scales and heavy jaws built to pierce hides and crush skulls. Where Tora was a hunter, Sango was shaped for war.

Rin tapped thrice on Tora’s hide, and she followed suit. The flight found perches along the rough ridges, and rolling swells of hardened magma. They clamored restlessly, some of them gliding on watch around the beaches.

“Stay out of it,” Rin had warned Tora earlier. “None of you need to get mixed up with this.”

She answered with a smoldering grumble, and Rin read something conditional in her tone. He ran a palm over the skin of her back, knowing with a heavy heart just how much he was asking of her.

“I’m serious. No matter what happens today, everyone’s gonna need you, not only me. This time, it’s my fight.”

Tora lowered to match Sango in a slow, descending spiral. They circled the island like buzzards over fresh meat in this delicate agreement to let their riders engage uninterrupted. The distance was too great, and wind too strong to shout over, but Rin met his uncle’s unflinching gaze across it. Tora spat a petal of fire into the center of their airborne ring—a challenge. To which Sango responded
with an acceptance of her own. Rin bit his lip and steered his partner down.

The island’s energy simmered beneath his feet. Wide fissures split the terrain open, leaking the stench of foul eggs, mottling the lava field with yellowish moss. Hissing curtains of steam curled downhill at a crawl from the far ridges, and the air churned with wet heat. This land was alive, and still angry.

Akira leaped down and crossed the distance to where Rin could hear him—at the halfway point between both dragons. Sango’s clan rained wary looks from a nearby roost. War balanced on a knife-edge.

Rin dismounted. Clearing his throat, he strode forward. “It doesn’t need to go down like this. We’re chasing the same enemy, and the harder we fight each other, the easier we make it for them.”

“You’re not wrong,” Akira agreed, with a barbed twist of condescension. “So fly behind me, and let me show you what it means to be Emperor of Samezuka.”

Rin seethed. “The people living on Tajiri are under our protection as much as everyone else. And they’re not gonna die because destruction is the only solution you know.”

“Suppose our minds are set then, Rin.” Graceful, and collected, Akira curled a hand around his sword grip. “You really are like your mother in all of the worst ways.” Metal scraped slowly—a mounting taunt, until it swung free to glint bitterly in the fading light. Rin followed its long lines with his eyes, as the situation sank in at last. That thin, sharp edge was to be turned on him. He was fighting this man for his life. Rin reached back to draw the curved twin knives that crossed over his shoulders. Tightening his hold on them, he’d never felt so unready.

“So this is it, then?” Rin called out. “This is the end?”

His uncle scowled, puzzled.

“You’re just gonna kill me after all that’s happened, and everything you did. To me, to us? Didn’t I mean anything to you?” The moment the questions left him, he wanted to reel them back. “I just…I dunno. I wanna know why.”

Akira met him with a look of brutal calm. “Because you’ve never been worthy of your blood.”

Rin swallowed the dry lump in his throat; hearing it straight cut so painfully deep. He wished that he could stop waiting, hoping for something more.

“Is that all you needed to ask?”

“Yeah,” Rin said heavily. “Looks like it.”

“Well, then.”

They paused, suspended in a wired, strained limbo as storm clouds smothered the sun.

With a last affirming nod, Akira sprang forward.

Rin was barely prepared for it. His uncle’s blade sang like steel lightning for the exposed sliver of throat over his breastplate, and Rin warded him off by a hair. Every three or four strikes they snapped away, intent pinned on the other. Akira was a good duelist; he was a good everything. Since before Rin could remember, his uncle had been an insurmountable paragon—intimidating in a
way that made Rin scared to reach too high.

They collided again. Rin spun out to avoid a sharp thrust, surrendering three shuffling steps. He zeroed in on the other man’s right arm. A cut there would slow him, make him falter, even if it was all Rin’s eyes could do just to follow the movements. He pooled his trust in his reflexes.

The rolling rock was smooth where the land had melted and petrified. A swell here, a dip there; Rin caught a toe and stumbled as they moved across the field. He had nothing figured out now, and no one seemed to think that he ever would. Not his family, not even Sousuke. Doubts whispered between his ears, who the hell was he to displace a man like this?

He backed away with his blades crossed in out in front, while Akira circled like a confident predator. “You’ve had several chances at me, Rin, that you did not take. You’re wasting time.”

“So are you,” Rin huffed.

It almost felt like practice, sparring on the lawn at home. He chased the memory out. “You’re a murderer.”

Akira scoffed, scoring a small cut into Rin’s bracer. “Is Death herself a murderer, or is she only necessary?”

“We’re not gods!!” Rin skirted around a bubbling crater, and leaped back in to attack. “We’re people, and we don’t get to hide in the clouds from our every mistake.”

“Hide from whom? We answer to no one but ourselves.” Amusement sparked in the question, and Akira sprang behind a tall rock that jutted out of the coal sea. He moved around it, mirroring Rin’s pursuit in a circle. “Without us, humans would be scraping by on shrubs, living out of tents, fleeing every abomination that we shield them from. The very least they can do is obey. And if they don’t, they know what happens to our enemies. It’s the way of things.”

Growling, Rin broke away from the chase. “If our way was right, good people wouldn’t suffer so much for it.”

Rin forced his way in.

I am the Emperor.

I am his equal.

If he thought the words loud enough inside his own skull, he might start to believe them. He misstepped, and Akira’s blade nicked his thigh, slicing through the leather and pricking his skin beneath. Reflexively, Rin lashed out, forcing his uncle on the defensive. This was taking too long. He could sense the dragons growing restless.

They swooped back to catch their breath. Akira’s glare skimmed past Rin, and went deathly cold.

Rin sensed the presence of something—a column of danger approaching that shot chills up his spine. The earth trembled, and with a pitch of the ground, he knew.

His uncle’s dragon was crawling toward him, thundering across the empty plain with sparks between her fangs. Slowly, he turned around.

“STOP!!” Rin’s command fell on deaf ears. She reared up, and he ran. Sprinting between the stones, Rin expected to die—to feel heat on his back before it engulfed him completely; he hoped it
wouldn’t take too long.

Abruptly, Sango was wrenched off-balance by the tail. Tora’s wings cleared the steam in whorls as she sank her teeth in and hauled the other dragon backward. Sango writhed, gouging trenches with her claws into the rough basalt.

“No!!” Rin coughed. “Tora, don’t—!”

Akira echoed his nephew’s command, but Sango ignored him too, rounding on her new challenger. Tora reared up to lead her away, spitting embers into the dirt. The former emperor stood to face Rin again, this time with teeth gritted, voice urgent. The closest thing to genuine fear and worry was twisting his features. “The sooner our fight ends, the sooner they stop.”

Rin reeled; the flash of emotion was piercing, jarring. He blew the hair from his eyes, and widened his stance.

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Sousuke crouched flat and braced his heels against the muscle of Tamo’s shoulders, using every ounce of his own power just to stay on the creature’s back. Tamo had dropped fast to come in ashore with as much speed as possible, and hanging on against the wind was the kind of falling nightmare Sousuke would lose sleep over later. He was fairly sure this scaly fuck had forgotten he was there. Still, he was happy the imminent danger of plummeting to his death was holding his fear for Rin at bay.

Water whirred by in a grey-green blur as the island ahead loomed larger. Warmth was radiating from Tamo’s hide; he was heating himself like a brick oven. They were close enough to see below now, and Sousuke could make out a pair of warring dragons on the ground—both red, one glaringly bigger than the other. That’s them. Their saddles were empty, and the larger beast was snapping, trying to get at something, but Tora would not let her through. Sousuke scanned the area, squinting into the haze. Two human figures were scrambling over the uneven terrain, locked in combat. He felt his own fire light from within.

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Akira’s long blade whisked across Rin’s face, grazing his cheek, and a kick to the shin nearly sent Rin to his knees. Rin caught himself and steadied, though he couldn’t help feeling like he was on the run. Too close. That was way too close.

Bubbling hot water and thick clay pooled in gravelly craters, roiling like shallow cauldrons. Rin led the duel up to the edge of one; if he could force a surrender against a fall into the mudpot, he could end this. Somewhere in the distance, a massive tail slammed against the rock, followed by the fast scuff of clawed feet, and his gut wrenched at the sound.

Sango was determined to tear him apart. Smoke billowed into a funnel, then shredded as she broke free and tore through. She spotted Rin, and he saw down the back of her throat as she lit a breath. She was beyond reason, and words; Tora was tearing at her back, and her armored neck. There was
no cover here, and Rin faced her, a lone figure in the face of her rage and untamable devotion. Warm light from Sango’s swelling fire melted over the ground, bathing Rin in war hues as it gathered in her mouth.

Rin held his breath.

Something colossal sailed over his head. The light went dark, and Sango was engulfed by a mass of black scales; the aftershocks of the impact thrumming in the ground beneath Rin’s feet. Dust kicked back, and he shielded his eyes.

A guttural roar shook the island, ringing against the jagged rocks. It was low, harsh, furious. And unmistakable. Gaping, Rin watched a friend he’d long since thought lost rise out of the chaos. Keeping his head in the duel was getting difficult. Tamotsu lunged again, and Sango recovered, rolling their battle elsewhere as he drove her away. Rin dropped his gaze from the impossible, and squinted into the dry haze around the dragon’s feet. A man emerged, wreathed in steam wisps that clung to him like silk lace, and dripped off his broad shoulders. Taking him in all at once, Rin forgot how to breathe.

“Sousuke?!”

They found each other across the shattered earth.

“Rin.”

The sound of that voice sent Rin’s heart soaring. There was paint slashed across Sousuke’s face, and the hue of his irises flashed deadly bright against the mask of coal. “I-” Rin was struck still, unconvinced he wasn’t looking at a mirage.

“What?”

There was something different about him that left Rin suspended in a shocked state of wonder. All of Sousuke’s anger from the day before seemed to have gone cold, leaving a quiet resolve in the embers. Stepping confidently onto the field with weapon drawn, he pinned his attention on his enemy.

Akira had retreated over the gap of a fissure a few paces away, stalking with caution along the opposite side. “Suppose I shouldn’t be surprised,” he sneered. “Was the lure of revenge too sweet to pass up?” Samezuka’s former ruler raked his eyes over Sousuke carefully, splitting a thorny grin as he saw something in the other man’s expression that he liked.

The ground gurgled from the bottom of the fissure and erupted, spitting boiling black mud high into the air. It cut the fight in half, forming a barrier between them, and Sousuke sprang away from the edge.

They were trapped on this side of it, and Rin seized his chance. He caught Sousuke by the shoulder and spun him around. Stunned, he searched his best friend’s face, trailing feather-light along his jaw, down his neck, tracing constellations of white paint. The skin beneath his hand was damp and still chilled from the wind, but firm and familiar, heating at his touch.

Sousuke stopped Rin’s frantic roving, pressing a palm over his hand. Dipping his head down he lit up with a grateful smile.

“Hi, Rin.”

“I’m dreaming. Or I’m dead.”

Snickering, Sousuke lowered Rin’s hand, but didn’t let go of it. “Neither.”
“How? How did you even-” Rin motioned toward Tamo over the geyser, incredulous.

Sousuke huffed. “He’s a brat, but he can haul ass.”

“You’re telling me he let you ride him?! What, did you just ask him nicely and hop on?”

“Hm. Yeah.”

“What the fuck!?” Rin was halfway between laughter and a sob. “It’s you,” he breathed. “You’re really here.”

The way they’d left things last sat wedged in a frigid rift between them. “Sou…about before—I… I’m—”

“Later.” Sousuke tilted Rin’s chin up, forcing their gazes together urgently. “You can be mad at me later. I’ll deserve every bit of that and I get that you might not want me here, but I promise that I—”

Closing his eyes, he leaned their foreheads together with a soft urgency, blurring out the world around them. “I came back for you. Only you.”

Rin was lost in blue, at an unbecoming loss for words. “Okay,” he managed in a whisper.

Sousuke’s smug grin went soft with embarrassment. “I’m so glad to see you.”

Selfishly, Rin wished they could live in the sweeping, breathless bliss of that moment for longer. But the geyser relented, falling in heavy splashes.

Sousuke’s hand left warmth lingering as he pulled away. “Let’s go.”

As one, they turned to face the opponent ahead.

And found his space empty.

“He ran away?” Disappointment furrowed Sousuke’s brow.

“I doubt it…” Rin scanned the plane of sharp steam rifts and layered cliffs. “More like he’s leading us away.” Outnumbered, Akira would look for some way to even the odds.

“Can’t be many places to hide out here,” Sousuke said. “I’ve got no idea where to look.”

Rin scanned the craggy landscape, gaze snagging on something dark at the foot of a rough-hewn hillside that snaked out of view into the haze. “I might.”

He threw a glance backward as they carved across the field of jagged, broken shale. Tamo had fixed himself as a shield between Tora and Sango, spitting livid. His throaty barking reverberated against the hills. Sango reared up, breathing a tongue of flames into the air above his head. The others roosted around the area were growing dangerously agitated, and Rin prayed that none of them would lose patience. The worst was still to come.

He had been right about this point of interest, at least. The dark spot was a hollowed, crumbling arch—the mouth of a track where lava had once oozed down the island seaward. Ropes of black rock curved into flowstones, and stalactites that dripped from the ceiling like broken teeth. The tunnel collapsed into a gorge just past this arch. Sharp columns and walls of black rock were all that remained of it, towering into the darkening open sky. Heated, heavy air wafted up from below.

Sousuke moved in front, Rin pressed up close to nudge him with a shoulder. “Careful.”
“I’m always careful.”

They descended into the gorge, shifting between the shadows, edging around each bend in the path. A dismal, sickly smattering of plant life had grown into the cracks. Lichens crept up the cliffs, tangled with hardy-looking shrubs, and vines that stitched between pillars like thin cobwebs. Walking space was narrow, and seeing around the pillars was impossible; when they confronted the former emperor again, they would have to engage him one at a time.

