Before he could make peace with who he was, he would need to be everything that would come to make him whole. A child, a brother, a corpse, a weapon, a wanderer, a student, a man. All of these things that make him who he is. This is the story of Genji Shimada. {{An exploration of backstory, headcanons, relationships and personality.}}
Chapter 1

His earliest memory was of an embrace. He remembered being tucked into the crook of a warm, comforting neck, his chubby fist gently gripping a handful of long dark hair. A ponytail, perhaps, or a braid. Arms not quite big enough to hold him, but determined nonetheless to keep him safe and secure. Steady steps that jolted him gently. Little huffs of breath warm into his hair, but there was not a single word of complaint about how heavy a burden he is. Why would there be a complaint at all?

The first thing he remembered, his earliest memory, was of his brother holding him.

It was the simplest thing to call to mind, his brother’s constant presence. He could not remember the face of his mother, and even the photographs of her could elicit any recollection from Genji of who she might have been. No smell, no lullaby, no hands. He was young when she died. Young enough that Hanzo had to step in to be the one who took care of him. Soothe his tears, chase away the nightmares, feed him, dress him, carry him around, make sure he listened when spoken to. It is Hanzo that Genji remembered. An ever-present figure in mind and memory, as well as daily life. He was always there. They were always together.

On festivals and quiet nights at home, when Father read them stories, when the kotatsu warded off the winter chill, when the sun was rising or when the sun was going down, and most moments in-between, the older would always find his younger brother clinging to him. Hand in hand, or fingers tucked in a belt or grabbing a sleeve. Sometimes, Genji would even curl up in his brother’s lap. The little one radiated warmth, and the big one quietly relished it.

Even the thunderstorm couldn’t keep them apart.

“Anija!” Sobbing, snot-nosed, his little white feet pounding against the floorboards as he climbed. Searching each room as the rain battered against the windows and the walls shook with each clap of thunder. “Anija!”

Higher and higher, he climbed and searched, calling for his brother. They’d taken Hanzo away for ‘an initiation’, but the storm was roaring and... He was alone. He was scared. He wanted his brother. He had to find him.

Up high, the very very top of Shimada Castle, Hanzo was shivering on the balcony, his hair plastered flat against his head and his face from the rain. He was pale from the cold, from the fear of high places, and even though he had been told the ritual was sacrosanct he opened his arms for his little brother without hesitation.

“Anija, I’m scared!”

“It’s alright, Genji. I’m here.”

Magic words that made the storm seem like just a passing shower, the crack of lightning like the flicker of lightbulb. But the thunder boomed, still, like footsteps of a kaiju getting ever closer. Genji clung to his brother, blinking against the rain, and Hanzo clung back, rubbing his shoulder.

Both brothers were breathless, then, when the storm took another shape. Breathless, but not afraid. Through the lightning and sheets of rain, something wild and ancient circled the building, swimming through the air with slow and ponderous undulations.

Genji pointed, staring at the creature, as it moved with all the grace and ease of a predator through the rain-sliced air. His brother shivered, licking his lips, swallowing a lump in his throat, and nodded
to the unspoken question. *Yes, brother. That is a dragon. A real dragon. Just like from the stories, but real.*

The beast gripped the balcony with clawed hands and lowered its head down to the two brothers, breathing over them. It was power incarnate, scales and whiskers sparking with light, its body composed of a tempest, its very being all starlight and knowledge. Its tail flicked, and the storm raged louder around the castle.

Genji reached up. The dragon snorted, and tilted its head away in irritation, refusing to be petted by a child. Hanzo grabbed his brother’s arm and pulled it down, murmuring a frightened admonishment: *don’t touch the dragon, Genji.*

“Why not?”

“Genji.”

The tempest beast tilted its head further, then resumed circling the two children. But now there was a strange new quality in the light and the scales and the tempest. There were not one but two dragons, swimming side by side through the storm, around the castle roof. One faster, one slower, until they formed a circle, chasing each other’s tails at equal speed.

The boys stared. Hanzo touched the mon on his chest, eyes wide with understanding. Even if he had not been prepared for this strange new aspect of the ritual, even if he had not been told this would happen, he knew what it meant.

For hundreds of years, the two dragons had only been seen on the clan symbol. Never together. They always came alone. But now, for once, they coiled and swam together, the perfect mirror images of themselves. One blue, one green.

Both beasts coiled closer, before both reared up over the huddled boys. The new dragon had flickers of St Elmo’s fire over its scales and whiskers, and it tilted its head this way and that like a curious bird of prey. Genji took his hand back from his brother, and raised it once more, this time towards the newcomer.

In fear, the elder tried to pull his brother into his arms, out of harm’s way. “Gen-“

The fiery dragon huffed a breath, then leant forward, pressing its massive snout into the tiny hand. The storm rumbled around it, low and long and content. Like the sound of a purr. Genji laughed, and rubbed the dragon’s snout until it clicked its teeth at him.

The starlit dragon huffed at Hanzo, deigning to move closer as its sibling did. Deigning, even, to lower its head, to accept with grace the hand that Hanzo shakily extended to rest on its snout. It flicked its tail, and there was lightning, before it gave a rumble like thunder, but more alive. More alert. It huffed again, and Hanzo closed his eyes as he felt the dragon’s raw energy wash over him, filling him. Genji did the same, but his jaw was dropped in glee and wonder, his breath quick as though he had just run a lap of the castle grounds.

When the two brothers stared, in silent awe, the dragons breathed with them, against them, inside them. The storm was no longer beating merely against their skin and flattening their hair. Now it was inside them. Part of them. Power infused limbs and excited their blood. Electricity tingled through fingertips and straightened their spines. The winds coiled and crushed, and in their minds’ eye the brothers could see the paths that the winds travelled, from one end of the world to the other. They could feel the smothering press of clouds and the bite of ozone, and the strange foreign pull of the world’s magnetic currents. They saw the world below them, not as any would see on a map, but in
glowing flight-paths carved by the passing of centuries of the migration and passage of the dragons.

The boys were not shown the past, or the future. The storm had a different kind of wisdom to impart that night.

The dragons bid the brothers to rise, and both boys took their stances on the rain-slicked roof. They had been taught this exercise in motion since as soon as they could walk, and every morning they greeted the sun with these smooth motions of limb and posture, a silent dance. It was what they had been taught, though they knew not the reason why. The ‘why’ was answered, now.

The dragons twisted and pulsed through the air, and the boys moved with them. Their motions were too smooth and practiced for any nine- or six-year-old, but they had the storm in their veins tonight. They moved, they acted, they mirrored on two feet each graceful swoop, bare of fang, or flick of claw. The winds buoyed and buffeted them, but it was as though each wind, raindrop, flash of light, rumble of thunder were music and audience and guide and teacher.

The brothers were moved, together, in harmony, in balance, until the storm clouds faded and moved on, and the skies grew dark and still all over again. Only one or two stars, here, in the busy electric world of Hanamura, the calm evening that smelled of damp earth and washed-clean streets. Then there they stood, in silence, as water dripped from the eaves, and the sound of the city reasserted itself over the night. All was calm. All was normal. All was as it had ever been.

Almost.

Genji sought out his brother’s hand, and Hanzo squeezed tightly. The blaze in their eyes - one set blue, one set green - were already fading.

“… anija?”

“Yes, Genji?”

“… I’m hungry. Can I have some daifuku?”

Hanzo smiled to himself. He stared up at the stars for a moment longer, then looked down at his little brother. Genji smiled hopefully back.

They went downstairs to look for sweets.
Chapter 2

He was always loud, always active, always in a rush, always wanting to play, always underfoot. There was a question about whether this wildness came from before the dragon, or if the power woke something in him. ‘Genki Genji’, they said, in various degrees of exasperation, as they chased him through the halls, or coaxed him from the trees, or tried to get him to sit still while he ate dinner. He was a tumult, a whirlwind of passion and energy. He would cry loudly, laugh louder than that, shout and whoop and always speak his mind.

Hanzo could get him to sit still for a while. Goro could make him keep utterly in place.

“They were brothers. One of the north wind, and one of the south wind...”

The Shimada patriarch’s affection was honest and genuine, even if occasionally he seemed baffled by his children, by the idea of raising them alone. Not that they were alone. There were servants and tutors, bodyguards and uncles and cousins, and the elder brother who took care of the younger. But the children needed a father. He did his best to be one, for all that the business was his main focus. For all that fatherhood troubled him.

He told them stories.

Genji would listen, wide-eyed, as Father told tales of mystical beasts and old heroes, of the rich history of their homeland and the potential for greatness past, present, and future. All the stories were lessons, yes, but for a boy too young to understand them at anything other than face value, they were marvels.

Father had spoken about the dragons. And the dragons had been real.

Goro’s stories filled Genji’s head with fancies. The boy would sleep and dream of flight, of running over a vast ocean as though it were a plain of blue grass, buoyed up by only the summer breeze. He would climb the trees to see as far as he could, and imagine crossing those vast distances in long strides. He would stare at the mountain, and the sky, and way out towards the sea, and he would bounce where he was sitting until he could sit no more. And then he would run and scream once again, wearying those around him before he himself would tire. And even then, not for long. Genji had too much energy in him.

Goro found a solution entirely by accident.

Time watching television was rationed out, as a treat for the boys who had studied hard, or who had spent a day in training enough to impress their tutors. Hanzo preferred to read; Genji sprawled over the entire couch whether or not his brother was there. Today, the elder brother was frowning into a book in the other room, the wood-screen door slid open so he could keep an ear out for his younger brother. The television shows bored Genji: adults who spoke too slowly and loudly, puppets with googly eyes and gaping mouths, trying to teach him what he had learned already (how to count, how to read, colours and numbers and animals, the importance of good food and exercise, the history of Japan). He wasn’t supposed to, not without his tutor’s permission, but the tutor was not here, and Hanzo was not paying attention, so he changed the channel. And then again. And then again. Flick, flick, flick.

His father watched from a gap in the screen, cigarette cupped in one hand against the wind. The flame of the lighter burned out, forgotten, as Goro watched his youngest son.
A loud sound, an explosion, a whirring helicopter crashing into the side of a building. Genji sat forward, gaping, staring. Utterly still. There were people leaping down from the debris, landing in dramatic poses, while things caught fire around them. They all had swords, all were dressed in outfits that combined the traditional with the modern; they had billowing capes and scarves that caught the light in vibrant colours. They were surrounded by enemies, and with yells and coordination, they charged into battle with their foes.

He could not keep still. Genji jumped up and started swinging the television remote around, shouting along with the heroes, mimicking their vicious strikes and leaping and stomping into the same poses.

“Kuru nara koi!” He shouted, in time with the leader, then with the second in command, “BUKKUROSU ZO!”

“Genji, you’re noisy!” Hanzo called, not even looking up from his book, with the fatigue of a brother who was used to repeating himself and still being ignored. And, sure enough…

“FUKUSHUU WA ORE DA!”