“I still can’t believe you found me,” Rin whispered. He hoped conversation would ease his nerves. Again, he glanced at Sousuke’s back, and the white patterns cascading down his shirt. Sousuke could not have done them himself. “Where were you?”

“It’s a long story.”

“According to you, anything that takes more than twenty seconds to say is a long story.”

“You look great in your armor, Rin.”

“Oi.” Rin battled a smirk. “I still wanna know.”

Sousuke was silent a moment. “I was…where you left me. The same island.”

“Oh…”

Guilt pierced Rin through, settling heavily. He didn’t ask anything more. Taught minutes scraped by.

“You don’t have to be here,” Sousuke said at length.

Rin bristled. “What—”

“You didn’t have to chase after your uncle. You could have just looked the other way and let him go; it would be the easy thing. But for others’ sake, you didn’t.” Sousuke cleared his throat. “And for that, even if I’d never met you before now, I’d think you were worth following.”

Rin’s spirit lifted on kite wings. He smiled hard. “I missed you.”

Quietly, carefully, they delved deeper into the gorge. Rin flattened a hand along the rock. It was smooth, and vitreous in parts—rough and blistered in others. The dragons’ cries were fading now, punctuated by shuffling echoes against the crags. Rin heard Sousuke’s heavy footfalls with his own light steps, and the soft bubble and roil of water. Simmering pools were scattered near the cliffs, blanketed with an algae that glowed crimson in the shade. Beside them, a deep seawater stream snaked across the flats and underground. Ghost eels were swimming through it, eyes moon white and fins like ribbons.

“Dead end up ahead,” Sousuke noted.

The gorge emptied out onto an exposed flat ledge that seemed to reach out over the ocean. The crash of waves against the side of it sounded promisingly close. Back to back, they advanced. Rin shivered, and let their shoulders brush.

An earsplitting whistle shook the gorge, and Rin’s heart skipped; he knocked into Sousuke. The sound chimed between columns, and faded out. Sousuke lowered, tensing, and sucked in a breath.
Tall and regal between the pillars of stone, Akira walked straight in front of them. The grey sky at his back made a dark, haunting figure of him.

Rin wet his lips. “Give up. This is your last chance.”

“Surrender?” Clear laughter bounced cruelly around the space, sounding like the onset of a crowd rather than one man alone. He advanced, long blade held aloft. “Someday you’ll understand that peace is not the natural state of the world. It must be won, like anything else worth having. And victory carries a price. You can’t save everyone, Rin.”

Rin readied himself. “I’m gonna try. Always, forever.”

Sousuke rushed in first. He wasted no time and no movements—ruthless and aggressive. The scrape and clang of metal rang in the hollow trench. Sousuke swung wide and caught his blade against the wall as they slipped through a gap too narrow. Speeding around from another angle, Rin cut in to cover him in time. Together, Rin and Sousuke fought their enemy through the mangled tube of petrified lava, dueling in turns, sweeping around the fangs of rock.

A toothy grin lifted the former emperor’s face as he slashed in a low arc, grazing Rin’s breastplate. Avoiding the blow sent Rin stumbling into a net of hanging vines, cursing under his breath.

Akira’s satiny voice went rough. “Such a shame, all of this. But I won’t allow a weepy little boy to bring all that his ancestors built to ruin.”

Sousuke melted out of the shadows. “Say what you want about him, but here at the end, you’re alone. And he’s not.”

He drove the former emperor toward the ledge, a wave raging against a wall of wildfire. Heart pounding as he caught his breath, Rin was in awe of him. He untangled his arms from the vines, and hurried to catch up. Sousuke slashed across the former emperor’s right arm, spattering blood onto the rough black slate. The weapon clattered out of Akira’s hand, and he shrank away, furious. A strange dread shivered over Rin’s shoulders as Sousuke closed in.

“You’re like a weed,” Akira seethed. He paused, eyes darting nervously up the cliffs. “But you know, I think you’ve earned something for coming so far, pit boy. You didn’t run when Rin cut you free.”

Sousuke was silent.

“So would you like to learn why I did it? Why I destroyed your city that evening. The truth runs deeper than you might think.”

Rin ground to a stop, a few paces behind. Sousuke’s shoulders tensed, his grip tightened; emotion was pushing against the walls of him. Painful seconds ground by as the waves hissed and roiled.

“So…” Rin reached out gently.

Sousuke stepped back.

“No,” he said thickly. “No, I don’t want to hear it. Whatever your reason was, it’s done, it’s over. And nothing you say could ever make it hurt less, or convince me it was right. Here and now, you’re a threat to Rin’s life, so that makes me a threat to yours.”

For all Rin had tried, and waited, and hoped things could be different, Sousuke was going to kill this man. Maybe his path was always meant to lead him here, by one route or another. Three strides lay
between him, and the closure that had torn him apart—the light at the end of a long, lonely tunnel. There was nothing left but to take it.

The dragons’ violent roars were closer now; their battle was moving, blazing over the desolation.

Sousuke stilled. He went suddenly rigid, in that way he did when he was listening for something, filtering out the noise.

He broke away.

Rin froze there, stunned as Sousuke tossed his weapon aside and spun around, rushing to him.

“Sou, what are y-”

A red-tinted shadow slid over the ground, the wind from wide wings flattening thin clouds of steam over the pools, ruffling the hair into Rin’s face. He recalled the loud whistle his uncle had issued and cursed his own murky memory; it wasn’t a taunt aimed at Sousuke. The man had led them into a dead-end; he’d been buying time.

*It was a call for Sango.*

Fire ripped the land apart, so bright and so hot, Rin saw it blinding behind his eyelids. A raging wall of it headed him off, and trailed into the gorge. Heat kicked back; the stone around him buckled as the ground was unmade, peeling in pieces like black tree bark. One of the stone pillars cracked at the base, toppling sideways into another. The collision rained shards of melting rock, and there was nowhere to run.

Rin heard Sousuke scream his name, felt the force of the man’s momentum as he knocked Rin sideways, and pinned him under a scarp. Sango swerved around, and lit up the cliffs. The gorge was filling like a flaming gutter as rockslides spilled downward. Rin was shoved against the shelf with Sousuke curled over him, shielding his head from the crackling debris. Freeing his arms, he locked them around Sousuke to hug him flush under the outcrop. Smoke fumes billowed thick and noxious.

Through a break in the clouds, Rin spied another scarlet shape shoot across the sky, heard a distant crash and screaming roar, and the attack ceased. The last loose pebbles rolled to a stop, and settled. Scorched verdure kept the fires alive, and the heat was dizzying; they had to get out. Frantic, Rin lurched up, and Sousuke’s arms fell away heavily. He slumped forward.

“No!” Panic swarmed in the pit of Rin’s stomach. “No no no, please… You asshole, why’d you come back for me!?”

Sousuke was motionless on top of him, eyes closed. His shirt was torn, and charred. Rin rolled them over, and pushed aside the sweaty strands of dark hair. Fresh blood came away when Rin lifted his hand from the back of Sousuke’s head. He pressed unsteady fingers to the man’s neck, nearly dissolving into sobs as he felt a pulse beating there, stubbornly. “Sou, wake up. We gotta go.”

No response. Desperate, Rin cast around. They were alone, stranded, half buried amidst the burning wreckage. But they were alive.

The last melting husk of a pillar folded behind them as Rin heaved Sousuke onto his back, securing an arm under each leg. He trudged over the field, Sousuke’s weak, uneven breaths in his ear spurring him forward. They burst into a clearing upwind from the rubble, and Rin gasped clean air greedily. He sank to his knees, and placed Sousuke down slowly, cradling his head in one arm.
Thunderheads above cracked and grumbled, glowing bitter burnt orange. Dimly, Rin was aware this lull would not last long. Eyes watering, he leaned down.

“Wake up,” He whispered. Sooty paint smeared on his hand as he cupped Sousuke’s cheek.

“Come on, say something, love. Anything.” He kissed him on the mouth. “Please, please. I need you-”

“A few seconds more, and he would have killed me.”

Rin jolted, and bared his teeth at the approaching figure, despair twisting into something feral. He curled protectively over the man in his lap.

Akira made his way unhurried across the rubble, his armor slashed, hair matted, and blood still weeping from the wound on his arm. He halted to look Rin over with barefaced pity. “Crying again, Rin?”

Rin set Sousuke down, drawing the blue-gripped knife and straightening to his full height.

“No.” Rin dropped his voice low and thunderous, shaking his head slow. “You will never hurt him again.”

Rin understood that Akira’s resolve was as unbreakable as his own. He had trusted this man once—admired him. His uncle had carried the empire on his back, held their family up when home had been gutted, and for that Rin was forever grateful. But blood ties could be poisoned, blinding; sometimes there just wasn't any light left to find. The future that Rin fought for now looked like hope, and pure love, and he would carve a place for it for himself.

“Move aside, Rin.” Akira slid a dagger from his boot. “I’m going to finish something I should have done myself six years ago.”

“No.” Rin dropped his voice low and thunderous, shaking his head slow. “You will never hurt him again.”
They collided a final time in a clash of steel and ruthless hunger. Rin’s mind burned clear. Akira grinned with blood smeared on his sharp teeth, pleased like someone possessed as they tore at each other. He drove his knee hard into Rin’s ribs, and Rin spat red, clawing his way back to wrench the dagger from him. Nothing in his life truly prepared him for this part of a battle. Verses never sang about the taste of blood in his mouth, hellfire in his chest, and this pounding, savage desperation.

Earth still burned, the dying flames from Sango’s attack jumping defiantly. Heat from the nearest of them sweltered against Rin’s face, and he wrestled into a deadlock as Akira tried to shove him into it. Rin surged forward with a burst of raw strength. He was protecting something he could not bear to lose.

His hand tightened around the grip of Sousuke’s knife.

Sousuke came to with a loud headache, lying on his back. His mouth was parched down his throat, and nothing felt quite grounded on the plane of reality—as if he was floating just below it, staring up at the broken world from behind a film of dirty water. Everything was too calm, too quiet, to be…he didn’t remember. Whatever it was before.

He let his heavy eyelids drift shut.

“I need you.”

-and snapped them open with a gasp. It might have been a dream where he’d heard Rin say that, but the memory of Rin’s voice kicked him with enough energy to just get up. The horizon swerved, and his limbs felt weightless as he followed an undertow toward somewhere he had to be. The battle was over; the air had cooled. Tiny fires still lingered like stubborn torches, burning away the swaths of moss. An eerie wail broke out over the crumbling desolation. Its sound was beautiful—haunting and sad, like a whale song. Mourning, Sousuke knew. It soaked into his bones.

“Rin!!” He coughed. The huff of heavy breathing drew him downhill, and toward the hunched-over form of a man on his knees. Heartbeat hooking, he ran. White noise rushed in waves with each stride, and he slowed to a stop over Rin at arm’s length. Rin didn’t seem to hear him, frozen with Sousuke’s knife still in one hand, his expression dazed and absent.

Sousuke took in the grim, half-charred sight before them. The figure that had cast so long and so dark a shadow on their lives had never been anything more than one man.

A drop of rain cooled his cheek, chased by several more.

“Rin, the storm’s coming.” Sousuke sank his tone to hide the weary hoarseness of it. “We should go.”

When no answer followed, he dared reach out to cover Rin’s shaking hand. “Love…”

Rin blinked, the rest of him trapped behind a wall Sousuke could not breach. He parted his dry lips to talk, but no sound left them. Sousuke stowed their weapons and wiped the blood from Rin’s mouth with the inside of his sleeve. He slung Rin’s right arm over his shoulders, rising to his feet again, moving like his lover was made of thin paper.

Another doleful wail seeped into the island, and Sousuke started walking, back into the destroyed gorge—the only way out. Rin shuffled his feet, letting himself be led forward in a listless trance, gaze trawling along the ground as they went. He retched, and they sank to a stop while he emptied the meager contents of his stomach. After, he bent there, wheezing, drained. Sousuke cleaned his
face again and hiked him back up. At this point, Sousuke wasn’t certain he could walk on his own either; they held each other upright and kept going. He glanced back to see a massive crimson shape snake its way down the ridge to where they had been standing minutes before. Sango spotted them across the ledge, holding them in a quiet stare, and Sousuke returned the look unwavering. There was no fight left in her, either.

She let them leave.

Rin looked back toward the ocean. Sousuke kissed his brow, and his cheek, tasting salt, and grit, and iron. He prayed that the others were looking for them. Pressing his dry lips together, he blew a whistle—but it petered out quiet and insufficient around his fingers. *Fuck it*, he screamed Tamo’s name with everything he had left.

Rain smattered the rock shards now, misting over the island. The weedy fires dimmed in deference.

Coughing, Sousuke pulled Rin in to his arms, and waited.

A resonant grumble answered from above, and the black dragon mounted the hillside. His pupil waxed wide when he spotted them with his good eye, nostrils jetting steam. He crawled delicately over the pile of rubble. Fresh gashes gleamed on his flank and the back of his neck—somewhat difficult to see against the dark hide, and Sousuke noticed a welted tear in the membrane of his wing. With a glance at them, Tamo seemed to understand they did not have strength left to scale his back. In a manner he might call considerate, Tamo dipped low to let them lean onto his forehead instead. Clinging to Rin with one arm, Sousuke used his other to hold them in place as the dragon balanced them there, bearing them up and out of the debris. The rest of the flight spiraled around, vocally concerned.

“Look, Rin.” Sousuke said, smiling tiredly into dusty red hair. “They didn’t engage. They followed your orders.”

Rin’s grip on him squeezed a little tighter, then relaxed. He was going slack in Sousuke’s arms, exhausted.

Tamo lowered them with care into the saddle on Tora’s back. Scorched bite wounds marred her beautiful scales. Her tail thrashed, and she craned her neck to check on her partner.

“S’okay,” Sousuke managed a shallow nod in her direction. “I’ve got him, we’re ok.”

Clouds above darkened on the verge of a downpour. If they waited any longer, lightning would ground the whole flight here. Sousuke tugged the straps closed around both their waists, and looped the reins into one hand, tucking Rin’s head gently against his shoulder.

Tora barked an order to the others, crouched, and leaped into the air. As they left, Sousuke looked back to the island a final time, catching the defiant glow of a funeral pyre.

Gou leafed through the musty stack of palace builders’ notes she had yet to review. Bars of afternoon sun crept into the Matsuokas’ private study to warm its walls and ceiling murals in autumn honey hues. Clumsy koto notes twanged from somewhere below in the courtyard, where Momo
was trying his hand at it for Ai and Chigusa. Despite that, it was peaceful. Strangely so.

The candle on Gou’s desk dimmed before its flame fizzled out completely. Gloom soaked her space in its absence.

Across the table, Sei looked up from his shift roster with ‘That’s weird’ written into his frown. “Huh. Must be a draft in here or something.” He rose to find another candle to relight it, but stopped, brow knitted. “Gou…? Doin’ alright? We can take a walk if you need a break.”

The princess recovered with a quick smile.

“I’m fine. I don’t know, it’s….” She watched the extinguished wick curl smoke into the rafters with an odd tightness in her chest. “It’s nothing.”

Chapter End Notes

Well hey thanks for reading, and I hope you’re doing well. It’s been a busy few months for me, and this project stalled some as a result. That coupled with, well…this particular part being rather heavy. I wanted the chapter about Rin and his family to offer a little insight into his upbringing, and why things fell apart for him the way that they did. But yes, I will continue trying my very best to get the rest of this story finished, and make it as good as I can. There’s a bunch to look forward to. :)

-World Notes-
•I joined pillowfort a little while ago, and have started posting art and things there. Designs for Akira, Kurou/the sirens, the Hazuki sisters, and Aki Yazaki are all up there under the AWH tag if you’re interested in seeing how I personally imagine them. HERE

-About Ena (The setting of this chapter): After an eruption devastated the island, it was mindfully sought out as a convenient battle ground. Dragons fighting each other in a formal manner is actually quite rare. And when they do fight, they prefer not to do it at home. Reckless firespitting can wreak havoc on wooded or grassy areas, and they’re smart enough not to destroy a good food source. Thus bouts are usually carried out in the air, underwater (dependent on breed), or on desolate land like Ena.
-Ena’s ghost eels, and the Abyss: The north ocean is very deep. It dips into an unfathomable trench near Moyajima, from whence it is presumed the sirens first came into the world. The oldest, largest among them are likely spawned directly from here. This place is dubbed a sort of “gate to hell” in some schools of belief. Various other horrors have crawled out of its depths, and some marine life in the north reflects its Abyssal origins in appearance.

P.S. Chapter 13 is much happier ;;;
The Rockhoppers make their way east, while Rin and Sousuke rest in the aftermath of one battle, on the brink of another.

Kisumi was perched on the ship railing, long legs crossed, anchored there with his grip on a sturdy rope. Sea spray made it almost impossible for him to keep his hair perfectly fluffed the way he liked it, but Asahi thought he looked good this way too—all wild and windswept, with Asahi’s worn leather coat on. It fit him perfectly.

“You’re sure we’re in for some rain tonight huh, Captain Shiina?”

Tearing his eyes away, Asahi scanned the horizon. “I’d bet money on it.”

Clouds smeared the late afternoon sky like cotton pulled thin across a wide blue-gold table. A certain pressured, threatening air always sank to sea level before rough weather, and Asahi had picked it up a while ago. “Changing winds means storm’s on the way,” he noted with confidence. “And I just have that feeling in my fingertips, you know?”

The spirit giggled into his sleeve.

Asahi liked the sunny, delicate sound—liked that he’d caused it. He had a feeling shit would get complicated once they reached the opposite coast, but he was enjoying the journey there immensely. When there was work to do in the daylight hours, Haru and Makoto carried it out as a pair, leaving Asahi at the wheel alone. Not that he didn’t love spending hours in the company of rolling waves, but singing and flirting with Kisumi was…well, better.

Kisumi flicked a look toward the cabin. “Been calm the last few days, hasn’t it?”

“Hell yeah,” Asahi agreed. “Gods know we got enough to worry about when we dock in Samezuka.” He paused. “…No offense. I’m sure it’s plenty nice there ‘n all.”

The spirit lit up, his hair and shoulders lifting with the breeze. “Oh, it is! It’s big and beau-tiful.” He rocked back coyly on the rope. “And when we get there, I’m taking you to Shirobara Pools in Sano. I think you’d love it.”

“Sounds a bit fancy for me,” Asahi scoffed.

“You could do fancy.” Kisumi stretched the last vowel and reclined into his vision, lounging carelessly off the rail. “It’s a bathhouse. You can swim, there’s wine, music, sports, the water’s always nice. There are different flower petals in each pool, and everyone walks around in towels, or..."
ass-out naked.” He winked, gaze dripping shamelessly all the way down Asahi’s body, then sliding back up. “I’ll even have the owner put my private room on reserve.”

Asahi faked a cough to keep himself from derailing. He struggled to imagine a bathtub big enough to go swimming in. Even Nao’s luxurious washrooms had basins only about the length of his body, just deep enough to soak in. The extravagance of Samezuka nobles was almost beyond Asahi’s comprehension.

“Excellent!” Kisumi beamed. “I can’t wait.” The spirit sprang down from the railing and smacked a loud, full kiss on Asahi’s lips. He tasted like candy, and summer, and Asahi wanted more—so much more. But before he dared go further, Kisumi was swooping away, whisking back to his spot like the kiss had been a pat on the back.

Asahi groaned, and dragged a dirty hand over his mouth, wiping rose lip balm over with the tang of salt and wood. It wasn’t the first impulsive kiss Kisumi had planted on him; the last few days had been sprinkled with sneaky pecks on the cheek, both ears, and one kiss on the top of the head when he’d been sitting on the floor beside his bunk. But they hadn’t kissed on the lips before, and now that they had, Kisumi didn’t seem to think much of it. A hairline crack split Asahi’s bare heart, even if this outcome had been painfully predictable.

Scuffling and quiet conversation murmured from below deck, where Makoto and Haru were sorting through supplies. Several hours remained before night shift took over, so Asahi would make the most of the waning light, covering as much distance as possible before rough weather descended. A pair of wandering albatrosses coasted alongside the ship, skimming the waves lazily. He stole a moment to admire the elegant bends of their design—the strength built into their frames that carried them leagues and leagues around the world.

“Like them, do you?” Kisumi noted. “Birds?”

“Oh, uh…” Asahi drummed his fingers against the polished wheel handle. “Well yeah I…used to watch the eagles sometimes, as a kid. Just thought they were cool.”

A curious expression seemed to be nudging Asahi for more. He ruffed up the back of his hair, shyness driving his limbs now. “Before I went to apprentice under my dad, I was an accident cooped up in a pleasure house attic by the Gutters, so…flight’s always had a certain appeal, I guess. Like…an inspiration.”

“I see.”

A thoughtful pause followed, and Asahi could feel Kisumi’s eyes on him—like a physical touch mapping out his face. He fixed pointedly away to watch the albatrosses shrink into the distance.

Then all at once, his view of them was swallowed up. Wings of pure white and silky gold spread out in front of him, magic radiating in waves of mellow warmth. He jumped, but traced them down to Kisumi, who was brimming with amusement. Sun snared in his feathers and seemed to set them on fire from within—the edges glowing like dying coals in a hearth. He flexed to fan out the ends.

“Go ahead.” His smile was bright and sugar-glazed.

Asahi reached out almost hypnotized, running his palm over the bony ridge, and along the softness of the coverts. The wings were papery translucent, but solid beneath his touch, and pulsing with life. Eyes alight and jaw squarely on the floor, Asahi knew he must have been an easy read.

“Beautiful,” He blurted.
“Aw, thank you~ I should put them away, if you’re done.”

“Oh! Right. Yeah, uh.” Asahi cleared his throat. “Thanks for letting me…”

“No problem! I shouldn’t have them out past evening, though.” The wings folded and faded like steam wisps. Kisumi’s glow dulled some as the sun sank behind the cabin roof. He danced a hand along the wrungs of the ship wheel, fluttering into Asahi’s space again. “Thank you too, Captain. It’s been a very long time since someone’s looked at me like that.”

Asahi was too distracted to notice Ikuya’s siren brother approaching. The man moved like a shadow. Haruka cleared his throat and waited to be addressed, wiping dusty hands on a washcloth. Kisumi retreated to meet him, and Asahi let out a bated breath.

“Hey, Kisumi,” Haru said. “Makoto needs you to help fix one of Rei’s contraptions. He broke it while we were moving stuff around.”

“I didn’t break it, Haru—” Makoto’s slightly frantic response came muffled from below the starboard side.

“Then, it’s not broken. It’s just misaligned and doesn’t work anymore.” Haru faced the spirit with an ironed-out expression, like it pained him to say these words. “I don’t know how to fix it; it’s…an antique. Can you help?”

Kisumi answered with a weightless frown. “You think I know?”

“You’re old.”

“Aaaah, so you’re deferring to my wisdom~”

Haru furrowed a dry glare as his answer, and stalked off, expecting to be followed.

Kisumi gave Asahi a resigned sigh and a knowing shrug, then pushed up his sleeves to take care of it. He was leaving. Asahi was spurred by an urgency to do something, quick, say something before the moment slipped through his fingers.

“Hey, Kisumi.”

The spirit spun back on his heel, looking if anything, excited.

Asahi pooled his confidence, leaning half his weight on the wheel the way he’d seen Natsuya do at banquets, and it had always seemed to work for him. “The next time you kiss me, I want you to mean it.”

Kisumi’s eyes snapped to Asahi and narrowed; his look piercing. He recrossed the distance in two long strides, crowding in so close, Asahi caught the thin line of teal pigment tracing his almond eyes, and fine glitter of diamond powder on his cheekbones. A smile curled across his face, sparked with affectionate inspiration.

“Okay, then.”
Haru huddled on the floor in a corner of the cabin, alone with his thoughts and a silver hand mirror in the dead of night.

Torrents of rain were pelting the ship outside in a loud, ceaseless lullaby, and winds rattled the glass bottles shelved in Rei’s adjacent workshop. To be resting inside while a storm beat down on the night crew saddled Haru with staggering guilt. Morning shift didn’t start for another six hours, and there wasn’t much he could do to help a sorcerer, but peace still skittered agonizingly out of reach.

Haru wiped his face with a wet cloth, and tilted Kisumi’s small mirror up to peer at himself. The reflection glaring back was deathly pallid, his cheeks shadowed beneath an eerie bloom. He trailed over the new scales there, tracing their smooth edges to the shell of his ear with a fingernail. They’d been on his mind lately, more than he would like. The rage that consumed him in the dingy tavern alley was real, and horrifyingly new. For the first time, he’d wanted with all of his being to take a human’s life. The sensation had been invigorating—like a cold current, power seeping from fractures in the ice. It terrified him.

Across the cabin, Kisumi shifted in his dreams. The spirit barely fit in his cot without bending his knees, heels snug against the wall. Haru was tempted to wake him up and ask him about this. Questions were grating at the back of his skull, and Kisumi seemed to know something about everything. Though if he did have answers, he would give them up when he wanted to, and no sooner.

Haru snapped the mirror closed and returned it. He was fretting over maybes and what-ifs; there were taller hurdles to clear.

*Makoto is not afraid of me. I shouldn’t be afraid of me, either.*

“Haru.” Makoto was sitting with his back against the edge of their cot inlet, fully awake. “The rain keeping you up?”

He’d been caught. Haru retied Kisumi’s bag, careful not to displace any of the shell combs, or perfumes, or weird vials of whatever. “I guess. Sorry I woke you.”

Makoto’s gaze pinned him, searching. Then relented. “I know what you’re thinking. What you were looking at just now. And I really wish you weren’t.”

“Then help me forget about it.” Haru pushed to his feet, pausing a moment to let the blood flow back into his legs. Makoto scooted closer to the wall to make space, and he nestled in with Makoto’s arm firm under his pillow. The bunk was barely half the size of their bed at home; made to fit only one. And Makoto was broader than most, so sharing this cot meant practically laying on top of him. They chose to stretch out on their sides instead, facing one another.

“I’m glad you had a good time the other day.” Haru held his voice at a whisper. “In the ocean.”

Makoto hummed, content. “I did.”

“I was scared that you wouldn’t. For a long time. Most of my life, maybe.”

Haru felt Makoto’s laugh tickle over his mouth.

“If it’s something that means a lot to you, Haru, it’d be hard for me not to love it too. We’re not as different as you think.” Shifting closer, he nudged foreheads. “Not as alone, as you think.”
Haru saw his own color reflected in Makoto’s eyes. He lay there, just looking. Then reaching out, mapping with his fingertips. Makoto had a hard jaw, but soft cheeks. They’d grown up together, and it was easy to miss change, when you saw someone every day. Time had matured Makoto’s features, but left his spark of wonder undimmed. Light stubble was rough under Haru’s touch when he smoothed his knuckles across his lover’s chin. There hadn’t been time for him to shave it properly over last few days, and Haru aimed to explore and enjoy the subtle change. He’d never been able to grow hair on his own face, and the texture was fascinating. Tilting sideways to kiss, Haru relished the sandy softness on his lips.

“I get, I get it,” Makoto giggled. “I’ll shave tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to. You could grow a long beard, and then tuck it into your robe. I’d braid flowers into it. We could grow mushrooms.” Haru’s imagination spun with possibilities.

“I’m not going to grow a beard like that, Haru…”

“Maybe a family of birds can nest there.”

“Oh my gosh, I’ll shave!”

“Then let me shave it for you,” Haru offered. “I do a good job.”

Makoto agreed with a quick press of his lips between Haru’s brows.

Haru stretched his legs out under the covers, hooking one over Makoto’s thighs and pulling himself closer. “You know what else I’m good at?” He grinned, and watched the fire catch.

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“We just did that with two people in the room.” Makoto sprawled out, winded.