“Genji!”

“What is this noise?” Goro entered the room, unlit cigarette still in the corner of his mouth, though the lighter was slipped into his billowing sleeve. The brothers both quieted at the same time, Genji guiltily dropping the remote control and climbing down from the couch. Goro made a point of staring down the boy, then looking at the television. “… ah, I see. An interesting adaptation. But I think the original films were better. Still, the yamato-damashii is good. Just the kind of thing you should be watching.” He tucked the cigarette back into the enamel case, tucked it into his belt, and then looked down at his son severely, arms folded. “Genji. Show me your stance.”

Genji blinked, then took the opening stance of Rising Dragon. The exercise he hadn’t understood, the one that he and his brother had mastered after countless mornings before the sun rose, the one that served both of them well on that night with the storm and the dragons.

But Goro shook his head, waved a brocaded sleeve dismissively. “Not that one.” He pointed to the television. “That one. Stand like a hero, Genji. Show me how you would do it.”

Eager and confused and afraid in equal parts, he picked up the remote control, holding it like the hero held his katana. “Like this…”?

His father grunted, moving forward to kick at the boy’s toes, to bend down and press a hand to his son’s stomach and shoulders. “Straighten your back! Head up. Eyes scanning the horizon. Shoulders down, save your energy. There. That is better. Now my son almost looks like he could be a real warrior.” He stroked his chin. “Or he could be… Perhaps I should arrange for some training for you, boy.”

Genji, holding the pose, trembled with excitement. “Really?”

“Of course!” Goro shook a finger, smirking. “You are a Shimada. And you are a son of Japan. That makes you twice the warrior as anyone else.” He leaned down, his expression grave as he studied his son. “You will master the sword, and the bow, and martial arts styles. You will learn to speak different languages. You will not just be smart, but you will be cunning. You will be strong, you will be fast, you will be unbreakable.” He gestured to the television, to the character portraits that slid past as the credits rolled. “They are a team. But you must be an entire team in one single person. It will be a lot of work. You will need to study. You will need to train. You will have to work hard. You will have to leave behind a lot of childish things. But you have the power of the dragon in you,
Genji, so I know you can do this. You will become a man, and you will be a great warrior.” He leant back, folding his hands in his hakama sleeves. “That will make me proud.”

Genji stared up at his father, eyes wide. He swallowed, first, but the excitement was too much to contain. He nodded, fit to make his head fall from his neck. “I will do it! I’ll be a warrior! I’ll make you proud, tou-san!”

“Yes. But not just any warrior. A Shimada warrior. You and your brother both with grow up to be great men, and will make sure that the order and prosperity that our family has brought will endure for all the generations. Isn’t that right, Hanzo?”

The elder brother had put down his copy of Sunzibingfa. “We will bring honour to the clan.” There was a slight dubious glance to Genji, as though the ‘we’ was suspect.

Genji didn’t notice his brother’s pointed look. His eyes were fixed on the television, on the heroes who stood silhouetted by the setting sun. He moved into the next stance, sweeping the remote as though he were sweeping a blade. He was still; only his eyes were afire.

“I’m gonna be a Shimada warrior!” He yelled, changing stance. “Shimada Dragon warrior!”

Goro smiled. You cannot stop a storm from breaking. But you can redirect the lightning.

“Yosh.” The Shimada patriarch clapped his hands together, the signal for the end of discussion. The final word had been spoken and the matter was sealed. “Hanzo! Come over here, boy. The light is too poor to be reading, and you have studied enough for tonight. Tomorrow, you will start your training for real, boys. But tonight, let’s all watch a movie together, as a family. Genji, give me the remote.”

The screen flickered in black and white, rough huts in a field of wheat, men on horseback, peasants bowed low in the dirt in fear and grief. It was an old movie, Goro explained, old even when his father was young. The technology to capture such a story had been replaced a hundredfold, but the story would always be strong, always resonate. He narrated and clarified, impressing little insights and explanations for the sake of his sons.

Hanzo watched, intently, nodding, committing it all to memory, smiling when his father ruffled his hair. Genji did not squirm, not even once, as he cuddled up against his father’s left side. Under his ear, he heard his father’s heart beat, while on the screen the drama of life and death, love and grief, duty and honour, all played out in shades of grey. He perked up, more than once, to hear his own name used. The name of the hero had his name, their name, the name of the clan. Their name was in the story. Their name was part of it.

Genji fell asleep, as the credits rolled. In his dreams, a green dragon ate a bowl of millet. Its tail flicked impatiently; it had been fed, and now it wished to act. The north wind blew.

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**Chapter notes:**

- I held a vote to see if this chapter was expanded beyond this scene or not. It was a close vote, but ‘post now’ won out. Expect the next chapter to be longer, as a result.
- The name Goro came from another work of fiction, Hanzo: Koi no Yokan by franklytriggering. I honestly tried to find a different name that would fit, but none of them worked as evocatively as ‘Goro’ did. I will try to keep the puns and references to the number ‘five’ at a minimum, but I do like wordplay, so…
- Yamato-damashii, the ‘soul of Japan/Japanese spirit’, is a term that refers to the cultural and
social values of the Japanese people. It, in relation to the Shimada history and the world-setting of Overwatch, will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter.

- The movie they are watching is The Seven Samurai. The anime that Genji was watching is up for discussion: I might have thrown in a little Super Sentai/Power Rangers, Cowboy Bebop, and Final Fantasy vibes, but I did not specifically choose one show in particular. But after the cultural revolution in the wake of the Omnic Crisis (again, wait a few chapters for an explanation!) I am sure that there would be plenty of heroic television shows written and broadcast for Japanese children.

- As the chapters get longer, there will be plenty of callbacks and references, not only to works of fiction and history, but to symbols and recurring themes within the narrative. I hope you enjoy.
Chapter 3

The school was a stark white building, all squares and corners, walls and windows and a high wall. Six towering pines lined the main walk up to the building, symbols of constancy and pride, growing here from even before the Crisis. There were so many students, Genji’s age and older; the school was a large one, combined shōgakkō and chūgakkō. Even though Hanamura was not a large village, it had many children; most, if not all, studied here. The Shimada brothers would be no exception. Genji squeezed his brother’s hand, and Hanzo squeezed back, both of them excited and nervous about their first day of school.

Hanzo was supposed to have started a few years ago. But he had refused to go, and Genji had cried when he had been told that he would be alone all day, without his brother. Faced with such a unified front, Goro Shimada had no choice but to keep Hanzo at home, and to let Genji sit in on his brother’s lessons. Hanzo would start school when Genji did, three years later, but both of Goro’s sons would be more than ready for the academic life ahead of them.

Goro never spoiled his sons. Indulged them, maybe. But they understood that every allowance or granted request had to be repaid. So they knew, so they promised, so they worked hard to deserve all they had been granted.

And now, here they were.

“There are so many girls!”

Hanzo smirked, amused that this should be the first thing his brother noticed. There were women at the castle, the maids and the gardener’s daughter and even a few of Father’s own guards. But girls? No, no girls. Small wonder Genji’s eyes were popping out of his head. He might as well have been lead into a grove of unicorns.

He was troubled. “… aniki, I don’t know which one I’m going to date.”

“Boke,” Hanzo nudged his brother roughly, trying not to laugh. “Focus on your studies. You’re too young to be dating. Besides,” he added, breezily, in an attempt to distract him, “If you date one girl, you’ll just make the rest jealous. And that wouldn’t be nice.”

“Then I’m going to date all the girls.”

Hanzo sighed wearily. The plan had backfired. “No, that would make all the boys jealous.”

“Then I’ll date them too!”

“Genji.” He stopped, and kneeled down to be at Genji’s eye level. “Genji, no. You can’t date your entire grade.”

“Why not?”

“Cheeky little sparrow.” Hanzo ground his fist into Genji’s hair.

He wriggled free. “No, really! Why can’t I?”

When the bell rang, they had to be parted. That was hard. Even with the assurance that his brother would still be in the same building, just a few levels over his head, it was hard for Genji to let go, and to face the day alone.
Desk all in neat rows. The teacher’s desk. The chalk board. The windows and the sliding doors, shut tight. All of them squares, corners. Boxes. Genji felt boxed in. Caged. It felt wrong to be in a room that did not smell of paper and straw and wood. This was tougher, stronger; concrete and plaster. His leg bounced uncontrollably under the table, as he tried to focus on the teacher and the other students. First day of school. He wasn’t the only one nervous and out of place. But he felt so strongly. He always had.

It occurred to him quite quickly over the next week that he was not normal. Not in a bad way, just in a different way. Normal children don’t have bodyguards waiting outside the gate for them before and after school. Normal children don’t have maids to make their bento or to press their uniforms. Normal children didn’t have limousines or private tutors or strict exercise regimes. Normal children didn’t have the power of the dragon in their hearts.

It felt like a secret identity.

It made things easier, then, to think of himself that way, helped him to sit still and concentrate, to relax and say hello to people, to make friends, to not be afraid of the teacher. Here he was, a son of Japan, pretending he was just like anyone else, while deep down he was super-special. Genji told his father that, after school.

Goro had laughed, and tousled his son's hair. "Really? That sounds like a very good way to think of it. A secret identity… hah! Yes. Perfect."

Hanzo had wrinkled his nose, perplexed, all-knowing as any ten-year-old. "Everyone knows who we are. It's not a secret."

"Maybe," Goro nodded, smiling. "But do they really know you? Who you really are?"

"I'm a warrior," Genji had said, determined, wolfing down his snacks, cheeks bulging.

"So you are," Goro laughed again, then sat back to nod at the instructor, to watch his sons being taken off to finish their homework and then begin on a study of the family tree. "And so you will be. Make me proud, my sons."

Genji made friends quickly. He liked normal people. They had so many stories to tell. They were so different. They were so real, as real as the stories told about dragons. Having lots of friends around made it easier to focus on the day, but he always ran to hold his brother’s hand when they left the school. Hanzo always squeezed back.

The elder brother didn’t seem to have any friends waving goodbye or saying ‘see you tomorrow’. Maybe they were in class, trying to study so they’d be as smart as Hanzo was. Because Hanzo was definitely the smartest. He knew so much, and Genji was always in awe of the things his brother knew.

“They’re an American invention. They’re not real.”

A weekend watching Father’s favourite movie, and Goro had mentioned - with some disdain - the American remake, the one with cowboys instead of warriors.

“No real?” Genji leaned around to look at Hanzo. “But they’re on the TV!”

“No not everything you see on television is real,” Goro ruffled his son’s hair.

“There are people who take care of the cows,” Hanzo said, brushing dust from his hakama. “But they are ‘vaquero’. From the Spanish word for ‘cow’. The Americans took the idea of the Spanish
cattle-riders, and put it on the television. *Ne, tou-san?*

Goro nodded, gravely. “They did. Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, and all the rest… Not real cowboys. Just actors. The Americans always do that. They find a story they like, or a picture or an idea, and they take it. Paint it white, pretend it always belonged to them.” His brow furrowed, jabbing his finger at the television. “But it belonged to us first, boys. Never forget that *this.*” he pointed again, insistently, “Belonged to us.” He bit back a curse, standing up, rolling his shoulders. “I need a smoke.”