“Hm,” came Haru’s tired response. He ran his tongue around the seam of his lips with devilish satisfaction. “You think too much.”

“And I’m usually thinking about you.” Makoto looped him back in around the waist. Haru stretched on the outer edge of the bed, half on top of Makoto with one arm hanging off the side. Asahi’s sawtooth snores dampened the mood somewhat, but it was fine. All of it was fine.

Haru settled onto his side and let his thoughts wander, unraveling.

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Absence startled Haru awake to an empty pillow. Makoto was sitting bolt upright in bed, rigid as a board. His anxiety bled into Haru in fumes.

“Makoto?”

Asahi and Kisumi slept on unbothered, and the rain still beat in a drumming murmur. A cursory glance around the unlit cabin landed on two round yellow eyes, staring wide from the bottom shelf on the opposite wall. Ikuya’s cat usually slept curled up with Asahi…
Makoto’s ears flexed, his breathing quickened. “It’s weird. I just have this feeling. Like…bad, it’s…very bad.”

“Makoto—” Haru snapped up and latched onto the man’s shoulder, voice a hiss in his ear. “Is it them?”

“No,” Makoto shook his head. “It’s not sirens; I’d know if it were.”

“Then calm down,” Haru breathed his relief. He flattened his hands against Makoto’s shoulder blades, trailing them down, then curling securely around his middle.

“I don’t even know what I’m saying,” Makoto hunched forward with a heave of embarrassment. “I—maybe I’m going stir crazy in here. This happens at home, and it’s usually just a deer, right? Or a squirrel, or, the wind. It’s always nothing. Why am I like this—”

“Look at me.” Haru framed Makoto’s face, and locked eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

He slid out of bed, stripping off his night clothes. “If it’s any help, I’ll go and check outside.”


“If it’s nothing, then there won’t be any need to worry. Besides, I like the rain.”

Makoto released him, looking sorry, but grateful. “Thank you.” ‘I love you.’

Wet headwind sluiced over Haru’s body as the cabin door clattered shut, and he transformed, relaxing into the chill. His eyes narrowed.

Something was off.

This atmosphere was suffocating in a way that the open ocean should never be, though Haru couldn’t pinpoint why. He cast around the deck and beyond the rail, into dark curtains of rain. A silent flash lit everything white-hot, catching a rogue wave that towered thrice the height of their mast. Sea and sky rumbled powerfully, restlessly, arguing with one another. Haru had never seen a squall like this from above the surface before; its rage was fearsome to witness. Maybe that’s all it was. The storm.

In any case, Nagisa seemed unperturbed. He was piloting at the bow, in animated conversation with Rei. A conjured shield around the stern repelled rain to keep them dry, while one of the jeweled rings on his bracelet shone like an icy white star. The pair of them got along well in the quiet hours, it seemed. Haru left them be, feeling a little more at ease.

He followed the strung lanterns that swung nervously along the cabin eaves, making his way to the rear deck. Planks were slick beneath his feet, and his hair whipped about his face. There he found Ikuya surveying the way behind—slouched over, leaning with his elbows on the rail like he was bored. He had his teal waves gathered back in a short ponytail, and no shirt as the torrents drenched him. The boy bounced away from the edge as Haru drew near, delighted to have company.

“What’s up!” He raised his voice over the wind. “Not time to switch yet, is it?”

“No, not yet.” Haru joined him at his post with caution. “You shouldn’t hang around back here so close to the edge; Nagisa won’t see you if you fall off.”
“Someone’s gotta be rear guard. I won’t fall.”

Another bolt of lightning speared down, outlining the anguished texture of the water below. Harsh thunder trailed shortly behind, and that dread returned—more insistent. Haru swallowed. “Do you not feel that?”

Ikuya raised an eyebrow. “Feel…what?”

“Nevermind,” Haru sighed. Maybe he and Makoto had simply been bouncing emotions off of each other. “I guess I was just—”

“Hold on.” Ikuya’s spine straightened suddenly, his whole body pulled like a bowstring. Pupils narrowed to pins, he cast around in a panic.

“…Ikuya?”

“Lights. Douse the lights.”

Haru yanked the chains on either side of the cabin, and plunged the ship deck into darkness. Unease warped into grating fear; growing louder by the second. Nagisa noticed, and his mood turned stony before ushering Rei into the cabin. He dropped the shield to free his right arm, and rain pummeled the deck in merciless sheets.

“You should go in too, Haru-chan.” Urgency spiked Nagisa’s suggestion.

But Haru refused, taking up a defensive position port side. They were beyond doubt, being followed by something, and the ocean offered them no refuge. Shadows roiled. Lightning bloomed in the clouds a third time, illuminating a section of something large, armored, coiling in ribbed segments, and moving way too fast.

“Nagisa!” Haru bellowed. “There! Hard north, four hundred yards out!”

“I see it!”

A cry between a wail, and the groan of falling trees tore out from behind the nearest thunderhead. Nagisa cursed and ducked low, fumbling with the pouches of his belt and counting something in threes under his breath.

“What is that?!” Ikuya cut in desperately, sprinting over.

“That is Mukade,” the sorcerer dropped his voice. “The mountain centipede. One my sisters’ favorite pets.” Bouncing to his feet, he extracted a small bunch of red-coated pebbles, rolling them in his right hand like marbles. They sparked and crackled. “Charming, right?”

Abandoning its stealth maneuvering, the creature dropped into plain view. Half its body remained buried in the clouds as it wormed downward. Dozens of legs twitched in coordinated pulsing waves at its sides, making a wet rattling noise that turned Haru’s gut. Enough muted ambient light glazed over its form that he caught the rotting sheen of its shell, and the snap of pincers framing a gaping maw. The creature twisted and coiled through the air.

“It hasn’t seen us yet,” Nagisa said. “It will though. It smells us.”

Eyes, I need its eyes. Haru swallowed, flattening against the cabin wall to brace himself. Bugs had eyeballs; all he had to do was find them, but he couldn’t catch a decent angle, nor seem to draw the thing’s attention. Above him, Ikuya clambered up the shroud to attempt the same.
Voices inside the cabin escalated to a frantic pitch, then there was scuffling, thumping. Asahi kicked open the door and staggered out onto the planks, followed by Makoto with his staff tucked under one arm as he tied his pants on. He rushed port side, planting himself squarely between Haru and the oncoming evil.

“Oh, Makoto. You were right, by the way.” Haru craned over his shoulder with a wince.

“I can see that, Haru,” the man huffed lightly. He braced himself, wrestling the terror Haru knew he carried into the night. “Kisumi and Rei are inside. Don’t worry; they know to stay there.”

Alone on the main deck, Nagisa hovered the red pebbles in even clusters, clenching his hand into a claw as they whirred midair. Lightning flashed again, revealing them, and the creature saw. Haru had never felt more like helpless prey.

“Eugh, gods!” Asahi gagged. “I dunno if there’s some law of nature that says when something has too many legs, but that is too many legs.”

It reared back, and barreled toward the ship with a blood-churning shriek. Nagisa had a clear shot at last, and sent the stones flying like tiny comets into the monster’s unshielded abdomen. It screamed as each rock exploded in violent blasts upon contact. The Mukade recoiled, fuming and hissing. Black mud oozed from its gut.

“Ikuya!” Nagisa held his palm out. “Can I borrow your hair tie a sec?”

Ikuya hurried to pull his ponytail free and slap the woven band into Nagisa’s hand. The sorcerer glazed magic over it, setting it aglow. Across the water, the Mukade swerved around, vengeful and ravenous. It thrashed with its massive body; Haru had yet to see the tail end of it. Squinting one eye, Nagisa stretched the hairband to pull between two fingers—waiting, waiting, and fired. The tiny band whistled forth, missing its mark but striking the creature below its face. Yellow veins sprouted from the spot, sizzling like fresh burns. The Mukade reeled and sank out of the sky with a colossal splash.

Nagisa wasted no time leaving it behind.

“I got this.” He forced a confident laugh as he put on a burst of speed, but it came off sounding maniacal, and unsettling. “We’ll make it to morning, trust me.”

The vessel shook with impact broadside; wood splintered and split. Haru was hurled off his feet into the shroud, his hands spidering for purchase on the thick web of ropes. Another lurch sent him overboard. Reflexively, Makoto snapped out latched onto his arm, hauling him up and securing him against the mast.

In a dark explosion from below, Mukade engulfed the deck, and swept Nagisa over the rail.

Two blinks passed as they registered the sorcerer’s glaringly vacant spot at the bow.

“Oh…,” Ikuya breathed. “Oh no.”

The fall back to sea happened in a screaming blur. Catherine stuttered, and dropped out of the sky to the tune of Rei’s muffled shrieking. Haru collected his wits, snatching Ikuya by the wrist as the deck
lifted out from under their feet. Murky clouds smeared by as they raced toward destruction. If they survived the impact, they’d drown in the wreckage shortly after, Haru was sure. He glanced desperately at Makoto, wondering what to do, and if somewhere in the watery chaos, Nagisa was already dead. Makoto’s magic wasn’t strong enough here; he looked every bit as lost.

A searing flare of white light burst over Haru’s head, and this time, it was not lightning.

Kisumi materialized at the mast with his wings outspread to their fullest. He looped the shrouds around his back, and flew up, hard. The crew tumbled back onto the deck, and Asahi sprinted to reclaim control of the wheel. Wood and nails screeched as the spirit fought to slow the ship’s fall, dragging it skyward with everything in him. His wings seemed to grow past their normal size, burning like a sun, and showering sizzling embers onto the gangplank; Haru felt the swelter of them from where he clung to the wall.

Asahi threw his weight into steering them in a hard left curve. A wave was forming ahead, devouring all of the others in its orbit, and Haru realized with a pitch what Asahi planned to do with it. If they landed at just the right height, at the right moment, Catherine would be carried safely down the back of it into the trough. Touch down at the wrong time, and they’d be smashed to sawdust.

“HOLD TIGHT!” Asahi bellowed downwind.

The swell crested with power immeasurable. As it began its descent, Haru felt the ship’s keel meet water with a buckling shake, a guttural splash. Asahi cheered, though Haru thought celebration a bit premature. Makoto spiraled his staff and brought it down with a resounding thump that thrummed through the floorboards, flowing through the wood grains. Kisumi slowing her, Asahi and Makoto driving her steady, Catherine carved down the spine of the wave, bearing into the trough. Haru squinted beyond the sheets of rain, and saw something red and warlike in the distance—heard an explosion like the onset of an avalanche. Another blast crackled, closer this time. And again, followed by a rattling shriek.

Without warning, the Mukade erupted from the sea. It arched over the mast, the segments of its massive body exposed from below, limbs crawling through the air. Legs were missing in blown-off chunks, and it stank of burned flesh. The monster dove into the water on the other side, and the night went dark.

Asahi and Ikuya leveled out the ship as best they could with her rudder cracked loose. They dipped into the sea, and spray kicked high with a vengeance. But the Mukade gave up—snaking to the surface and fleeing into the barrier of clouds. A collective spell of relief heaved out of the crew, cut sharply short.

“WE’RE SINKING!!” Rei burst out of the cabin door with Haru the cat. “The hold is torn open, and filling fast; we’ll be under in minutes!!”

“Fuck me,” Asahi seethed. Makoto leaped for the hatch that led below deck, throwing it open with such force he nearly busted the hinges loose. He saw the state of the hold, and reeled with a panicked noise like the squeak of a wheel skidding. Crates and loose supply barrels were sloshing on seawater that was rising with each roil of the current.

Rei screamed, voice pitched high. “I CAN’T SWIM!!”

“What!??” Ikuya rounded on him. “Rei, please tell me you’re kidding right now.”
“Why would I know how to swim?! It’s an inefficient mode of travel!!”

“Okay. It’s okay,” Makoto rested a reassuring hand on Rei’s shoulder. “We’ll figure this out.”

Haru knew he didn’t quite believe that. The swells surged, and flood gushed higher. It swept out their rescue boat, and several crates he hoped they didn’t need. Holes ripped from the sides were too big to block with anything they had onboard, and even if they could close them, there was no way to get rid of this much water. It was inevitable; they were going under.

Like a heaven-sent meteor, a ball of gold dust hurtled sideways from the shadows and tumbled onto the deck. Powder exploded in floury clouds, coating everything, and Nagisa scrambled to his feet in the middle of it.

“Heyo! Thanks for keeping my spot warm!” His winded cheer felt like a somersault in Haru’s ears. The sorcerer was dripping in thick onyx sludge, but he slicked it away from his face, and reclaimed the bow like he’d never been gone. He retched, spitting out tarry muck. “Anyone got something minty? This stuff tastes like embalmed rats.”

Asahi yelped and stumbled out of the way. “What the fuck!?”

“What’s that? ‘Welcome back, Nagisa?’ Why thank you, I’m glad you’re alive too!” Nagisa dipped into a crouch and hovered them, straining for their height back. The ship must be considerably heavier while half submerged, and he struggled, widening his stance to lift the added weight. Haru saw the water draining down below until the flotsam clattered onto the soaked floorboards. Catherine bounced like a skipping stone, then threaded back into the wind. At last, they cleared the tallest waves, and soared out of danger’s reach. A new shield was thrown up against the rain, and everything around them went quiet.

“Are we safe? Is it over?” Rei straightened the frames of his glass lenses. He looked like he’d been swirled around the bottom of a washbasin.

Haru craned over the railing. “I think so.”

The malicious presence faded into an afterthought as the Rockhoppers caught their breath in the damp, dripping lull. Makoto was shivering, still adrenalized with his nerves fried. His exposed skin was icy, and Haru wished desperately that he had more body heat to share.

“Is anybody hurt!” Makoto yelled. No answer followed, and Haru felt him relax.

“Kisumi’s gone!!”

All eyes converged on Asahi. The shipwright jogged to a stop in the middle of the group, panting and panicked. “I checked the whole ship, and he’s just fucking gone!”