Genji watched his father leave, then looked back at his brother. “*Vakeeroo?*”

“*Vaquero.*”

Genji’s nose wrinkled. “Vak… eeroo.”

“The Americans couldn’t pronounce it either. So they say ‘buckaroo’.”

“B…” His eyes lit up. “*Bakaero!*” Genji laughed, delighted.

“Yes,” Hanzo nodded. “Cowboys are stupid.”

Genji snickered, then he looked at his brother in seriousness. “… Dad doesn’t like movies about cowboys…?”

“The movies are fine,” Hanzo said, promptly. “What Dad doesn’t like are Americans.”

“Why?”

“Because they stole from grandfather. And they killed great-grandfather.” His brow furrowed. “They are not to be trusted. They’re liars and thieves and killers. Always have been, always will be. Dad says so.”

Genji looked back to the television, to the fight caught mid-swing by the pause button, a sword raised and a grimace of effort captured in black and white. Outside, their father smoked, breathing away his anger and frustration into plumes that hung in the early summer air. He coughed, slammed his fist against his chest, took another deep pull of the cigarette. The tip glowed like a firefly. Brighter than that. An ember, a flare of dragon’s temper. Contained, restrained. Another plume hit the air, and for a moment Genji could see his father’s dragon silhouetted within. Teeth snapping, claws flexing, tail flicking.

“… sorry.” Hanzo reached out and ruffled Genji’s hair. “I upset you.”

“It’s okay, Han-kun. I’m not upset.” Genji leant against his brother, seeking comfort from the bad news, the bad thoughts. But now that there was one, more of them started to appear, like clouds that gather on a day before a storm. “… hey. Hanzo? Do you like school?”

He considered the question, eyes shifting to the television. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

The younger brother squeezed his arms tight around the elder. “You don’t seem fine.”

“… I don’t like it,” he admitted, stroking Genji’s hair. “It’s boring. I already know everything. And all the people they… they look at me like I’m going to hit them.” He breathed a sigh out through his nose. “… *this* makes me happy.” He squeezed his sibling in a one-armed hug. “Being home, here, with you and Dad. Using the sword, and the bow. The cherry blossom trees. These clothes.” He extended his arm, shaking the sleeve of his yukata. “So much more comfortable than the uniforms,
ne? All the modern stuff… I don’t like it.” He rubbed his face. “… maybe it’s because of the dragon. Do you feel queasy, when you’re in class? Or in the car?”

Genji frowned. “Sometimes,” he said. He’d never noticed, never even thought about it.

But it seemed to be the right thing to say, because it made Hanzo relax. “We were not meant for such mundane things. We’re dragons. We’re Shimada. Once we’re grown up, it’ll all feel better. It’ll all make sense and everything will be right.”

“Anija?”

“Mm?”

“What does ‘mundane’ mean?”

It meant boring. Normal. Average. Not very interesting. It was a shame that Genji could not have a ‘mundane’ life, because he was learning so much whenever he was in the middle of it.

When the third-year girls started picking on Sumiko, he sat with her at lunchtime and got her to teach him how to do his makeup. She turned pink and told him to stop being a silly boy, but who could resist his pleading eyes? Eyes which looked so much better when lined in black and touched with the colours of the Shimada banner? She taught him about colour and line, and how to put it on and take it off himself, and laughed whenever he told her he liked looking prettier than anyone else in the school.

When Ryouichi came in with no bento and a cut lip, Genji shared his meal, a portion cut unfairly in the other boy’s favour. He had a notebook covered in stickers that Genji didn’t recognise; within a week of asking about it, the two of them would read smuggled manga between classes, swapping DVDs for the weekend, sharing an enjoyment of the escapism that the stories in ink and animation provided. More stories to make his head spin, to fill his dreams with colour and impossibilities.

His classmates lived all over Hanamura, from the outskirts where the farms clung to fertile soil to those tall buildings near the city centre. They liked food and music he had never heard of, enjoyed hobbies in their free time he never would have considered. He talked to them, just so he could listen. He was friends with the grocer’s daughter and the baker’s son and the twins from the laundromat and the youngest child from the family that owned the trout farm in the hills and the oldest child of the noodle-delivery man. There was no reason to doubt his sincerity; he genuinely wanted to know them all. In knowing others, wouldn’t he know himself better? Himself, and the world?

‘Genki Genji’ exasperated his teachers, at first. So many questions, so much to ask. He made his classmates remember their lessons because of an interruption or a question that made the whole class laugh. Or, sometimes, stop and think. But he soon learned to save his energy for other things, for lunch breaks and after school and for the clubs and for all the training at home. The school days were so trying. Sitting still and listening made him want to squirm and run and scream. But he had to, because Father told him to. Father wanted him to be a warrior, and all the best warriors had a secret identity. This was going to be his. He would endure the boredom of sitting still in class, listening and writing about things he already knew or understood too easily, because there were all these people around him. He was one of them. Shimada Genji, student. Just a boy from Hanamura, one child among many.
"You need to stop shouting your attacks," Hanzo said, exasperated, as he let his brother up from the floor.

Genji wriggled his way back upright, adjusted his belt, then took his stance again.

Hanzo mirrored him, and they circled the room, facing each other. Dark hair, white *kekogi*, orange mon. "It makes it really easy to figure out what you're doing."

"Maybe I'm just being nice to you," he laughed.

"You need to keep every advantage you have," Hanzo said gruffly. "You're smaller than me, and not as strong."

"But faster! Vicious Western STRIKE!"

Hanzo moved his leg an inch to the right, then threw all his weight down onto his younger brother, his hair swinging out behind him like a silken rope. A swift pin, sacrificing grace for brutal effectiveness; Genji squeaked as he hit the floor.

Hanzo sighed. "... told you."

"Don't get mad at me because I'm cooler than you."

"Only winners get to decide what is cool." Hanzo noogied his brother into the tatami. "The makeup makes you look like a girl."

Genji turned his head and batted his eyelashes. "Am I prettier than you, hime-san?"

Hanzo sighed, and stayed seated until Genji's whining about needing to breathe became unbearable. Only then did he let him up. "Try not to shout at me this ti--"

"Surprise Dragon Lunge!"

---

The teacher raised the flag, *Kote*.

Behind his mask, Genji grinned. Another point in his favour. The third-year he was fighting made a small nod of a bow, before he and Genji both backed off, to ready themselves once again. *Shinai* raised, poised to strike. Waiting for the signal, to continue their training, their duel. Other students watched, either readying to join in, or just part of the Kendo Club's audience. A hush would fall over the hall, until the *kiai* burst out like a clap of thunder.

"MEN!" Genji's *shinai* tapped sharply over the helmet of his opponent. No harder than it needed to be, though he did tend to call his attacks with more volume than was strictly necessary.

Kendo club was a natural choice. He already practiced with the sword at home. The teaching was similar, too: an emphasis on discipline and focus. He was faster, fitter, more eager than others his age. Than most in the school. It gave him an advantage that he tried not to use too often, but... he did like to win. But even better than winning was taking part. The armour felt good; sure, it might have been padded cloth, but when he was older he'd have one made of steel, like from the old books and Father's stories. A samurai.
The helmet was his favourite. He'd wanted to wear a mask for a long time.

"Why would you join the cooking club?"

Genji took a deep breath, shifting his weight from foot to foot, starting the training dummy's featureless face down. "Because of all the cute girls. And the food. And all the cute girls giving me food."

Hanzo watched his brother, arms folded, scrutinising Genji's technique. It was hard to find fault; the Shimada brothers had discipline drilled into them. Genji would stop shifting, going still, then raise his blade in both hands. After the stillness came movement, swift and sudden. The dummy lost its left arm.

At school, he used shinai. At home, katana. It was just the way it was done. All part of his secret identity.

"We don't need to cook. We have servants for that."

"You don't need to learn Korean." Genji almost sounded accusatory.

"It'd be useful for business, Genji. For working with father." A heavy emphasis on the words, trying to impress on his brother just how important that was.

But the younger brother, as usual, seemed flippant, missing the point... or finding some other point entirely. "And I'd be able to make cakes for him, okay? And maybe for you too, anija, if you'd stop being so sour." He twirled his sword before sheathing it.

Hanzo scoffed, and brushed his hair out of his eyes as he took up his own sword. Eyeing down the crippled training dummy with intense focus. "I'm not sour."

"Whatever you say, hime-san. But I still think a few sugar cookies would sweeten you up."

The head of the training dummy bounced and skittered across the tatami mat. Hanzo was laughing too hard to follow through.

He wasn’t laughing a few months later, when he found his brother in the kitchen, chatting to the maids, radio blaring. “What are you doing?”

The maids bowed and swiftly withdrew, while Genji continued to focus. “Cooking.”

Hanzo looked at the pan, the sizzling chunks of chicken still pink at the heart, then at the roughly-chopped vegetables. The carrots were no surprise, but he raised an eyebrow at the second. “You hate bell peppers, sparrow.”

“Yeah, I know.” His tongue stuck out the corner of his mouth as he focused on cutting the vegetable into uneven pieces.

“... so why are you...?”

“Because the teacher loves them,” he says, exasperated. “Almost every savoury dish has bell peppers in them. Everyone loves cooking with them.” He squints, angling the knife. “You know they’ve got
more vitamin C in them than oranges? They’re really good for you.”

“I could have told you that.” He reached up and ruffled his brother’s hair. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I did. But you ignored me.”

“Yes, I was a bratty kid,” he said, breezily, batting Hanzo’s hand away. “But now that I’m ten, I gotta be a man, right? So I need to get over the things I didn’t like as a kid.”

Hanzo smiled to himself. “… hey, boke, you need to cut everything to be the same size, or it won’t cook right.”

“I’m working on it,” he growled softly.

“You’re too slow. Your chicken is going to burn.” The elder brother grabbed another knife. “Move over.”

Orange and green vegetables, artfully diced, tumbled into the pan. Two cups of water, next, carefully poured. And then, from a box on the counter, Genji crumbled in a brick of hard-packed brown powder.

Hanzo had been incredulous. And more than a little disgusted. “You’re using packet sauce?”

“I’m easing into this whole ‘eating bell peppers’ thing, Hanzo.”

“That’s lazy.”

He shrugged. “Hey, if I don’t like it, it’s not like I’ve wasted a lot of money or effort, right?”

“Tch.”

It was delicious. Even Goro had to agree, when he came to investigate Genji’s loud whoops of triumph and was presented with a bowl.

The substitute teacher blinked in surprise. “What are these for?”

“They’re a gift!” Genji grinned. “To welcome you to the school, and to thank you for coming to replace Ms Otomi on such short notice. Welcome to Hanamura,” he bowed, “And thank you for being our teacher today! I look forward to many more lessons!”