“M-Mister Asahi,” Rei offered delicately, “I’m sure he’s—”

“He’s not here!! That thing took him; it ate him!”

Oh. Haru regathered what he’d seen—the Mukade emerging from the wave, and sudden plunge of total darkness. He twisted with shame at not realizing what that meant.

“It didn’t eat him,” Nagisa gritted out. “He’s alive.”

Asahi beamed with intent. He stripped off his soaked nightshirt, and twisted the water out with jittery hands. “Then set a course to follow that oversized earthworm.”
“No.”

Sharp lilac eyes turned cold, feral as the captain rounded on Nagisa. “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” The boy shrugged, dismissive. “This ship’s a mess. Nearest landfall happens to be north of here, but after that we’re taking a hard turn for Samezuka. The Mukade is bringing Kisumi to my sisters on Tajiri, and that’s out of our range.”

“There is no ‘out of our range.’ We follow it there, destroy your fucking sisters, and get him back,” Asahi commanded.

Ikuya pushed up from his spot, and waded over on eggshells. “Hang on, Asahi. Nagisa’s right; we need to repair the ship, and I can think of an assload of reasons why flying to Tajiri’s a bad idea.”

Asahi crackled, on the brink of an eruption. “So what, we just leave Kisumi to die?!”

Ikuya reared away from him.

“I like Kisumi,” Nagisa said, his tone leveled. “We all do. But if my sisters have him, we’ve lost him. I’m sorry.”

“I made him stay!!” Asahi wrung out. “He thought it’d be safer to go it on his own, but I guilted him into stickin’ around. For this. For us. It was my fault, and I can’t…I can’t just let him—”

“It was nobody’s fault,” Makoto assured. “Kisumi’s our friend too, and whatever happens from here, we don’t leave friends to suffer when we can do something about it.”

Asahi brightened with a look like he could tackle-hug Makoto right there. Haru was drawn a little closer to him.

“Why don’t we take a vote?” Rei offered, audibly at the end of his thread. “That’s fair.”

“We’re not voting,” Nagisa fumed coolly. “This ship’s been gutted; if I drop her, she sinks. You need me. So give me all the orders you want, but you don’t have the power to make me do a single thing.”

Ikuya and Asahi still mid-motion—like a frozen scene in a painting. Nagisa’s young features iced over as his own words steeped. Haru recognized the sting of inward-facing regret.

The sorcerer backed away from the group. “You know what? Fine. I’ll fly you within half a day of Tajiri. Anyone who wants to die there, can be my guest.”

Makoto stepped in. “Nagisa, what—”

“After that, it’ll be good luck and good-bye.”

He wrenched away from Makoto with silencing finality. And set the Rockhoppers’ course northwest.
Rin had melted into a cloud. He was clean and dressed in dry clothes, lying on his back wrapped in wool plush. Fever flushed upward and his temple throbbed, but something blissfully cool was dabbing the sweat from his neck. He cracked his eyes open.

"Rin?"

"Rin, hey."

The shape of Sousuke sharpened into focus, haloed like a dream in liquid firelight. He’d been hurt the last time Rin had seen him, Rin was fairly sure about that. Though the ‘how, when, if it was real’ swirled with murky imprecision. Awash with relief, Rin slurred something indistinct. He struggled against the weary weight of his eyelids; unconsciousness had been so much easier.

“Hey. Can you stay with me a little while?” Sousuke’s voice was low and hoarse, but rich. His warm hand slipped under Rin’s shirt hem to give his shoulder a light massage.

Rin knitted his brows and pooled his focus to keep awake for him. “Sure.”

Sousuke melted with gratitude. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too…” He reached for Sousuke instinctively, but his hands were pinned under layers of sheets and furs. “You’re alright, you…”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Sousuke’s expression softened, and he peeled the towel from Rin’s forehead to re-soak it in the bowl of water by his knee. “It’s been a few hours.”

Rin mumbled something else. It hurt to talk, and to breathe. Points of pain were starting to register all over, melding into a dizzying sum. He didn’t remember getting hurt. Or getting here, for that matter. Recollections lay scattered in fragments that couldn’t possibly add up to a whole story—frayed at the edges; there were pieces missing.

“Tora..?”

“She’s fine too,” Sousuke finished. “They’re all okay. There’s a crater just over the hill with a lake at the bottom. They’ve got shelter, and a watch set for when the fleet’s close, so all we have to do is wait right here.”

Rin relaxed back into his pillow with a weak smile. His face smarted a little as he did so; there was a swelling bruise on one cheek, and a cut splitting his bottom lip.

Sousuke tucked Rin’s stray bangs aside and lay the fresh towel back on his forehead. “How’re you feeling?”

Rin let his eyes roll shut for a moment. “Peachy.”

A raw, anguished look strained Sousuke’s features. “Don’t be a smartass right now. Please. I’ve
been worried to death about you.”

Rin’s heart pulled like a hitched knot. “Sorry.” Freeing a hand from the covers, Rin reached up to frame Sousuke’s jaw. “I’m a little tired, but I’ll be ok.”

Sousuke leaned into the hand with an exhausted full-body sigh.

“You scared me plenty too, y’know,” Rin murmured.

Sousuke’s smile then could have melted snow, and Rin was overwhelmed with gratitude. A plain, polished wooden drinking cup sat next to the bowl on the floor, and Sousuke offered it gently.

“Water.”

“Oh. Sure, thanks…” Mouth parched as sandpaper, Rin sat up feeling a thousand years old. Pain pierced from between his ribs on the right side, and he collapsed backward, cursing through clenched teeth.

“Careful-!” Reaching over, Sousuke readjusted the damp towel. “Easy. There’s a pretty nasty bruise under your shirt.”

Rin tested the tender spot again, and hissed. “Ah fuck…” He raked a hand through his damp hair.

“When did that happen?”

“Hard to say.”

Thinking on it, Rin couldn’t recall acquiring most of the patched-up cuts and bruises painting his arms and waist. There had been a fight, a fire, and now he was here. Sousuke curled an arm behind Rin’s back and helped him sit up, propping him gently against the wall with his pillow and a rolled sheepskin. Groaning, Rin accepted the water with Sousuke holding it steady. Smoke from the island had left his throat gravelly and raw; the cold water was liquid bliss. He drained the cup, smog in his head dispersing.

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

Sousuke refilled the cup and nudged it into Rin’s hands.

Sipping the water, Rin roamd his eyes around the house, unable to focus much on anything in particular. Firelight revealed dark, simple wooden walls, woven straw mats, and beams that cut down the center of the house. Thin wooden doors closed off the porch, but no light seeped through them; it must be late. His low bed rested on a raised platform above the dirt floor. The place was cool, but heat wafted from an old pitted stove. A hanging clay pot of something was simmering over it, filling the house with a delicious, savory smell.

“Where are we?”

“An abandoned cottage on Tsunoi.” Sousuke took the empty cup, then settled back, resting a hand on Rin’s thigh. “The dragons found it just as the storm started getting serious.”

“Oh.”

Rin was chilled, and faint. He scowled blankly at his palms bound in linen bandages. The skin smarted when he brushed over his hands.

“I burned them,” he wondered aloud. “I burned my hands.”
Sousuke’s shoulders stiffened, and Rin’s fear spiked.

“Sousuke, how did I burn my hands?”

“Rin, look…just—”

The memory materialized, and Rin felt like a rake had scrambled his insides; he wanted to throw up, scream himself hollow. Sousuke gathered him into a firm embrace, and Rin descended into what he’d done, playing it back in flames behind his eyes. Reality wavered, every nerve floaty, and numb. The air thickened, and it was suddenly the hardest thing to remember how to breathe it.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” Sousuke repeated into Rin’s hair. “It shouldn’t have been you.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” Rin’s voice cracked. He crumbled against Sousuke’s shirt front, folding himself small. “One of us had to win. He wouldn’t have stopped what he was planning, and…I couldn’t lose you.”

Sousuke held him there, cradled the back of his head—desperate, enveloping, as though if he left enough space Rin might billow like smoke out of his own body. Rin dammed his sobs, painfully. Sousuke didn’t need this; he shouldn’t have to comfort someone torn up over the death of his enemy.

“It’s alright,” he whispered. “It’s alright, Rin, just let it out.”

Rin buried his face under his best friend’s collar, cheek against damp skin, breathing the scent of pinewood, roses, and home. And he cried.

When Rin was finished, and drained, Sousuke leaned away. Remnant smudges of black pigment under his eyes intensified the look of pure devotion that he leveled. “You made a choice, because you had to. But when the waves settle, you’re still gonna be Rin. You’ll get through it. I know this because I know you.”

Rin let that wash over him, start to mend his open wounds. Sousuke swiped a thumb over Rin’s cheek, catching a tear, trailing his finger behind the shell of his ear.

“Thank you,” Rin managed.

Smiling with warm reassurance, Sousuke pushed to his knees, bracing himself against the wall to stand. He was a twinge unsteady, Rin noted with concern. He wondered if Sousuke had slept at all since they’d parted ways.

“You should get some rest, Sou. I mean it.”

“Soon.” Sousuke shook himself alert, and hopped off the platform and into sandals to kneel in the kitchen. “But not on an empty stomach. You hungry?”

Rin followed him around the house with half-lidded eyes. “Sure, actually. That smells great.”

“Zosui. It’s good when you’re sick.” Sousuke stirred the pot, scraped the bottom, and leaned over a spoonful to sample the taste. “That is, if His Majesty’s palate can handle peasant soup with no hot peppers.”

Rin scoffed, and Sousuke chuckled as he filled two stoneware bowls and set them aside to cool.

Leafy discards were piled on the floor nearby beside unwrapped packets of dried seasoning he’d
brought from home. Sousuke must have picked the vegetables himself when they’d landed here. He’d bathed Rin, dressed his injuries, cooked for him, tamed a dragon to fly over the ocean to save him. Blowing steam wisps from the tops of the bowls, Sousuke stepped back up the platform, and settled on the cushion beside the bed. Rin just stared at him, unable to look anywhere else.

Sousuke craned closer with concern. “Rin? Are you ok?”

“I love you. So much.”

It came out clear and heartfelt—tumbling from his lips to fill the quiet cottage. Sousuke’s eyes jumped wide as if he didn’t already know. He did. He must, but he still flushed a lovely shade up to his ears, completely disarmed. Rin glowed with endearment.

Sousuke shifted clumsily closer. He held a spoon up to blow the heat away, then lifted it delicately to Rin’s mouth. “Eat your dinner, you hopeless poet.”

Rin tilted his head and parted his lips, eyelids fluttering shut. The soup warmed him to his fingertips, and he hummed around the spoon. “*Amazing,*” he gushed.

“It’s just rice and vegetables in broth.”

“It’s perfect.”

Refusing to let Rin use his injured hands over hot soup, Sousuke fed him the entire bowl, one bite at a time. The intimacy of being cared for so fiercely had Rin’s face burning too, lit a mellow flutter in his chest. After dinner, Sousuke set the dishes aside, and helped Rin wash up. He hung the rags up to dry, stopping to knead his shoulder, rolling the cricks from stiff muscles.

“Oh. Rin, could you help me with something? I couldn’t reach a few spots on my back with the salve earlier; If you might—”

“Of course,” Rin breathed. “Gods, you should’ve woken me to do this first, Sou.”

“I’m asking you now, right?”

“Tchhh.” Rin seethed as Sousuke fetched an olive glass vial on the nightstand. He shook it, and the liquid inside frothed and solidified into something with the consistency of whipped butter.

“Magic?” Rin cocked an eyebrow.

Sousuke curled him a wry look. “Maybe. I used it on your injuries; it keeps them clean, helps them heal faster. Used to hide some in my dorm at Sano too.”

“Revealing smuggled goods to the Emperor himself,” Rin teased. “Ballsy~”

“Mm you should lock me up, Your Majesty.”

Sousuke passed him the vial, and settled on the bed with his broad back to Rin. He unfastened his shirt, and Rin slid it delicately down and off.

“Sou, gods….”

Skin between Sousuke’s shoulder blades was angry and blistering, scraped raw where the burning debris had struck him. He sucked in a gasp as Rin’s fingers skirted over the welted, darkening cuts. Rin rolled his bottom lip between his teeth as he worked his way down. These marks would leave new scars to meld with the old one on his shoulder, and the criss-crosses from barbed whip gashes,
blades, and net hooks. The room filled with the grassy mint scent of healing ointment. Rin trailed Sousuke’s spine up to his hairline, and found the wound at the back of his head. He paused, wetness springing to his eyes again.

Sousuke tensed. “Hey. It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Shut up; you can’t even see it.”

Sousuke’s shoulders shook as he laughed. “Should’ve brought my helmet.”

“Lucky you’ve got such a thick skull.”

Drawn down with a swell of affection, Rin kissed the nape of Sousuke’s neck, just below the close shave of his hair. Sousuke went immediately quiet, as goosebumps pricked down his arms. Rin rubbed the salve in slow, thorough circles down the expanse of Sousuke’s back.

“I’m proud of you, you know.” He capped the jar when he’d finished, but continued to massage absently, just to keep his hands on skin. “And I hope you…found what you were searching for, all those years.”

Sousuke stilled, shifting around to face Rin. He burned like blue fire, and Rin shivered, paralyzed by the strength of it.

“I did.”

Sousuke leaned forward and they closed the distance between, tender and nervous as a first kiss. A pillowy press of lips, and then firmer. Sousuke’s loud, longing sigh rushed across Rin’s cheek as he
crowded forward to kiss him into the bed, pulling the roll out so Rin lay prone on his back beneath him. Passion surged where it was tethered before, turning Rin inside-out in soft gasps. Rin gave it back greedily. Losing himself, he slung an arm around Sousuke’s shoulders as the man put a twinge too much pressure on Rin’s ribcage. They grunted in pain together. Sousuke hung his head, chuckling quiet and exasperated under Rin’s chin.

“*Ngh* fuck,” Rin gritted out. “Don’t you dare make me laugh, you bastard.”