He left the basket of sugar cookies in the man’s hands, leaving the teacher’s lounge but not quite sliding the door all the way closed as he left.

“Strange boy,” Mr Iwasaki chuckled, before he turned to the rest of the lounge. “Is this normal? For the students to make cookies for the teachers?”

“A recent development,” Mr Ito smiled. “The younger Shimada boy seems to have taken quite well to Home Economics. He’ll make a good wife someday.”

There was a ripple of chuckles through the room. Some of them were just polite, or nervous.

Mr Iwasaki stared, suddenly cold. “Wait. Shimada? That boy… is a Shimada?”
Ms Okabe gave a sympathetic smile. “I know. Shocking, isn’t it? You’d never know he was yakuza. He can be a little disruptive in class, sometimes, and a little loud. But it seems like he has a good heart.”

“… I don’t think I can eat these,” Mr Iwasaki said, looking at the basket of sugar cookies in distrust. Perhaps even fear.

“Oh, they’re fine.” Mr Ito waved a hand. “He’s made them for us before. They’re really good!”

“You don’t understand. What that family has done… I was there in Tokyo. I was just two streets away when it happened. I thought it was an earthquake…”

Genji drifted away from the door. He didn’t want to hear any more. It felt like he had heard too much. All the world was grey and cold, and his footsteps did not echo down the halls. It was so quiet. His body felt so heavy, and yet so light at the same time. Gooseflesh pricked across his arms.

If he started running, would he be able to stop? Or would he just keep going, until he hit the sea, and the breezes carried him over the water, far, far away? Or would he fall, and drown? Drowning must feel like this. To not be able to breathe. For it to be getting so dark.

“Yakuza?” He whispered, perplexed. Frightened.

Ken and Honoka were waiting for him, outside the school gates. Tall and immaculate in their dark suits, the limousine parked just behind them.

Genji noticed, as though for the first time, the tattoos on his hand and the knuckle missing from her little finger.

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**Chapter notes:**

- More development about Hanamura and its infrastructure will follow in later chapters.
- I had already written several kendo-related scenes before Blizzard released the Halloween update and showed Genji wielding dual shinai. After the recent Sombra update has (probably) spoiled one of the future scenes I have written, I have been told to ‘write faster’, so that my story gets out before anything else is made canon (or stricken from it). I will try to do so.
- Childhood is over. Teen Shimadas in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

In the right place, the wooden boards creaked like a nightingale. Genji took care where he stepped, his body moving in slow and graceful motions, shifting his weight from toe to heel, foot to foot. To cross the Shimada compound unheard took the grace of a dancer.

The temptation to add in a few chest rolls as he went, like a classic Jpop dancer, was intense. Somehow, he resisted. But only barely. There was a rhythm to moving silently, and it worked best to music. He was silent; the music blared only in his head. His own personal soundtrack.

He’d almost reached the door when there was a gruff interruption.

“Boy!”

Genji winced. Caught. He knelt, one fist on the ground before him, head down and staring at the pattern in the mats below him. Just when he thought he was doing so well…

“… nothing to say for yourself, Hanzo?”

He licked his lips. “It’s Genji, sir.”

“Genji? … Huh. Your tread is like your brother’s.”

He gave a sheepish smile, still staring down at the floor. “Guess I’m better than I thought, huh?”

Goro slid the balcony door open, tilting his head in a quick ‘come here’ gesture. Genji rose from his crouched place on the floor, and joined his father. It was a beautiful night, the skies clear and cloudless. From here, they could look down from the heights of the castle. Before them, the wide spread of farmland, pastures, orchards, before the landscape changed to roads and apartments and densely-paced buildings, connected by the whiplash-fast monorail lines and lit with bright electric lights in defiance of the darkness. Lights so bright the stars above were dimmed. Shimada Castle had pride of place over Hanamura, both the village and the city. And the mountain watched over them all.

Genji pulled a packet from his coat, tapped it on the balustrade until a cigarette came loose, and put it between his lips.

“Sir,” Goro snickered. He cupped his lighter around his own cigarette, puffing until the flame took. “If only you walked on eggshells as well as you walked around the house.” He offered the lighter, holding the flame steady for his son to lean into. “What’s bothering you?”

The younger son took a deep pull, feeling the smoke go deep down into his lungs. He tilted his head back, breathing the smoke out into the shadows of the valley, then lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Not much.”

“Is it school?” He snapped the lighter shut, tucked it back into his sleeve. “Hanzo thought you might be struggling.”

“School’s fine.” He flicked ash off the edge of the balcony, and was pleased to see his father do the same. They matched, mirrored. Like father, like son. “Same old, same old. You know my grades are good. If this is about me worrying about Hanzo moving on… We’re in the same building, even if he’s in chūgakkō. I’ll catch up to him.” He gave a lazy grin. “It’s only a matter of time.”
“How things change,” Goro grunted, amused. “I remember the day you realised that Hanzo would always be three years older than you. You burst into tears because you would never be the same age.”

Genji threw back his head and laughed. He remembered the story, and even remembered the tears. He’d wanted so much to be like his brother, but Hanzo would always be just three years ahead. Such an injustice! “I was such a stupid kid!” As though it were not just eight years ago.

“Heh.” Goro blew a plume of smoke into the dark. “Alright, so, not school. So what else is there? Troubles of the heart?”

Genji wrinkled his nose. “Too much love in me for trouble to take root, tou-san. Why the worry?”

“Because Hanzo said you’re not yourself. And I’m inclined to agree.”

“While we’re talking about him, Hanzo also said I should take this down.” He grabbed his phone, flicked through to the video site, and held his phone out for his father to see.

Goro raised an eyebrow. “Tanuki-gi Cinnamon Challenge. Nearly a million views?” He leant forward to watch, while Genji grinned and took another pull from his cigarette. Soon, the patriarch was laughing, as muffled coughs and shouts and curses blared from the phone. “You dumbass.”

Genji just grinned.

He gestured to the screen with his cigarette. “What’s with your fingernails?”

“Oh, you like it? I just had a tea party with Kasumi. She wanted to fix my makeup, too, but I drew the line there.” He shuddered. “She had glitter.”

“Good to hear you’re getting on with your cousins.” He smirked, taking another drag. “Only the ones worth getting along with. She’s a cutie. And she’s going to be devastating when she grows up.” When the video ended, and his father’s chuckles had run their course, Genji lifted the phone and waggled it at eye level. “Hanzo said it was embarrassing, something about a bad mark on the clan’s name. So should I take it down, or…?”

“Hell with that, you won.” He flicked a hand, a gesture both grandiose and dismissive at once. “Keep it up. Show them how it’s done.” A faint smirk. “The ‘Tanuki Boys’, huh? You formed a gang?”

“We just needed a name for ourselves, tou-san.” He tucked his phone away, took another brief puff at his cigarette. “Otherwise, we’re just some teenagers, y’know?” He grins. “You’d have to have real balls to make a gang in this town.”

Goro laughed again.

They smoked together in silence for a moment, flicking the ash over the balcony, blowing the smoke into the night air, watching it drift until it faded into the dark.

But just when Genji thought his gentle deflections had been enough to save the night, Goro rested a hand on his shoulder. “You still work hard. You still study hard. You’re still attending the clubs and functions like you’re supposed to. You still are one of the strongest in the clan… and you’re still my son. But there’s something that isn’t right.” He peered into his son’s eyes. “If there is something wrong, Genji, you need to tell me.”
It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, to lay it all out in the open. But could he? Did he dare? ‘Yakuza’, that old-fashioned, treasonous word. That’s not what he was. That’s not what they were. Was it? Was it, really? It had taken him months to try and bury but, but it seemed like burying it wasn’t an option. The deeper he went to try and hide from it, the more he dug up. How long before he was in a hole he couldn’t climb out of?

“… is it about the argument you and Hanzo had yesterday?”

Genji winced, and leant on the balcony, making the most of what was left of his cigarette. From fire to pan. Not exactly saving grace, but better than nothing.

Yesterday. The brothers had archery practice in the yard. They’d been surrounded by eyes and ears, watching their progress, but this had been the only time Genji had built up the willpower to try to turn to his brother for help. For answers. Hanzo was smart, he’d know what to do. He’d know what to say. How to help his brother deal with confusion and doubt. But Genji couldn’t just say it out loud. So he’d tried to sidestep, easing into the conversation.

He talked about classes. Classmates. Approaching graduation. He’d chattered, words light and airy as the bowstrings twanged and the arrows thudded into the straw targets on the other end of the yard.

“… but why English, Genji? Any commoner can learn English.”

“C’mon, it’s the third most important language in the world.”

“So why not pick the first? Or the second?”

“Hah, please. Chinese doesn’t interest me, and when am I ever going to need Spanish? Spain’s on the other side of the world. So that leaves English.” He watched his brother draw back and fire, and whistled in admiration as the arrow thudded into the target. “… you know, I’m thinking about studying law.”

Hanzo did something he’d never done before. “You? Law?” He scoffed, dismissively.

The bowstring had been taut, the arrow ready to fly. But Genji had eased back on the tension, lowered the weapon, and looked at his brother. “Yes. Me. Law.”

Hanzo had hesitated, on seeing the hurt expression on his brother’s face. “That doesn’t seem like you,” he murmured, eyes sliding back to the targets, his fingers brushing over the fletching of his arrow.

“What do you mean, ‘it doesn’t seem’,” he stared his brother down. Incredulous. “You know my grades.”

“It’s not just grades,” Hanzo still wouldn’t look up. “You know you’re not…”

“Not what, Hanzo?”

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t even look Genji in the eye.


“Genji, stop it.” Hanzo had tried to turn away. “I don’t mean any of that. I didn’t mean to say…”

The younger brother had thrown down the bow and arrow on the grass, storming away with his
hands in the air. “Forget it! Forget I said anything.” He left the yard, left the castle, went straight to
the arcade until his temper was faded and his money was spent. Until he, too, was spent, and tired.

Hanzo had never been dismissive of him before. What was high school doing to him, that he would
just say something like that? Or even think it? Three years, three years was the only difference
between them. How had it made a gap so wide?

Genji forced himself out of recollection. “Hanzo… He’s been talking to you. But he hasn’t come to
see me.” He glowered out at the night.

“You lost your temper,” Goro said, evenly. “No surprise, for a dragon. But you need to learn when
such things are inappropriate.” He planted his hand on Genji’s head, ruffling his hair. Even if he had
to reach a little higher these days, it was still the same gesture of affection from father to son. “Don’t
fight with your brother. You’re family. Now…” He gave his son a small shove. “Go and talk to him.
He’ll apologise, he means to. But it’s hard to apologise to someone who storms off and refuses to be
found, ne?”

Genji sighed, chastened, as he stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. “Yes, tou-san.”

“Sparrow.”

“Yes?”

“Will you be studying law, when you get to chūgakkō?”