“I love you, Rin.” A breathless kiss against one fevered cheek, and then a nuzzle beneath Rin’s ear. “I love you.”

Rin took Sousuke’s face in both hands, and claimed his lips again—slower, because there was time. The cut on his swollen lip was bleeding. Sousuke carefully licked it clean, gave Rin a quick peck above his eyebrows, and sat back.

“C’mere. Lie down with me already.” Rin said with an embarrassing softness. He scooted to the right and patted the waiting spot on the futon.

Sousuke retreated, stealing his heat away with him. ‘I’ll fall asleep, though. The bowls are still dirty’

“Fuck the bowls.”

“Are you warm enough? There are more blankets upstairs.”

“*Sousuke.* Don’t think I won’t wrestle your ass down here if you make me.”

The bed creaked sharply as Sousuke sat on the edge, removed his shoes, and collapsed face-first into the other cushion. Rin giggled, airy and shallow as Sousuke eased down on his side and pillowed his head on Rin’s shoulder.

“Even more demanding when you’re sick.” He settled his arm around Rin’s waist and relaxed, the coils of tension unwinding. Rin buried a hand in his thick dark hair, wishing he could feel its softness better through the linen wraps. They’d been apart only two days, and the absence of this closeness had left Rin starving for it. His muscles went weak; he was lightheaded with contentment.

“‘S nice.” Sousuke peered up happily, eyelids drooping. “I can hear your heartbeat.”

“Mmm,” Rin purred. “Why do you think I like it there so much?”

“Thought it was so you could feel up my chest.”

“Definitely that too.”

Laughter puffed over Rin’s collar. “Wake me up ’f you need me….Rin.” Sousuke mumbled. He dropped off in seconds.

Thunder grumbled above, and rain pelted the roof, rustling the tight thatch and tinkering down the gutter chains. Rin felt his face burning, head hazy, but he melted into this pocket of pure bliss. He planted a kiss to Sousuke’s forehead, staring up at the ceiling beams, and carrying the steady rhythm of his love’s breathing into his dreams.
Makoto thought it might be inconsiderate to cheer at the sight of dry land, but part of him certainly wanted to. Broken and waterlogged, Catherine heaved aground into an empty cove, and Nagisa hovered her up the beach out of tide’s grasp. The ship rattled with hastily-nailed-together planks. Asahi insisted that permanent repairs be made before they went any further, so here they would stay.

The trip had been gravely quiet—confusion, fear, frustration festering over the group in fumes while they weeded through what could be salvaged of their supplies. A voyage across the ocean to deliver a message had hardened into an insane rescue operation overnight. Assaulting the Hazukis’ fortress had never been in Makoto’s plans. Or it wouldn’t have been, if he’d had any plans to begin with, diving headfirst into all of this.

And they had lost someone. All of that running, and hiding, and the enemy had still kept that one step ahead. Strange and secretive as Kisumi had been, he was their guide, their compass, their friend—and now they were facing forks in the road, blind. Makoto put an extra pull of strength into securing the sail before dropping heavily back on deck. They would get the spirit back, before it was too late.

Makoto peered sideways at Nagisa, discreet as he could manage. The boy was never short of subjects to chatter about, nor tricks to show off, but he remained eerily quiet as he settled them onto the sand bank. He’d thrown an illusion on his body as soon as his hands were free: He was now a burly, middle-aged man with meaty, wooly arms and a broom-like mustache. A blocky brow shadowed his face under the enchanted coat of dust.

“Land-ho,” Nagisa announced lifelessly. He coaxed a patch of sand on the beach into a long, shallow ramp from the ship to the ground. Makoto’s hesitation to use it must have been obvious, and the sorcerer raised railings on either side with the gnarled lift of a grin on his face. Makoto followed Asahi down, and his heart soared at the scent of leaves, and soil, and fresh rain. The earth welcomed him back.

Though there was something else here; he was abruptly certain of it. An odd surge washed through his veins—not the chill of raw evil, nor the lively hum of the woods, but something new and crackling. He cast down the beach, up the towering, jagged ridge. Braying birds were the only life in motion.

Haru made his way up lightly, scanning the tree line with his usual thorough mistrust. He stopped beside Asahi, mouth pressed tight. “Have you been here before?”

“Not in a while, and not for long.” Asahi tasted the atmosphere, and wiped the dirt off his nose, mostly just smearing it worse. “But we stayed at this cove and it’s pretty secluded, so make yourselves at home. I’ll need today and at least all of tomorrow for repairs, maybe more. We’ll have to find shelter somewhere.”

“I can help,” Makoto offered. He didn’t know much about seafaring or shipbuilding, but he’d built their house in Aomori, so he hoped he could be of use. Sitting around with nothing to do would drive him mad with worry, otherwise.

Asahi split a sunny grin. “‘Course! More hands I’ve got, the quicker we’re outta here.”

Nagisa had the good sense to stow the ship’s wings through the storm, but the rudder would need straightening out, and there were three gaping gashes across the hull where the Mukade’s pincers had
torn it, searching for Kisumi.

Rei sized up the damage with a calculating eye. He’d shed his embroidered coat, vest, and rolled up the sleeves of his open shirt. It used to be cream white, now stained a dirty grey. “I think I can whip up a batch of adhesive, for some of this. That would seal it better and speed up the process.” He brushed his shirt off, making himself sneeze. “I’ll check what I have still undamaged.”

He and Asahi rumbled through materials in the wrecked hold, while Makoto marched further along the beach. Sand was noisy and coarse underfoot, interspersed with larger rocks, sand dollars, and pretty chunks of seaglass. A dirt road disappeared into brambling coastal woods that climbed steadily toward tall, tiered basalt ridges. The cove was isolated safely at the island’s edge. Two small, forlorn fishing boats rocked together at a pier some ways down the coast, though no people were anywhere in sight to man them.

“Aright, Rockhoppers!” Asahi barked. “Ikuya, Nagisa, secure the area. Everyone else with me; we’re getting started on the big fixes now before this weather goes to utter shit.”

“Yes, sir!” Rei piped, visibly delighted at some semblance of order.

“Swell.” Ikuya shrugged off his cloak, and unlaced his breeches, handing his clothes off to Asahi. He wore another set of pants underneath—fitted black cloth with a thick tie at the waist. These he left on, as he jogged down the shore and waded into the waves. “Gonna flush the island out. Stick close to the beach ’til I get back.” He halted. “Also, feed Haru-chan in a little bit? It’s almost his lunchtime.”

“Got it.” Asahi gave him a stiff nod, and a reassuring smile. “Be careful out there.”

Ikuya smirked. “Always am.”

Haru darted after his brother, splashing into the shallows fully clothed. “Ikuya! Ikuya, wait. What do you mean ‘flush out’? Where do you think you’re going?”

Ikuya turned around, hopping restlessly in place. “Most of the islands in this area were gutted with magic years ago.” He edged into deeper water, letting the waves break against his back as he stretched his arms, hands, and rolled his shoulders. Jade scales layered to life down his face and slim torso. “The Hazukis punched a tunnel leading from the ocean that runs straight up underground. It empties out inland, so their siren friends have a point of entrance for an ambush. I need to make sure it’s empty, and safe to camp here. Nagisa can close it up once I find where it opens to land.”

A sick sensation settled like cold cement in Makoto’s gut. He knew exactly what was coming.

“Wait for me.” Haru left absolutely no room for argument.

In a flash, Ikuya’s mood cracked, and the smile he gave Haru was dazzling. “Seriously?! We can swim there together?!”

“YESS! Shouldn’t take long, I promise. Let’s go, let’s go!” Wired with enthusiasm, Ikuya dove like quicksilver into the surf.

Seizing his last chance, Makoto took Haru by the shoulder and spun him around. There was a determined, protective set to the siren’s expression.

“Please be safe,” Makoto begged. “I have a weird feeling about this place.” The tide licked at his
boots, and washed over Haru’s bare feet as it pulled, receding. “I know it’s silly, and very me to say this, but I just…feel like something dangerous is here.”

“Your intuition is never silly, Makoto.” Haru faced him with soft eyes, fingers busy at the ties of his robe. “You were right about last time. I’ll be careful. You too.”

Makoto gave in and undid the ties for Haru, stripping him neatly, and folding his clothes over an elbow. They stilled a moment, trading words in the roaring silence. Then Haru nodded, and slipped out of reach, walking on his heel until he sank beneath the surface. The next white crest rolled over his head, and he disappeared.

Makoto stood fixed on the spot where Haru had been, not quite sure what he was waiting for.

“I know the feeling, buddy.” Asahi made his way down the bank, his presence announced with heavy, crunching footfalls. He stopped beside Makoto to clap a firm, familiar hand on one shoulder. “It kills me some when Ikuya goes underwater. He doesn’t tell me half of what he sees, and I know it’s a…a different world down there.”

The shipbuilder sniffled in the crisp, salt breeze. “I have this fear that, I dunno. That something’ll happen to him one day. He’d just never come back and I’d be left up here wondering.”

Makoto cut Asahi a desperate look. “Shit—” Asahi remembered himself with a jolt. “S-sorry, I’ll stop talking.”

Another wave rolled in, reaching a little higher than the one before, darkening the sand.

The shipwright’s spell of quiet lasted all of ten seconds. “It’s just….Ikuya’s always trusted me to do my part. So it’s only right to return that faith. Y’know?”

“You’re right.” Makoto, breathed. He was deeply grateful that he wasn’t alone in feeling so hopelessly left behind.

Asahi gave him a quick slap on the back, and turned to go. “Coming? We could use some real muscle clearing out the hold, yeah?” He flexed both arms to make his point.

“Yes. I’ll be right up.”

The sea thundered, and hissed. ‘Take care of him, please,’ Makoto asked.

He trudged up the beach. There was work to do.

Haru found his shoreborn brother in deeper water, waiting for him a couple meters below the surface. Ikuya’s elegant bangs swirled with the undercurrent, and sunlight reflected in jade flecks off his slight shoulders.

“Ready?” Excitement was flickering about him, like a kid about to show his bedroom off to a guest.

Haru affirmed with a nod.
Ikuya kicked backward, quirking an eyebrow. “Took you long enough. Were you making out?”

“I keep forgetting you’re still a teenager. Thanks for reminding me.”

“No problem. Wait…”

Haru glided down, grinning.

They swam at a swift pace, making for the craggy underbelly around the southeastern side of the island. Leafy kelp clung there, ropy stalks swaying with the current, roots anchored in the depths out of sight. The haunting undersea forest breathed with the water, teeming with ceaseless motion. Startled bonito darted and scattered as sawfinned sharks leered from the shadows. The sirens threaded their way through unbothered. Ikuya propelled ahead, taking a few sharp swerves between kelp stalks as he chased a barracuda. Bubbles jetted from his mouth; he was laughing, inviting Haru to match his speed. And Haru did, with fondness tugging up the corners of his mouth.

“I thought we had a job to do,” he huffed.

“Well yeah we do, but…” Ikuya flipped backward into an effortless somersault. “We can enjoy the trip a bit, right? Not often I get someone to swim with down here.”

Haru blew a stream of air. “As long as we’re moving in the right direction.”

A bloom of lilac jellyfish cleared into view ahead, and Haru shot an irked scowl their way. Jellies were a plodding, painful nuisance, and their lack of eyes made them impossible to get rid of.


Ikuya zoomed into the bloom, twisting between them with glee. “Stings from these don’t hurt; it’s fine.”

Haru joined him carefully in the drifting cloud of lacy-looking pests. He pushed lightly on one of
their bells, and it bounced back into form, the print of his fingers lingering in bright green there before fading. Ikuya was already busy drawing a bored-looking face with his pinky on another one of them.

“Guess who! Quick!”

Haru peered from above, then rolled his eyes. “…It’s me.”

“Yesss!”

The pair flitted across the kelp forest, powering through the current. Light flickered with the churning tide above, and Ikuya glided a few strokes in front. He was a formidable swimmer now—confident and capable. Haru swelled with pride.

He trailed after Ikuya, weaving under the undulating fronds, when something slithered at the corner of his vision. A swarm of unagi snaked out of the darkness. They were silvery, or black, their scales ribbed translucent, and jagged points of their teeth setting their faces in a ghoulish frown. Haru thought they were kind of cute, in their way, even if dangerous to most. They swerved out of the sirens’ path, between swaying columns of kelp, drawn toward a destination out past the forest. Haru had seen such behavior before, though never in numbers like this.

“They’re scavenging.” He tasted faint traces of blood in the water. “There’s a kill close by.”

“Huh…” Ikuya swam up and settled to tread beside Haru, relaxing into the current. “Must be a hell of a kill to attract this many.”

These creatures were normally hunters themselves. If the prey was so impressive, what of the predator?

Haru blinked, and for a moment, he thought the sky did too—as though something had blocked it, passing over the ocean. Ikuya was too entertained by the spectacle below to notice.
“Ikuya. We should go. The others are waiting.” Haru sank a few meters down, urging his brother away from the surface.

“Oh! There! I found it!” Ikuya lit up, and zoomed past Haru into the dark.

Below them, an opening gaped into the rock shelf. Stone around it was warped unnaturally, like folds of a sheet forced through a funnel. Magic’s mark on the land was easy to spot when a sorcerer was careless.

“Here, in case we find any of the others.” Ikuya pushed a weapon into Haru’s hand, curling his fingers closed. Haru looked it over, and nearly dropped it. The weapon was a knife—thin, smooth, and dirty white. A sheer blade of glass or crystal was wedged into one end, the grip roughened with seal hide. But the core-

“This is a bone.” Haru recoiled. “Ikuya, this is a human bone.”

“Metal rusts too quick.” Ikuya brandished one of his own with pride. “The others do something to these to seal ‘em up; they’re good to have down here.”

Haru propelled himself away. “I can’t use this.”

“Why not?” Ikuya chased him. “It’s not like I made it. They were lying around the sea floor near one of the other islands. Would just be going to waste.”

“We’re not like the others,” Haru said darkly. “We don’t use things like this.”

“Our eyes aren’t as strong as theirs, Haru. So we have to make due. Just take it.”

Haru turned the weapon over a few times, disgust crawling up his veins just to hold it. Ikuya might well be right. He’d been out in the world all of that time Haru was isolated safely in Aomori, and the boy only wanted to help. He was always trying to help. Haru glanced again toward the surface, where the skylight glimmered.

He returned the knife. “Thanks, really; I get it. But I’ll be fine.”

Ikuya deflated as he stowed his own blade to accept Haru’s back. “If you say so.”

He’d given me the better one, Haru realized with a sting.

Swallowing his guilt, he sank down, and they drifted through the entrance together.

The Hazukis’ underwater tunnel was frigid and lightless. Good. It would make other sirens easier to spot, if they came across any.

The passage was just wide enough that he and Ikuya could swim alongside each other with room to spread their arms as they delved into the murk. Limpets, clams, spindly pale starfish, and bleached sea reeds formed a living wall on all sides as tiny potbellied fish schooled in a shimmering mass. They scattered, twinkling like frantic fireflies when Ikuya reached a hand out.

Gradually, the route sloped upward—the island’s passage filling with water into the heights like an upturned cup in a bathtub. They were scaling the insides of a mountain; Haru could feel the pressure shift in his ears.

Spurred by a sudden need to fill the silence, he cut a sidelong look at Ikuya. “Are you happy?”

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“What?” Ikuya floundered.

“I said are you happy,” Haru repeated with more resolve. “With Asahi and Naoya. Are you…doing well, generally speaking?”

“You mean Natsuya?!” A watery snort. “I’m gonna tell him you called him ‘Naoya;’ he’ll think it’s hilarious.” Then Ikuya slowed as he considered. Haru realized this was a bit of an odd thing to say out of the blue, but he wasn’t as subtle as Makoto at weaving his questions into courtesies. And he didn’t know when he’d have another opportunity to ask.

“I’m happy, I think,” Ikuya started. “With all the madness of these past years, it’s not something I think about much. I love them, though—Nat, Nao, Asahi…everyone. I’d do anything for them, go wherever they are.”

He pushed off the wall, brushing along the beaded clusters of shells. “Gods, I haven’t seen Natsuya in forever. Hope he knows I’m looking out for him. He’s done a lot to protect me.” There was a distant hint of misery in Ikuya’s tone, hanging in the cold stream. “You know, after he got over the weirdness, he started calling me ‘Kirishima’ nonstop in front of anyone and everyone. He made sure people at court knew who I was, and who they’d be answering to if they gave me any grief. You wouldn’t think it’d feel this great having something as simple as a last name, but…”

“—it does,” Haru finished.

“What about you, then?” Ikuya looped the conversation back, disturbing a group of shrimp as he passed. “What do you want to do when this is over?”

For Haru’s part, there wasn’t much thinking involved. “I want to live at home.”

Ikuya laughed in a burst of bubbles. “That sounds like you, Haru.”

Nothing approached them, and Haru relaxed a little as the minutes ticked by. Eventually, the passage gathered into a dead end, where the floor sparkled with veins of glassy-gold minerals. Outside light lanced into the shadow, and the sirens kicked upward. They surfaced into a low cavern, with a roof rough and wavering in dull blue reflections. Their hard breaths, and tiny sloshes echoed intimately in the damp enclosure. Haru followed the cave’s contours to a flight of perfect magic-wrought stairs that curved up from the water.

“That’s the way out,” Ikuya motioned to them. “Shall we?”

Haru mentally prepared himself for the discomfort of dry land after so long underwater. He huffed over the cold surface, and dove for the staircase.

Sure enough, he felt like a wet cat—thick, soggy pants clinging to his legs at the tunnel exit. He wrestled through the tangle of ivy that hung over the opening and winced, not yet dry enough to readjust his sensitive eyes to the brightness. A headache was creeping up his temple, and Ikuya groaned in shared misery. Haru shook his hair out and absorbed their surroundings. The passage had dumped them out into a shady redwood grove. Beyond the trees was a clustered hamlet, surrounded by verdant livestock fields, and rimmed by a broken barricade made from the surrounding rock. The field fences were all busted, and the enclosures unoccupied.

“Stay here and keep watch,” Haru ordered. “I’m gonna take a look.”

“Alright.” Ikuya unsheathed his knife from his waistband, and chose a vantage point behind a wide trunk. “Yell if you need me.”
Haru crept along the back of a stable, then skirted around the rear houses. If someone saw him like this, it would stir a ruckus he was in no mood to deal with. He and Ikuya had no humans present to vouch for them. But the streets were silent. It was late morning on a sunny day, and they ought to be bustling. A gust picked up, whispering down the road, rustling the reed roofs. An open gate creaked on rusted hinges.

There were no people here, anywhere.

Haru stepped out openly onto the road with this realization, and Ikuya took that as his cue to leave cover. He jogged over, looking antsy. “Well?”

Haru surveyed the group of houses, and the overgrown gardens. The front door to one place was left ajar, abandoned, and a wagon parked outside was grassed over at the wheels like it hadn’t moved for months. “It’s deserted.”

There was a ghostly, hollow feel to this town—like a dry skeleton the air was blowing straight through. Anguish twisted Ikuya’s face for a moment, as he peered into the yards, then back toward the forest. Into the shadow, toward the tunnel.

And the fate of this hamlet sank in like a lump of ice. Almost nauseous, Haru swallowed and coughed.

“Let’s go back. We got what we needed.” Ikuya said thickly. “This must’ve happened a while ago. We probably won’t find anyone, and I know where we are, so Nagisa can close up the opening quick.”

“Wait. I need to take a look over the ridge first.” Haru steadied and turned back to the barricade. He could mull over the rest of this later. “Makoto felt something here, and I need to make sure.”

“He felt something? Haru, I dunno if that means there actually is any—”

“I’ll be right back.” Haru shot him a stern look, and shuffled past the last house in line. He heard Ikuya heave a sigh and hop up into a wagon bed to wait.

Haru crossed the wooden bridge over a lively river that wound between the redwoods out of sight. A low, broken, ivy-coated wall cut the entrance off from what lay beyond—meant to guard the town, and stop landslides destroying the snaking switchbacks of the footpath. Patterns and blocky creatures had been painted on it in red and white, though the pigment was peeled and fading. Haru rested a hand on the corner of the wall, and passed through. Finally, he took in the full view of the island. And promptly reeled against the nearest tree in shock.

A crater hollowed out the land below, carpeted in green and gold tussock, broken by jutting rock slabs,

And filled by an entire flight of living, lumbering, wild dragons.

Haru wished he could make himself invisible somehow—shrink into nothing, or meld into the bark of this tree at his back. There were fifteen dragons gathered here at least—all different in size and color, some roaming the grassland, others lounging in a pile like beached seals around the lake, or tearing at bloody, fresh-caught prey. A few of them were the size of whales, with jaws like sharks, strong tails, and enormous fanning wings. Observing them, Haru saw now why the other sirens had swum clear of southern coasts.

One of them perked up and stretched—it was a brilliant ruby red with slashes of violet down its back, casting hot prisms over the ground. It yawned, huffed steam, and settled back down. Even
distracted and relaxed, the beasts were humming with latent power. They were terrifying, but
elegant in their deadly nature.

Haru snapped back into himself. He and Ikuya had to get back down. Makoto and the others were
settling into the cove over the ridge, utterly unaware and unprepared for what was taking up
residence here. Haru motioned a flat palm to Ikuya across the lawn, warning him to stay back. The
other siren tilted sideways, puzzled.

Why are there so many? Haru swore behind clenched teeth.

The trees rustled, and he lurched alert. That noise had been close. So close—a stone’s throw away
from him. Before he could react, the ferns swayed and bent aside as a body snaked forward—a
sleek column of satiny scaled armor and rolling muscle. Slapping a cold hand over his mouth, Haru
edged toward the bridge, blood thundering behind in his ears.

The dragon must have been halfway up the ridge already and somehow he hadn’t even noticed. It
scaled the broken wall with ease, and leaped off, swooping lazily into the grass field between the
gate and the hamlet, cutting off Haru’s escape. He locked eyes with Ikuya, who was crouching
paralyzed in the wagon. His stare was searching—waiting for Haru to point him in any direction.

The dragon snorted a jet of hot air, tail whipping side to side as its interest piqued. It was narrow-
featured, and smooth—the hues and patterns on its hide shifting like cuttlefish to match the dappled
ground. Almost birdlike in its movements, it craned in to examine the grass Haru had disturbed. This
one wasn’t nearly as big as some of the others—only twice Makoto’s height at most; Haru thanked
the gods for that. It sniffed the air again, as a breeze wafted downhill. Haru stilled; he smelled of
seawater; it was going to find him.

Across the field, Ikuya sucked in a scream. He hadn’t seen the crater; if he made a cry—

No. Haru signed emphatically. Don’t. Please don’t make noise—

They don’t eat people, he remembered. Kisumi said there had always been dragons in Samezuka
skies, and they didn’t bother humans unless someone had trespassed into their nesting grounds. But
then, Haru had no idea what he was near, and he wasn’t a human.

Curious emerald eyes scanned the ground, blinking once, pupils flaring. Haru scuffled with his heel,
and shrank behind the last tree left to conceal him. Sensing movement, the dragon crouched, and
trilled a growl from the bottom of its throat. It turned away from Ikuya and began closing in, leaving
Haru little choice but to pour his trust into the river.

Praying Ikuya would remember their errand, he spared a last glance the way he’d come, locking eyes
with his brother for half a second. “Go back.”

He lunged for the water.

In the split breath before he hit the icy surface, he thought he caught the distant, penetrating note of a
whistle.

______________________

Rin’s days at the abandoned cottage unwound like a long exhale.
He spent the first couple nights drifting in and out of a haunted, fevered sleep. Things tended to get worse before they got better—but all wounds healed, and quicker with love. Sometimes Sousuke would be a warm, encircling weight around him in bed. Others he was moving about the cabin, or cross-legged on the mats with a cool towel and quiet nothings. He sang when he thought Rin wasn’t really listening—old lullabies about springtime, and sea battles, and a lonely traveler with stars on his back. Rin wished he could remember the verses. It soothed him in every way to hear Sousuke’s voice.

Every day, Sousuke cooked—beaming quietly as Rin finished his meals, and his strength returned. Rin’s hands were in no shape to use a knife, but he delighted in stirring the pot when Sousuke let him, watching his lover chop vegetables with striking skill. And though he tried his best to hide it, Sousuke’s injury made him tired at first—gave him headaches. When he slumped over with one hand in his hair, Rin made him drink water and urged him to bed.

Rain showered onto the porch, the sky grumbled miles away, and Sousuke filled in his blank spaces by firelight. He told Rin about the Nanases, and Tamo’s cave; Rin was almost angry he’d done something so reckless on his own; he could have died. But in the end, Rin just found himself amazed—falling deeper, faster than he ever imagined. He didn’t have much to tell Sousuke in return; his time alone had been a bleak blur of hours on Tora’s back. And his duel on the ground was still heartrendingly raw.

They touched, skin to skin, Rin warming his hands between Sousuke’s palms, brushing shins under the fur covers. They kissed often, for long minutes, hours, they didn’t know and they never wanted to stop. It was slow, sweet, leading nowhere, but felt in the deepest places. Both were gentle as wounds mended, and bruises faded. A chapter of their lives had drawn to a heavy close, and the rest waited unwritten.

Showers thinned the morning of their fourth day, and finally relented.

Sousuke’s rough panting and soft grunts filled the cabin as he counted pushups beside the porch door. Rin soaked in the sight of him shamelessly. The muscled landscape of his back flexed and rolled each time he lifted up on his fists and dropped back to the mat, sweat gleaming on skin in the sliver of light from outside. Suddenly he sprang high, landing flat on his palm with a slap, then pushing up, down—bodyweight balanced with pure strength on one arm. Watching him exercise was starting to make Rin squirm under the covers.

Eyes flicking to the bed for a moment, Sousuke caught Rin staring and smirked.

“Did I screw up your count?” Rin purred.

“hff—You did—hff—actually.”

Two more lifts on the other arm, and Sousuke bounced to his feet. He crossed the room, breathing hard and towering over the bed. Heat was radiating off him.

“Feeling better?”

“Loads better.” Rin’s answer pulled into a yawn as he stretched and ran a comb through his mess of fine hair. It tangled so easily; it was a bitch to brush out. So he tossed the comb and left that for later. “Wanna take a walk, Sou? I miss the sun.”

Sousuke slipped a shirt on and knelt at the bedside. He brought a hand up to test the temperature of
Rin’s forehead. His features relaxed, finding it cool.

“Sure, I could go for a walk. If we follow that road up, you can see the rest of the island from the hilltop. Think you’re up for it?”

Humor danced in those ocean blue eyes, and shot sparks up Rin’s chest. He curled a wide grin. “Absolutely.”

Misty rainbows bridged through the clouds. Tonight’s storm was a ways off, the edge of it a gloomy vengeance creeping on the horizon. Still, Sousuke fussed over Rin—wrapped him in his warmest coat, and a wool blanket from upstairs that had a blocky flatfish pattern in faded green stripes. He’d beat the dust out of it earlier, and aired the thing out, though it still smelled faintly of old cedar. At last, the Emperor of Samezuka wobbled outside looking like a giant rolled-up bat with boots. He was tired and a little peaky, but when a beam of morning lit on his skin, Sousuke was struck dumb, staring with the stars punched out of him.

He led Rin down the steps by the hand, and above a water channel that curved past their cottage. It was surging near to overflow after days of heavy rain. A long uphill path trailed between the quaint green crop fields that layered up in orderly terraced yards. Native grass had leaked into the troughs, and fall harvest was spilling over untended. The air was rich with bird songs and the dewey scent of wet soil.

Sunny though it was, autumn chill crept in from the coast, and Sousuke’s stubborn shivering hooked Rin’s concern.