Genji frowned, rolling his shoulders. “… probably not.” He couldn’t possibly consider it, now. Not
when the word and Hanzo’s scoff were so entwined in his memory. He told himself it was fine; it
was just the beginning of a conversation. It wasn’t like he was actually planning on ending up in that
career. No. It was fine.

Goro tsked. “Don’t let this sour your future. If it’s what you want…” He paused, to cough, to slam
his fist against his chest before he recovered. “… You should seize it. The world is yours for the
taking.”

The words hit a little too close to home, to the doubts he cradled close to his chest. But he smiled,
anyway. “I’ll share it with my brother. Goodnight, dad.”

He let the floor sing as he left. There wasn’t much of a tune in his own head, anymore.

The desolation from the Omnic Crisis had been healed as best as it could be, in less than a
generation. But there were places not even the determined and resilient people would build. They
clustered their cities thickly, around landmarks like castles and shrines and places of historical
importance, but the battlefields where omnic and human had fallen in great number, they left to the
wilds. Grass and deer and birds and trees would flourish where nuclear radiation (and superstitious
dread) made human habitation unsafe.

Some places straddled the border of this, the safe and unsafe, the sacred and the profane. A few
hours east, in the next prefecture, there was a shrine that had much green around it, trees and wild
beasts claiming the hilly, forested turf. The old shrine had hosted crowds before, in ages past. It still
stood, for the prayers of the faithful and provided awe and wonder for tourists and children.
Important families and foreign dignitaries had walked this soil, had sat to watch displays of skill and
traditional rituals. Today, there were no foreigners. Only the Shimada Clan.

It was a perfect day, bright with sunshine, the air brushed with floral scents and the passage of
meandering butterflies and swift dragonflies. Genji huffed and puffed, while his younger cousins counted down from twenty, shrieking with delight and amusement. It was not easy doing pushups with a passenger sitting on his back, but what better way to train than with the family?

“Yosh’!” He laughed, sprawling face-down on the floor. “That’s you done, Naoko. Let your sisters have a turn. Oof! Careful! Don’t poke me!” As soon as the twins were settled, he braced his hands against the floor. “Count from twenty! Ready! Set! Go!” He started doing pushups again, while two four year olds shrieked and laughed from his back.

Incense swirled out from the door of the shrine, the prayers and rituals complete. The grounds had been swept, paths made for those to walk between the main building and the compound where food and drink was being served. The gravel-strewn parade grounds been set up with rails of hempen rope, and plywood shelters with comfortable chairs. The shelters were wrapped in cloth of orange and white, the colours of the clan; as if it were not clear enough to a casual observer, the geometric patterns of the family crest were woven into most of the prominent places. Banners. Flags. Jackets. Fans that fluttered against the late-spring heat.

Only a special few were allowed to wear the mon as it had been in days of old.

“Nineteen! Twenty! Yosh’!” Genji collapsed. “The train has reached the station, please disembark carefully!” He lifted his head, and saw a pair of feet that certainly did not belong to anyone under the age of ten. “… and it looks like that was the last stop for the train, for now. Sorry, everyone!”

“Genji.” Hanzo smiled faintly as he looked down. “Why did I know I would find you with the children?”

“Because I’m the cool cousin.” He offered a fist bump each to the twins, who giggled and fled shyly. Genji shrugged, and fist-bumped himself, then pushed himself to his feet. “And I’m just letting them remember why they love me so much.” He grinned, and wiggled his fingers: his nails were painted again, a dark green this time.

Hanzo snorted. “Such a child.”

“Hey, I’m thirteen. I’m a man, now.”

“Yeah, sure.” He laughed, and Genji grinned along with him.

Today’s events called for traditional clothing, and Hanzo looked great. In contrast to the hall of Shimada men and women in embroidered kimonos, Hanzo chose simpler colours: the clan’s white and orange, and a charcoal brown. He suited the simple, elegant look, and with his hair half-down like that, he almost seemed like a prince from the old days. His keiko-gi proudly displayed both Shimada symbols, mon over his heart and geometric crest to the right.

Genji couldn’t remember seeing his brother look more relaxed to be in public.

Hanzo offered his hand, helping his brother stand, then wrinkled his nose in barely-repressed amusement. “Why are you wearing this?” He flicked his brother’s forehead.

Genji huffed, adjusting the zukin, making sure it was secure. He couldn’t afford for it to fall from his head. It had been a real bitch to wrap up and make sure the scarf didn’t slip, and it was even more of a bitch to keep his head covered. His could feel his hair getting sweaty, and it was awful. “Because I wanted to.”

“You’re the furthest thing from a monk,” Hanzo smirked. “Aren’t you hot?”
“I am hot!” Genji posed. “But that’s not something appropriate for a big brother to say.”

“Boke.” Hanzo laughed, punching his brother in the arm, laughing again as Genji overreacted to the strike. “I meant, it’s a hot day, sparrow, and we’ll be riding soon. You’re going to overheat.”

“Tell that to everyone wearing more than three layers,” Genji nodded to the nearby hall, where family members mingled and chatted, where sake was poured in large quantities. Chilled, of course. “I’ll be fine… like I said, I’m the cool cousin.” The word was so fun to say, a fun twist to the tongue and a purse of the lips.

Hanzo laughed again. “Don’t let dad hear you using English. Especially not here.”

“Urgh,” he throws up his hands. “I thought you came over to say ‘hi, Genji, I brought you a snack’ or something, but now you’re acting like Uncle Ken. If you’re not careful, you’ll grow the same eyebrows.”

“God, I hope not. For either of those things.” Hanzo puffed a short laugh. “But you know he hates being called ‘Ken’. Keep your voice down, he might hear you.”

“If he doesn’t, then his cherry-blossom daughter will.” His cheeks puffed out, and he frowned. “Did you see her? A year goes by and bam! She’s all grown up.” He could see her, in the main hall, in black and red, standing with her father. Her face was painted in an expression that was supposed to be serene but just made Genji feel ill. The look was too mature, too sharp, too… perfect. He scratched his chin, then fixed the cloth of his zukin again. “Just like Uncle Ken, only more smiles. A snake hiding in a lotus, ne?”

“Like mother,” Hanzo said softly, adjusting his bracers.

“Mother wasn’t like that,” Genji said, attention snapping immediately to his brother.

“How would you know?”

Genji froze, and Hanzo flinched. The younger brother tried to school his expression, to hide the hurt, but judging from the look on Hanzo’s face he was - no, they both were recalling that argument, the loss, the way something had changed between them, even after the awkward apologies.

“Suman, I…”

“No, you’re right.” Genji adjusted his own bracers. “… I wouldn’t know.” He paused, took a breath, and looked up. “Do you think she’d be proud of us? I mean, we’re horrible bratty teenagers, but…”

Hanzo’s lips tugged to one side. “… Yeah. I think she would. Even though you’re still such a child.” He punched his brother lightly on the arm. Genji punched back, and the two brothers smiled. Crisis averted. Friendship restored. No fighting necessary.

“… you came to look for me.” Genji tugged at the fabric of his zukin, under his chin, fixing it for the umpteenth time. “Why’s that?”

“To remind you that we’re riding today.”

Genji flapped a hand. “Yeah, I know. It’s why we’re here.”

“We’re here to make a good impression, sparrow.” His voice remained gentle, but from the raise of his brow it was obvious he found this testing to his patience. “We’re the heirs to the castle. So make sure you’re on time, alright?”
“Yeah, yeah, hime-san, I know.”

“Eleven thirty.” He ground his knuckles into his brother’s scalp, ignoring the way Genji tried to shove him off, and smirked as he chose to leave in his own time. “Don’t be late.”

“I hear you!” He grumbled, and tried to fix his headgear. “Urgh!”

Hanzo laughed.

But he wasn’t laughing later.

“Sumaaaaaan.” Genji slid into the stables, arms full of the bow and arrows that had been left for him in the tent next door. “Okay, I’m here, I’m ready, we can start now.”

“Start?” Hanzo hissed the word through his teeth. His horse stamped her foot impatiently, sharing her master’s mood.

“Yeah.” Genji looked around, shouldering his quiver. “… where is everyone else?”

The elder brother looked like he wanted to tear his own hair out. Or maybe Genji’s. “They already rode! It’s twelve o’clock! You are late!”

“Sorry,” the younger brother gave a sheepish grin, pulling his horse from the stall, hurriedly checking the saddle. Huh, Hanzo must have done this for him, because it was perfect, and... everyone had gone, except his brother. He blinked. “… you waited for me?”

“Of course I waited for you,” Hanzo snapped. “I couldn’t let you embarrass our father.”

He winced. “I have a perfectly reasonable explanation.” And he did, but it didn’t look like he’d have the time to explain.

Hanzo’s temper made the air ripple around him. “Why did you do this, Genji? Today, of all days? This isn’t a game! What we do here reflects not only on our abilities but also on the honour of our household and on the very Shimada name…”

Genji had knelt to check the saddle was fastened tight. When he stood, something on the edge of his saddle snagged the zukin. He leant back, and the tightly-wrapped scarf pulled in the other direction, unravelling completely. Genji sighed a quiet curse.

His brother was not quiet at all. “What the fuck, Genji?!”


If Hanzo had been angry before, now he was also horrified. “Your hair! Your hair is green!”


If Hanzo had been angry before, now he was also horrified. “Your hair! Your hair is green!”

“Now you know why I was dressed like a monk,” Genji muttered, despairing. It wasn’t working: the fabric which had been so starched and proper first thing in the morning was now refusing to sit in place. It kept slipping, refusing to hold to his head, let alone stay in place as a zukin. “Shit.”

“Why is it--?!” Hanzo’s eyes flicked in terror to the doorway, to the roped-off grounds where the entire clan sat and waited to witness the two sons ride. “You can’t go out there like this!”

Genji gave up. The scarf was too fiddly, too loose, to take zukin form again, and there wasn’t time to make it obey. “I’m going to have to.” He threw himself into the saddle. “C’mon, Haru!”
“Boke! No!” Hanzo lunged forward, trying to grab the saddle, but Genji had already dug in his heels. The mare tore down the run, while Genji grabbed an arrow and tried to steady it in his hands. Haru was so fast, so eager, Genji barely had time to draw the bow back before the target was right in his line of sight.

“In-yo-in-yo!”

The arrow hit the target with a loud bang. Anyone who wasn’t paying attention would certainly be watching now; the turnip-headed arrows were designed to make a scene. Out the corner of his eye, he could see faces turning his way. There was Goro, ignoring the conversation he was in to watch intently. Genji grinned to feel his father’s eyes on him.

As he steered Haru with his knees, Genji was pleased that he hadn’t missed the target. Nowhere close to a bullseye, but he had two more shots. “Ha,” he urged Haru to turn, nocking and drawing an arrow as the horse rode again, picking up speed.

A shrine seemed like a perfect place to send up a quick prayer. Don’t let me miss. He didn’t know if there was anyone left to listen, these days, but better safe than sorry.