“So you remembered to bring a dagger into the front yard but not a coat,” he teased. “Shut up.”

Snickering, Rin threw half of the blanket behind Sousuke’s shoulders, looping him close around the middle. “Fuck, you’re so big.”

“That a problem?” Sousuke lifted an arm so Rin could tuck himself closer, burrowing into his spot happily.

“No complaints here.”

They started up the path with hips flush, and Rin’s arm firm around Sousuke’s waist. The road was sodden, and littered with happy slugs and deep puddles. Edging around them while bundled together proved comically difficult, but Rin was dead-set on keeping form as a bizarre two-headed hand roll.

“I’ll race you to the top,” he challenged.

“No.” Sousuke refused flatly. “You’re covered in bruises; we’re walking.”

Rin groaned something about Sousuke being afraid to lose.

Rain water pooled into a mini pond between the onion patches, and a flock of meadowlarks pruned their feathers along the edge of it. Their warbling melodies were answered from the trees.

“Hey,” Sousuke nudged Rin with his hip. “Remember the time you wanted a rematch race around that swan pond at the park, and I called you a big cheater? You didn’t talk to me for three days.”
Rin blew out his cheeks. “I do remember, and I have never cheated in my life, thanks. Also you were the one pouting, not me.”

“I don’t pout. That’s for babies.”

“You do it all the time!”

“I do not.”

“Really, huh. Then what’s this?” Rin pinched Sousuke’s cheeks until he snapped out to play-bite the air. Laughing, Rin tilted his chin up to ask for a kiss as they strolled.

Sousuke leaned down and gave him two.

A shallow staircase of wood beams packed in tight soil was built into the hill—leading them past lush fields of squash, carrots, and cabbage that meshed into undergrowth from a ragged tree line. Halfway up, they found an offshoot to a sundial and a stone shrine. It was waterlogged and mossed over, with mushroom clusters crowding up the pedestal of a block-limbed statue. Woven rice straw decorations draped the inside to mark north and south. Rin paid his respects, and they hurried back to the road. Sousuke knew him better than to turn back before the top.

He feared that the uphill exertion might be too much for Rin after days of bedrest, but the activity seemed to energize him. His voice rose with the breeze as they crossed a short bridge, and continued up the sloping path.

They reached the summit of the farm, where it leveled out over a sweeping view of the island. A steep crater circled below, where the whole flight of Samezuka’s dragons was nesting—taking shelter in several hollowed-out grottos. Soft tussock matted the basin in melded green and gold, color collecting at the bottom like a painter’s pigment dish. Dragons from warmer climates were perched along the ridges with their vibrant wings outspread like butterflies, basking in the sun. By the conifer groves, the carcass of something massive was splayed flat. It had been picked too clean for Sousuke to tell what the creature had been, but its rib cage curled high as a two-floored building. Nearby, a pair of smaller dragons had their jaws buried in the freshly seared flanks of black eels.

Wired with excitement, Rin jumped out of the blanket, pinched his fingers between his lips, and whistled. His crystalline shrill note echoed into the crater. At the sound of him, the dragons startled to attention, and converged. They flew up the hillside to perch on all sides of Rin, kicking up flurries of dewdrops and damp leaves, clamoring in a chorus of greetings.

“Morning!” Rin let them settle around him, take in his familiar scent. Their small bursts of air tickled, and made him giggle. “I’m fine, I’m much better, thaaank you-”

The creatures circled him, nostrils flaring and pupils blowing wide with affection. These adult dragons were thankfully more aware of their own size and strength than Sousuke remembered the young ones ever being; they stretched to let Rin stroke their necks, and nuzzled him lightly. Sousuke tried his best to keep out of the way, but still caught a few of their elated hellos.

Tora waited until the others had dispersed to reunite with her partner. She craned down, and held still to let Rin press his forehead to the side of her face. Wordlessly, he traced his hand over one of the fresh bite scars under her throat. Then she voiced something in a deep, emotive tone that made him smile apologetically.

“Oooh—” He turned and met Sousuke’s eyes with overflowing adoration. “It’s alright. No need to worry, girl. Sousuke’s been taking very good care of me.”
Sousuke blushed like a fool to hear Rin say it, because he would; he always would.

His roaming gaze hooked on another, pale blue one. Tamo grunted and huffed steam like he was daring Sousuke to look away first.

As if that would work on him, ever. Sousuke just glared harder. “Quit being so awkward. You haven’t seen Rin in years; go say hi.”

A rumbling growl came in answer, and something about the pitch of it told Sousuke he was being insulted.

Rin’s laughter broke off their staring contest. He welcomed Tamo back, brimming with joy. After, the pair of dragons drew away and glided back into the crater. Tamo stretched out in the sun for a nap, and Tora fit herself beside him—the pair forming an endearing crescent in red and onyx. Spines on Tamo’s back raised on end when Tora nuzzled the gnarled skin under his left eye. Sousuke had spent long enough with him to notice that he was snappish and belligerent when anything came near his blind spot, but he let Tora close without complaints—trusting and docile. She tucked her head in under his jaw. He held still for her, but sieved off his energy twitching his tail in the grass.

“Look how happy they are.” Fondness floated in Rin’s voice. “All thanks to you.”

Sousuke scrunched his nose. “I already regret it. Your dragon has bad taste.”

Rin snickered, rolling his tongue against his cheek. “Does she? And what about my taste?”

“Even worse.”

Rin frisked a hand up Sousuke’s side to tickle him, making him yelp and snap his arms shut. Staggering, Rin wheezed with laughter.


“Whaat, you mean you’d attack a guy with cracked ribs? Sousuke, I thought you had morals.”

Fluttering his lashes, Sousuke hooked Rin’s smug face between a thumb and forefinger and lifted his chin. He silenced immediately, as Sousuke dropped his voice low and velvety in his ear.

“You’re beautiful, my love.”

Rin shuddered, and teetered back, flustered. His cheeks flushed rose red.

Sousuke smirked; the score was even.

The yard had a wide, sturdy-looking swing hanging from a bough. Its wood was still damp, and Rin scraped the fallen leaves from the seat. Stiff rope whined when Sousuke nestled against one side with a leg up against the backrest. Rin stretched across the bench and reclined into Sousuke’s lap with a sigh, head resting under his chin. He pulled the blanket closed as Sousuke locked him in a loose, comfortable embrace beneath it. They had a view of the house from here, with its thick reed roof—the tiny orchard, and the overflowing green crop fields. Sousuke imagined what it might be like to live here, and tend to them—to grow old with Rin on the northern fringes.

“Fantasizing about the simple life?” Rin drawled.

“Whatever.” Sousuke squeezed him a little.
“I could see you living here, Sou. Or somewhere like it. Settling down with someone nice, starting a family away from all the war, and the courts, and the bullshit. Leading a long, happy life.” A bone-deep sadness bled into the thought, and Rin’s voice went papery. “Would you…would you want that?”

“No,” Sousuke said firmly. “I wouldn’t.” He hooked his ankle behind Rin’s to lift their legs together, up and down. “You already know what makes me happy.”

Rin tilted his face up, and answered Sousuke with an honest, grateful, razor-sharp grin. Wind ruffled his bangs, and the chill painted his skin in rosy watercolor. The world was dream-hued as he set the swing’s rhythm to and fro with one foot, Sousuke lightly thumbing over the bandages on his palm under the blanket. The serene silence was measured in sinewy squeaks of wet rope.

Creak, swsh.

Creak, swsh

There was something left open still—untied, unresolved.

“Rin, I need to say something.”

A pause. The swing stopped moving.

Crisp air rushed into their space as Rin sat up in the swing, straightening to face Sousuke with his full attention. His gaze sharpened with expectation. “Yeah?”

Sousuke dragged in a deep breath. “I’m sorry for what I said the morning you left. It was wrong. I had…so much hatred in my heart then, and I took my anger out on you when I should have been there for you.” Sousuke thought he might as well lay his soul bare while this momentum carried him. “Your compassion for others is not a weakness. It’s saved so many lives already, mine included. I’ve always thought you were incredible for it. And I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

Emotion welled in Rin’s features; he tightened his mouth, blinking hard.

“I’m sorry too,” Rin released in a rush. “Gods. I shouldn’t have left you, and what I said about staying in the pits was…just awful, and I didn’t mean it. I knew you were angry; I’d…always known that. And I should’ve listened to you instead of shutting you out.” He pulled Sousuke’s hand into his, and turned it over. Rin’s fingers were elegant, and still tender as they healed—flitting softly over Sousuke’s large, calloused palm before curling over it. “The pieces that make us people are different, Sou. But we’re both whole, and I love the man you are, forever.”

Sousuke reached up to splay a hand into Rin’s hair, and lean their forehead together. His adoration seeped into the space between, and swirled into Rin’s, halfway.

He nodded, slowly. “Forgiven, then?”

Rin sniffled, and chewed his lip, nodding. “Forgiven,” he rasped. He lunged forward, and pulled Sousuke into a hug. Which Sousuke returned—wrapping him tight, secure. They wove together, a fixed point in the universe.

Loosening his hold, Rin braced himself on the bench backrest and craned up to trap Sousuke against the side.
“Plus I hope you know,” he murmured, “that I do need you beside me.” And lowered into a kiss.

Sousuke pushed back into him hungrily—careful not to put pressure on Rin’s bruises, but just wanting him so much. Rin lost his balance and fell forward, scooting in and sliding his hand up Sousuke’s thigh. His mouth slipped as he readjusted. But Sousuke leaned in and found his lips again, widening the space between his legs to give Rin room. Rolling on impulse, Rin palmed Sousuke softly, clumsily through his pants, sending his pulse thudding through his veins. He kissed Rin harder, more desperately. The swing swayed and creaked out of sync.

The armrest was starting to dig into Sousuke’s back. Panting, he broke the kiss to whisper against Rin’s wet, swollen lips, making him shiver. “Rin do you…do you want to—”

“Let’s go inside,” Rin breathed. His voice and his dark red gaze were thick with lust.

Sousuke’s blood coursed molten. “Okay.”

He helped Rin to his feet, and they hurried down the path still clinging to the blanket, their hands curled possessively around each other. Sousuke’s head spun as heat gathered low.

Then Rin ground them to a halt.

“Sou-” His whisper cut sharp and hushed. “Sousuke, look at that. By the water.”

Sousuke almost toppled them over, he was so unprepared.

“What…?” he blinked, dispersing the haze, and followed the tip of Rin’s finger. Motion rustled the bushes near the channel, and footprints trailed up the muddy bank; Sousuke squinted to see. Wired on instinct, he took a quick look around the farm, but nothing else seemed out of place.

Rin jerked him back. “Look!”

A man emerged from the trees.

He was thin with slick dark hair, and pearly skin that shimmered almost blueish when he moved out of the shade. He sped across the grass with a panicky spring in his stride, throwing a look behind him like he was being chased. Nothing followed. The stranger waited, crouched behind the stack of firewood by the shed.

“The fuck…?” Sousuke scowled, his spine prickling.

They should hail the man, he thought. That was normal, courteous; the stranger was shirtless and unarmed. But there was something off about him that Sousuke couldn’t place. He edged closer, defenses raised, awareness pinned on the stranger, hand reaching instinctively for the dagger in his boot. They watched the man glance down the porch, edging around the yard. Sousuke shielded Rin with the blanket, but Rin peeled open a corner and peeked anyway.

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“Why’s he slinking around half naked; it’s fucking freezing out.” Rin blew his cover and loomed tall. “HEY!” He barked.

“Rin, wait-!”

“You down there!! Looking for someone!!”

The pale man startled upright, and flattened against the house. He spotted them on the path with terror-filled eyes circling wide.
Wide, luminous, and the color of pure evil.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Whew, was that a long one.

You can find me elsewhere on Twitter and Pillowfort. The Pillowfort is for art, and the twitter is...well, a twitter. It’s probably best to look for next chapter’s art there instead of Tumble. ;)

» Fanart Corner! «

Stray did this BEAUTIFUL PIECE of Rin and Sousuke for a secret Santa exchange present (seriously how lucky was I????). She has Sousuke’s scars, and Rin’s jewelry all perfect and I’m :_;: Stray is crazy talented, and you can check out her amazing art on Twitter, and her writing Here on AO3

-World Notes Corner-

• The dragon encountered by Haru outside the hamlet is called a Mercury. They’re on the small side of the big dragons, but their intelligence and exceptional hearing and vision make them good scouts. Skin on their hides and wings changes to camouflage them into their surroundings, matching the foliage or sky. They tend to be quite shy, and will sometimes stalk prey for hours before attacking.

• Shrines like the one at the island cottage are common fixtures of rural and remote areas in Samezuka, as well as mountain summits. Monks build them for travelers on the road, or for people living too far out to visit big temples. They are constructed of wood and stone, have decorated roofs, and one or more statues of a deity within. They are used as shelters, quiet places to pray for good luck, and a way to orient oneself if lost. Shrines always face east, with lanterns outside opening north.

• Since they’ve been mentioned briefly a few times now, a quick list of Samezuka’s four primary gods, and what they’re in charge of:

-Heart (courage, honor, strength, the sun)
  Season: Summer, Direction: East, Guide: Phoenix

-Plenty (the harvest, wealth, growth, knowledge)
  Season: Autumn, Direction: West, Guide: Leopard

-Mercy (favorable weather, good health & fortune, art, music.)
  Season: Spring, Direction: South, Guide: Bear

-Death (destiny, the afterlife, the ocean.)
  Season: Winter, Direction: North, Guide: Sea Serpent
Influence of the central empire’s religion reached far and wide as more territories were acquired. Regions meshed these gods into their own mythos, and interpretations of them vary widely across Samezuka. Artists in the capital depict the gods as either human or dragon in appearance, though where Rin and Sousuke are, people tend to express them in abstract or animal forms. The statue inside their shrine was of Plenty (to bless the crops).

End Notes

You can also find me at donguris.tumblr.com, where I post art and cry into people’s tags.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!