The world shrank away to just him, the horse, the bow, and the thundering that could be hoofbeats or heartbeats or both.

Deep breath.

Pull.

“In-yo-in-yo!”

Bang.

This shot was better, closer to the heart of the target. One more. This time he was determined to impress.

It was a hot, still summer day, but as he braced himself at the end of the run, he felt a cool breeze tousle his hair. Through the heat haze, he felt something burning under his skin. Something attentive.

“Ikuze,” he muttered, drawing his last arrow.

Haru moved in obedience, head down and charging. The power of the dragon rippled under Genji’s skin as he drew the string back, and he could see flickers of green fire sparking along the sleeves of his keiko-gi. It was here, it was with him, and it was happy to answer his call.

“IN-YO-IN-YO!”

There seemed to be an answering shout, a rippling ethereal roar. The arrow flew, trailing green sparks, and when it struck the target there was not a bang but instead a clap of thunder. Some of the ladies shrieked, someone barked a nervous laugh, someone dropped a dish or glass that shattered almost musically. The branches of the trees rippled with a wild and sudden wind. Genji grinned as he kept riding, a hand reaching to pat his horse’s neck, his scarf trailing out behind him like a family banner. Caught up in the storm, for a brief moment, and exulting in it.

The eyes of the Shimada clan were on him. The mon on his back, though merely stitched into his jacket, felt like a shield. In this moment, this beautiful moment when his body sang with the dragon’s power and his head was filled with joy, there was no room for doubt. This was his family. This was where he belonged.
He rode his horse up to the edge of the viewing booths, grinning and winking. Haru even pranced, picking up her hooves and bobbing her head as the pair of them strutted past. Those who had never seen the dragon had nothing but awe and questions for him. It seemed his performance was more than enough to turn things around. It was as though he had never been tardy.

His cousin in red-and-black hid her scowl as he approached. “You look like a carrot,” she said, making sure her voice was low.

“Fresh and tasty,” he grinned, gleefully rubbing his triumph in her face. Her attempt to stall him, to stop him from even riding today, had been thoroughly foiled. He had ridden, he had proven himself more than capable. “A product of good Japanese soil.”

Her lips thinned, and she flushed at the indirect accusation. “Such good earth is wasted on men like you.”

“Oh?” He leaned down to smile at her, and the dragon’s blood chilled in his veins. Cold as the northern wind, though he kept his innocent face. “And what men would it be good for, then? Your father? Shimada Goro inherited the castle, little flower; it belongs to our branch of the family. That’s not going to change.”

The look she gave him said ‘wait and see’. He pretended he didn’t see it: hoofbeats were breaking out once again, from the stables. Hanzo was riding.

“ANIJIA!” He whooped and cheered from the sidelines, grinning. Haru stamped her hoof and bobbed her head, whickering in excitement.

Hanzo did not shout as his brother did. He murmured the phrase that tradition demanded, as he drew back his bow and fired. Bang, dead centre. The wind whipped his hair back out of his face as he turned, steering with his knees. He was so steady and still, a master of horseriding, focused solely on nocking and drawing. His aim didn’t waver. Another whisper, as he drew and fired. Bang, another bulls eye. His gaze so steady, so focused. Just one more arrow to go. He and his steed turned at the end of the run, then charged once more, moving in perfect rhythm.

Genji watched his brother’s lips moved, whispering along with him. In-yo-in-yo.

Bang. A third bulls eye. Simple and efficient. The best anyone could have hoped for. Nothing could be better proof of a warrior’s skill than their use of the bow in such a way.

Genji stood up in the saddle, whooping with joy. “Anija! That’s my brother! That’s my brother! Whoo! Anija!”

As Hanzo rode past, he tried to give his brother a withering look. But Genji’s whoops and cheers were infectious. It was all the elder brother could do to roll his eyes and fight not to smile.

Genji sat back, smiling, watching as his brother went to bow to the elders. They were all so proud. The heir to the clan, strong and steady and undistracted, proving his worth on holy ground ten times over.

“If only your father would look at you in such a way,” his cousin murmured, sweetly venomous, before she slipped away. “Ah well. We can’t all be the favoured children of our fathers.”

Haru rumbled, a horsey sound that seemed almost disapproving of the young woman’s comment. But the strike had found its mark, for all Genji wished it had not.

Hanzo would make Goro proud. But Genji…
He ran a hand through his hair, gripping tightly at the bright green locks for a moment, before he sighed and let his hand drop. “… Haru. C’mon.” He turned her down to the end of the run. “Let’s do it, just like we practiced.”

Sake was being poured in honour of Hanzo’s victory when the sound of hoofbeats came through the air once more. Faces turned. Someone shrieked in alarm.

Goro laughed, long and hard.

Genji grinned from on horseback, hands braced against the saddle and his feet and body straight up in the air over his head. Completely steady as he did a handstand on the horse’s back, his scarf billowing out behind him.

Goro grinned. "I have such talented sons." He laughed again, lifted his sake cup as Genji rode off the field, and drank. And then he laughed again, the sound so merry and real that there were tears in his eyes, and held out his cup for more.

Hanzo looked at Goro’s smile. The elder son’s brows furrowed, before he had to look away.

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Chapter notes:

- This chapter was supposed to be longer, made up of seven parts. I had to save the other five for the next chapter.
- The younger brother crying about not being the same age as his older sibling is anecdotal. My own brother was once inconsolable for three days for that very same reason.
- There is a 'singing floor' - uguisubari - in the Nijo Castle, Kyoto. If Shimada Castle can have a sparrow, why not a nightingale?
- Yabusame was a samurai pastime. It seemed fitting to let it be something the Shimadas would lay claim to. (I was tempted to mention Nasu no Yoichi, a Genji warrior who was made famous by archery, but Hanzo won this particular competition :)
- For those with the skins, Young Genji and Young Hanzo are the ones on display today. Barring a few details, like the climbing hooks on their feet and Hanzo’s tattoo - those will come later.
- I avoided the symbolism of the chapter number. We'll have plenty of pain and death as we go along.
Chapter 5

On the days when Shimada Castle was open to tourists - a compromise between the clan, Hanamura and Japan’s tourism industry - the family went elsewhere. The Shimada family had no shortage of holdings, particularly in this prefecture, though the castle was theirs and theirs alone. Genji liked Block 27, with its sleek and modern design, the big glass windows, the huge Western-style rooms (and the huge Western-style bed). Hanzo didn’t; it was sheer necessity that they were here, in these decadent apartments. Where they belonged was the castle.

True enough, and no arguments there, but Block 27 could still be home, when occasion called for it. It was also a better place, in Genji’s opinion, to store all the stuff he owned.

In his apartment, the master bedroom was plastered with posters of movies, TV shows, rock stars, celebrities both real and animated; a massive corkboard was covered in photographs of his friends and classmates, mostly cheek-to-cheek selfies, or group shots outside arcades, sports venues, in the karaoke rooms; a couple larger shots of himself and his brother, his father, or both had their own frames, their own places to stand. The bookshelves overflowed with manga and well-bound editions of classic literature, stories of heroes and villains, tales of valour and honour, and a good number of cookbooks. Glass cases filled with figmas and collectibles. One entire table was piled high with pachimari, a nest of claw-machine trophies. His closet spilled over with unfolded laundry, suits and uniforms and cosplay and casual wear that had only been half-heartedly organised. Shinai and bokken leant together with hockey sticks, his skates in the same careless pile with his shuko and ashiko, and all his cosplay props and convention souvenirs scattered and stacked in-between. This was the room of a teenager with lots of friends, lots of hobbies, and hardly any patience to be tidy about it.

Genji frowned slightly, in thought. It was essentially perfect. Now he had to figure out where to hide his porn.

It had taken him a long time to set this room up to be not only a functional place to hang out and chill, but also part of his ‘secret identity’, a concept that had stuck with him since he couldn’t remember when. But now more than ever it was important to make sure the image he presented was flawless. And if he was a teenager, he was bound to have porn hidden somewhere, right? All his friends had boasted of their interests and their stashes, even in the online age; he had to look as normal as they did, for anyone who came to rifle through his possessions.

And there had been people doing that, already. Whether they were employees tidying up or perhaps spies sent by other branches of the family, there had been people in his room while he was not present. They’d been careful, but he knew his environment; he was a dragon, and this was his territory. He was going to be prepared for next time… especially if he invited friends over to just hang out. It was far better to have something planted, something that will serve as a distraction from whatever they were really looking for. Just because he was a Shimada didn’t mean he wasn’t also just a boy from Hanamura.

He tapped the magazines in his open palm. Under the bed, perhaps… no, wait. Under the mattress. The big Western-style furniture was good for more than just lounging on, after all. It would be close enough for it to be easily accessed by the bed’s inhabitant, and yet out of sight. Close to shame, but not out of reach of anyone except a saint. Perfect.

The magazines were new, a random assortment he’d grabbed at the convenience store before the bodyguards came to whisk him home from after-school practice. He hadn’t actually looked at what he’d bought, but now that he had the time and privacy, he might as well. He sprawled out on the
bed, and started to flick through them.

Huh. Muscles like that were simply for show. Maybe the guys could lift their own body weight, but their fitness was just for preening and posing. They wouldn’t last a round in the dojo, let alone in bed. Genji snorted. The next was a little more promising. The curve of hip bone and shoulderblade, bodies glistening from exertion, hair tousled and careless as his own. Their bodies were lithe and arched like dancers, and… wow, he didn’t know the human body could bend like that. He’d have to try that. Then there were the girls, seated and splayed and arching, eyelids drooped and thick lips parted, their skin smooth and unblemished as though they were plastic dolls. Regardless of their gender, there was something all the same about them, and it was more than just the glossy paper.

“Sono teido ka?” Genji sighed as he opened the centrefold, chin resting on his hand. “There’s no mystery to you.”

The blonde vixen stared back at him from the opened page, tongue caught between her teeth, the flesh of her very generous breasts spilling out from between her fingers and palm. He held her gaze, frowning slightly, then glanced down at the magazines in haphazard array around him. Was this all there was? This was what people liked? He was baffled that anyone could like these static images. Just… pictures. No conversation, no playful teasing, no foreplay. Just… sex. Or the promise of it. All without ever coming in contact with another living person.

“Must be lonely,” he murmured, meeting the centrefold’s eyes again. “… Does anyone ever talk to you?” He cocked his head, thoughtful, rolling his tongue in his mouth. There was no mystery here. … or was there? No-one ever knows you, after all. No-one ever really knows who you really are.

He imagined the girl’s expression dropping from kittenish to exhausted as soon as the cameras stopped snapping, and the way she reached for a bathrobe and rubbed the afterimages of the camera’s flash from her eyes. She’d move away from the velvet curtains, bare feet padding over the concrete floor to where she stashed her phone, her purse, her clothes.

What’s your name?

She’d look up, started, and eye him like she was personally offended to find him there, and then the outrage would be hidden behind a cool and impersonal stare. None of your business. Wow, what an accent.

He’d laugh. I’m just curious. Let me see… blue eyes, blonde, those lips and cheeks… You look like an Ashley. He’d frame her between his fingers, like a photographer would.

She’d roll her eyes and look down at her phone, texting someone. Or pretending to text, so he’d leave her alone.


I don’t care.

What if I buy you dinner? Would you care then?

A pause. She’d look up, and squint at him. Suspicious. What’s his game, she’d wonder. She’d try to figure him out. But he’d have his most charming smile on, hands outstretched.

Just dinner. You can ditch me after I pay, I don’t mind. You just look like you could use some company. And I’m good company, I promise. He’d smooth a hand through his hair, tilt his head, and wink. Really good company.
Oh, she’d still be suspicious. But he was charming, wasn’t he? And he was not trying to peer down the front of her bathrobe, like others might. His eyes won’t have left her face. Let me get dressed. See you in five. A small pause, and the smile would curl at the corner of her lips as she issued a challenge. And I’m vegetarian.

He smiled back. “No problem.”

It probably would have been an interesting date, but Hanzo chose that moment to burst in without knocking.

“Where’d you put th-- what the fuck, Genji?!”

Genji scissored his legs in an attempt to sit up, hastily gathering the magazines into a pile, trying to shove them under the pillows and explain it wasn’t anything like it looked like it was, but Hanzo gave an outraged shriek and charged forward. As typical of fighting dragons, there was a lot of screaming and shoving. It was hard to defend himself one handed, which gave the elder brother a distinct advantage. Genji gave a woof, winded, as Hanzo planted his foot hard in his brother’s gut; the younger toppled from the bed, gasping, while the elder gathered up the magazines, rage in his eyes.

“I’m telling dad.”

“Don’t you dare.”

He dared, running out of the room with his ponytail flaring out behind him.

“Fuck!” Genji stumbled to his feet, gasping as he tried to catch up. He tripped over his backpack, losing a few more precious seconds. “Anija! HANZO!”

In the lobby he paused. The door to the stairwell was closed. The elevator was near the ground floor. But the window was wide open. With a stifled curse, Genji braced a hand on the frame and threw himself outside, keeping a tight grip until his feet and free hand found the outer wall of the building. And he started to climb, hand over hand, finding every little ledge and tiny handhold, in the way the Shimadas had been trained.

Hanzo’s grip was less sure, with the magazines tucked awkwardly in the front of his shirt, but he had a head-start. He was vanishing over the lip of the penthouse balcony just as Genji caught up to him.

Goro watched in amusement, leaning on the railing. “And here I thought this would be a quiet weekend,” he murmured, half to himself, as he took another pull on his cigarette, and smirked as the smoke plumed from his nose.

“Not as far as the sparrow is concerned.” Hanzo tossed down the magazines at their father’s feet.

“I can--” Genji vaulted the balcony, and gave a smile that was closer to a grimace. “Explain.” He shot a glare to Hanzo, who stared haughtily down his nose and through his bangs right back. The ‘big brother knows you’re in trouble’ look. Genji wrinkled his nose defiantly, then looked back at Goro with concern. “I can explain.”

The Shimada patriarch bent at the waist, gathering up the magazines. He straightened up, brushed his hair back, and looked over the assortment of coverboys and girls. A thick eyebrow raised, and the cigarette tucked in the corner of his lip dipped low. But he still said nothing, his gaze moving judgementally between his youngest son and the magazines.

The silence stretched on, before he sighed, heavily. “You can keep these,” he tossed two of the
magazines back to Genji. “But I want you to develop better taste.”

“Father.” Hanzo stared in something like outrage.

Genji grinned, rolling the magazines and tucking them into his back pockets. “Yes, tou-san.”

“Don’t look so smug,” Goro growled, suddenly, in the tone normally reserved for business-table negotiations. He shook the other magazines at Genji. “I raised you better than this. Or at least I hope I did.”

Genji dipped his head, ears tinged pink from shame, and mumbled something respectfully apologetic. Hanzo looked vaguely mollified.

Their father huffed, rolling the magazines and driving them into the large, sand-filled ash-bin, where they stood like incense sticks. The lighter clicked, and warm orange flame quickly chewed through the glossy paper, sending flakes of ash to fly. Goro watched a moment, arms folded, then sighed and turned back to Genji.

“You need to understand something, sparrow. You can love who you like. You can fuck who you like. As long as you do your duty to the clan, and produce suitable heirs, then I don’t mind. … Within reason, of course. I should hope you at least understand that much.” Under furrowed brows, his eyes almost seem to gleam, and his lips almost pull to one side in a smirk. “White people should be your last resort, and only if they’re not American.”

Hanzo shut his eyes and hissed a sigh through his teeth, looking utterly defeated.

Genji stared at his father, then looked at Hanzo, feeling like he was missing something. “Uh. Okay. Sorry, tou-san.”

“Not sorry enough. Get dressed up nice, you two.” He straightened up, adjusting the cuffs of his suit - Italian silk, privately commissioned bespoke tailoring - and swept a hand through his hair. “You need a little education. Clearly, I haven’t done my proper duty as a father, so tonight? I’m taking you somewhere you’ll learn to appreciate the right kind of taste a Shimada should have.”

Genji blinked and tried to figure out if this was a joke.

“… why the both of us?” Hanzo almost seemed to whine. “Why do I have to be involved?”

“Because I’m your father and I said so. Downstairs in twenty minutes.” He clapped his hands. “Go!”

They went, and they returned in suits to match their father’s. Old money and modern-day style. The limo was waiting, and their father smirked as he ushered his sons inside, Genji bewildered (and a little frightened, deep down) while Hanzo scowled and pouted and dragged his feet and slumped and glared the entire trip.

Their names were Hidechō, Kimiyakko, and Tomogiku, and they bowed deeply to welcome three such distinguished guests to their humble ochaya. Humble it might have been, but it was well-lit and the streets were clean and the kimono they wore would have cost a small fortune each. Goro was in a very good humour, greeting the young women all by name, introducing his sons, and trusting himself and his boys into their care. He was even grinning as he grabbed Hanzo by the shoulder and lightly shoved him towards Hidechō.

Of course Hanamura would have a hanamachi, but even after taking a seat and having a drink poured for him Genji was still certain this was some kind of mistake. But no, here they were, Goro laughing and joking with Kimiyakko, Hidechō trying to make Hanzo feel less tense by offering
murmured appeasements, and Tomogiku smiling and sending little flirtatious glances from under her sweeping eyelashes. She flashed her wrist every time she reached to pour his tea or suggest a wagashi to try, and it was odd how such a simple thing made Genji feel a little flustered.

Goro smirked in approval over the rim of his teacup. “Now you’re learning, sparrow.”

“Uh.” He looked up at his father. “I am?”

“Nowhere else in the world is there beauty like this.” He gestured to the three women serving them. “Sure, there are pretty things everywhere, if you want to go looking. But this is the beauty of your homeland, and it should always call to your heart. First and foremost, son, this? This is what should wake passion inside you. Remember that.”

Tomogiku smiled demurely, giving Genji another careful sideways glance, and this time Genji smiled back, the expression feeling clumsy and childish on his face but he didn’t really care.

Goro chuckled, then grew serious and turned to look at his other son. “Hanzo.”

“Yes.”

“Go home.”

“Yes! Yes, father!” He scooted back from the table, like a startled dog finally let off a leash. “Thank you!” He gave Hidechô a belated bow, as though remembering he should have been a little more polite about not wanting to be here. She just looked at him in wry sympathy. She even patted his arm gently before he got to his feet.

“And take your brother with you.” Goro tossed back his drink, and held his cup out for a refill.

“Wh-what?” Genji’s head snapped around, losing sight of Tomogiku’s wrist peeking out from her silken sleeve. “Why? Why do I have to go?”

Goro grinned. “I had to punish you in a way you’d feel most keenly, or it wouldn’t be a punishment at all, and you wouldn’t learn anything.” He saluted with his teacup. “Ja ne.”

“Come on,” Hanzo said, still all sour grapes, practically dragging Genji out of the room, “We’re going now.”

They didn’t go home straight away. There was a bar a few blocks down, one that - thankfully - didn’t question that the Shimada boys were underage and not supposed to be here. Hanzo ordered shochu and sulked in a booth. Genji drank his beer and threw darts, quietly marvelling how efficiently their father had handled that whole situation.

Genius. Dick move, maybe, but... genius.

He paused, flicking one of the darts between his fingers, and leaned against the table. “Okay, so, can we talk about what just happened?”

“No.” Hanzo glowered through his bangs. “We’re not talking about this.”

“Because I have to say--“

“Genji, I swear to god, if you keep talking, I am going to punch you in the dick.” He downed his glass, and poured another.

Genji flicked the dart, not particularly aiming. “Okay, but... I get why I’m here, but why did he
make you… Oh. Oh, god.” He grinned suddenly as the realisation hit. “Dad caught you with porn, too, didn’t he?”

“Genji.” A warning glower. A touch of pink to his ears.

“He did!” The younger son almost crowed with laughter. “Hah! So that was punishment for the both of us! That’s why he made you come along! Hah!”

The elder drew back his hand, clenched it into a fist, and muttered, “Right in the dick, boke.”

Genji took a casual step or two out of range, forcing himself not to laugh aloud. Beer. Darts. Silence. Eventually Hanzo lowered his hand, and focused on his drink.

“… okay, but, can we talk about the fact we left Dad alone with three really beautiful --”

“NO, GENJI. SHUT. UP.”

“… should have sent them to a ladder school where they would have learned to be proper representatives of your household and your name.”

“They’re hard enough to raise as it is,” Goro rumbled softly, good-naturedly. He had no reason to sound steely in his own castle. “Can you imagine what they’d have been like if they were spoiled brats?”

“They are spoiled!” Ken’s voice raised, fractionally, the frustration evident in his tone. “Your boys are the talk of the town. All that they do, all that they get away with.”

“Mostly Genji, I assume,” Goro said dryly. “You know that boy has always had a lot of energy to burn, but he never means any harm.”

“Both of them. You already have Hanzo sitting in on meetings with you with the rest of the elders, and he isn’t nearly of age yet. You always, always find your way of flaunting tradition, ‘Takeru’, and I cannot abide it for much longer.”

“You know why he’s there.” This time, there was a hint of more than just casual patience in his tone. “We are not discussing my eldest son.”

A short hiss of frustration through his teeth. “So then, are we speaking of your youngest? You admit there is a problem with him?”

“No. No problem at all.” A small shrug. “I think he is as fine a Shimada as his brother is.”

“Fine? Perhaps, if you intend for that precocious… fellow… to have a life as a kitchen-hand.”

“Do you know how much a teenage boy eats?” He chuckles. “If he’s paying for and making his own food, it saves me the expense of the extra kitchen staff.”

“You should be mindful that you’re raising two sons, not a son and a wh--“

Genji slid the screen door open, and smiled amicably. “Hi, Uncle Ken! I thought I heard your voice.”

Goro hid his smirk behind a sip of his sake.

“Tou-san, can I come in?”
“Of course, sparrow. This is a family meeting, after all.”

His uncle’s bushy eyebrows furrowed, but he restrained his fury. The cousins in the room remained tense, the guards even more so.

Genji shuffled over, on his knees. Like a good Shimada, he was in haori and hakama. The castle was no place to dress casually; traditions had to be maintained, after all. Especially amongst members of the family. Genji smiled at his uncle, as he placed a lacquer container on the table.

“I just came back from another day perfecting new cooking techniques, Ken. I’m sure you’ll be so proud to hear of my accomplishment. Who knows, maybe I’ll be a famous chef by the time I’m 25!”

“Cooking is woman’s work,” cousin Noburu muttered, softly, before Ken could shush him.

Genji just laughed. “Is it? Then why are the best chefs in the world all men?” He continued to beam, turning now to his father.

Goro inclined his head. “Good to hear you are focused, sparrow. With your dedication, you’ll be a star in no time.”

Ken scoffed.

“Oh, but I haven’t gotten to the best part, yet. You see, I’ve started learning to prepare fugu.” His smile remained, but as he turns back to look at his uncle, his eyes are a little less merry. “Not an easy thing to master, I hear. At least three years of training is mandatory, for anyone who wants to be certified, and there is a very strict examination process.” Genji slid the lacquer container towards his uncle. “But I know a precocious fellow like me will do just fine.”

There was a heavy silence. A knife could have had trouble parting it.

“You always liked fresh fish, ne? I made this ten minutes ago, in the castle kitchens.” Genji’s lips curved slightly, and he proffered a set of chopsticks. “Tabesugimashou, Uncle Ken.”

The cousins cast nervous glances. The uncle was as still as stone. Genji wished he could see his father’s face, but from the soft sip that he heard, he could imagine there was a repressed smile.

“I have a lunch meeting,” Ken said, abruptly, rising to his feet. “I need to save my appetite for that.”

“Oh, leaving so soon, Oka?” Goro leaned one elbow on the table, chin resting in his hand. “But I thought we had much to discuss.”

“You know how the Germans are about punctuality.” He bowed stiffly, as though the depth required by tradition was painful. Perhaps it was.

Goro smiled pleasantly. “Congratulate Edward on his marriage for me, will you? And tell me if his wife’s as pretty as he says she is.” He waggled his cup in a salute. “Ja ne.”

Genji twirled the chopsticks in his hand as the room emptied: the uncle, the cousins, and the guards. It was so nice and peaceful when they were gone.

“Fugu, huh?” Goro set his empty cup aside. “Why’s that?”

“Yamato damashii,” Genji smiled. “It’s a dying art, father. Something that shouldn’t be lost. And I think it’s something I’d really like to learn.”

“Working with poison,” his father muses, giving his son a thoughtful look, “And skill and precision
with knives. Not exactly the realm of a warrior.”

“It’s all part of my secret identity,” he raised a hand, fingers splayed at eye-level in mimicry of a mask. “A warrior has many talents, doesn’t he? And a son of Japan should be a master of them all.”

Goro laughed. “Ha! Well enough, then. But you’d better pass with honours, sparrow, or I’ll be disappointed.”

“I hate disappointing people. Now,” he pulled the lacquer container back towards him, “Can’t let this go to waste.”

“Ah!” Goro put a hand on Genji’s arm. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“What? It’s not fugu.” He lifted the cover of the container. Inside, in a neat pattern, lay finely-sliced fish slices, drizzled in opposing patterns two different kinds of sauce: white and yellow.

“… it’s not?” Goro raised an eyebrow. “But you said it was.”

“Ah ah,” Genji grinned, waggling a finger. “I said I was learning how to prepare fugu. I said I made this ten minutes ago. I never said that this,” he pointed to the dish, “Was fugu. He just made that assumption on his own.” He snorted loudly. “I mean, fugu’s six thousand yen an ounce, you really think I’m spending that much on him? Besides, they wouldn’t sell it to me without a license.” A cheeky grin.

“Clever boy.” The Shimada patriarch laughed. “And here I thought I would have to reprimand you for threatening your uncle.”

Genji handed his father another pair of chopsticks. “I would have argued self-defence, anyway.” He narrows his eyes slightly, and stared out the open doorway. “… he’s been hanging around here a lot, lately. What’s going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Yeah, well, clearly I do, if my name gets mentioned.” He tapped his chopsticks and frowned. “… you’d tell me, right, tou-san? If you needed me for anything?”

“Oh course. Tabesugimashou, sparrow.” He chuckled, and helped himself to a slice of the fish. His eyes widened as he chewed.

“Sliced kingfish,” Genji said, proudly, as he picked up a slice of his own, popping it into his mouth and groaning in appreciation.

“What is that, coconut milk?”

“Coconut cream. I modified a Thai recipe, from a world-famous restaurant. My friend was so excited about it, from her recent trip, and the description made my mouth water. So, of course I had to make it. It was supposed to be coconut and lime, but I thought, you know what? Why not yuzu?” He grinned. “It turned out better than I thought.”

“Make this for my birthday,” Goro pulled the container closer, taking another slice between his chopsticks, and eating it greedily.

“But tou-san, wouldn’t it be threatening to have your son prepare fugu for your birthday?”

A gentle shove, and a ruffle of his son’s hair. “Fool,” he laughed.
He realised he’d been sticking his tongue out the corner of his mouth, and he laughed at himself. But it was done, and it looked quite impressive. If he did say so himself. With a smirk, he flicked off the radio, set the last few bowls in the sink to soak, and then carried out the tray from the kitchens.

The main hall was a flurry of activity, with banners and tables for the evening’s a banquet dinner, so Genji avoided that. Hanzo wouldn’t be found in the middle of a fuss. He preferred quieter places, higher places, places where he wouldn’t be bothered.

He spotted a tell-tale blue-tinged breeze, and headed over to the far side of the compound.

“Anija!” He waited a moment, head craned back. No response. “Oi, hime-san!”

Hanzo’s head peeked over the edge of the roof. “What is it, boke?”

Genji burst into song, loud and deliberately off-key. He had a good voice, but there were no lengths he would not go to, to bother his brother. “Tanjoubi omedetou! Tanjoubi omedetou!”

“Shut up, you’re so noisy.” But he was grinning.

And Genji could not be stopped. “Otanjoubi, Han-anija, tanjoubi omedeto!” He held out the tray for Hanzo’s inspection. “Come down and get your present.”

“You bought me a cake?”

The younger huffed as the elder jumped down from the roof. “Excuse you, I made this cake. No after-Christmas store-bought rubbish for my big brother, thank you very much.” He beamed and offered the tray. “Got all the ingredients from the local farms and stayed up all night to make sure it was perfect.”

“Boasting about it will only leave a sour taste in my mouth.” Hanzo grinned, and gave his brother a shove, then plucked one of the strawberries from the top to taste it. He looked immensely pleased.

“Everything except the chocolate,” Genji continued, eyes gleaming with pride. “I got some from Switzerland for you.”

Hanzo paused, and looked down at the chocolate disk on top of the cake. “Oh. Did you? That was nice of you.” His struggle not to look too excited was far too obvious; the trip to Switzerland was still clearly a high-point in his memories, and Genji was glad to have guessed rightly.

The brothers put their backs to a wall, sliding down to sit. It was a quiet, cool morning. The sky was grey with complete cloud-cover, the light glowing through both pale and bright; snow still lay on the ground, and the city was quiet far below the castle grounds. Sparrows peeped and bounced across the soil, woken from their sleep in the wall-hugging vines by the morning light. Some of them even spotted the cake and hopped over hopefully.

Hanzo plucked another strawberry to nibble on before Genji had the chance to flourish a knife and cut his brother a slice. “You shouldn’t eat too much of this, you know,” Genji said, almost sounding pious. “You’ll spoil your appetite.”

“I have a whole day of feasting and accepting thanks and praise from all of the family plus all of Father’s business associates,” the elder brother said mildly. “I need the energy.” He broke the chocolate disk into fragments, scattering them over the cake, then taking the biggest one for himself to eat straight away. A little happy grunt escaped him. “Real Swiss chocolate.”

“Happy birthday.” Genji smiled, and leaned against his shoulder.
He ruffled his brother’s green mop of hair affectionately. “The cake’s not bad. I can’t wait until I open the real present you got me.”

“Rude!”

“Heh.”

“… okay, well… I do have something else for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He opened the front of his haori, revealing a small envelope. “Kendo championships are next week. I’ll get getting my 3-dan. I want you to be there.”

Hanzo raised an eyebrow. “So… your birthday present to me is that I get to watch you perform.”

“I know, right? Best present ever!”

“Boke.” He shoved Genji, laughing, then held his hand out for the envelope.

Goro’s cough broke the calm. There was something about this winter that had made it worse. It was always deep, and chest, and vicious. Viscous, even. But it came with more frequency, lately, especially on cold mornings like this. The boys watched, sharing concern, but their father recovered. Trailed by guards and a few close friends, he was making an inspection of the banquet hall. He seemed quite pleased by the decorations. A laugh, a clap on the back for the head of staff, and… another coughing fit. He turned away, putting a cloth to his mouth. He coughed, and coughed, and winced, and reached out with his free hand to rest against the support beam.

He missed.

At the edge of the walkway, he pitched forward into the snow and the gravel. When he landed, he did not rise.

“Tou-san!”

The boys were on their feet and dashing across the distance, the distance which felt too long and too far even though they cleared it in a few bounds.

The winds shook the trees, howling. The sparrows took flight in fear.

The hospital waiting room was cold and stark, white as the snow falling outside. Men and women in black suits stood in formation all along the corridor, and in strategic places around the room. Nurses and orderlies kept their heads down, and pretended not to see them.

The boys sat together, faces pale and pinched. The younger had his head on the elder’s shoulder. The elder had his arm around the younger. They sat together, silent in their fear, waiting. Waiting.

When the doctor bowed with solemn face, Genji could not hold back a whimper, the prelude to a sob. But it was good news, as good as the news could be. Goro was awake. Aside from some bruises and scrapes from the fall, he was unharmed.

But the cause for his fall was as bad as it had ever been. And it was likely to get worse.

The boys moved together. Their father was sipping tea, his hair down, a plaster bandage across his cheek. He smiled to see them, and beckoned them over, rumbling something about how they worried too much. They took their places at his sides, Hanzo on the right, Genji on the left, just as they had
when they watched movies together. They were bigger now, these sons of the dragon.

Goro seemed smaller, wrapped in their arms, than he did before.

He passed Hanzo on the singing floor. He asked with his eyes, but the elder brother just shook his head and hunched his shoulders, moving onwards. Under his heavy tread, the nightingales sang.

Genji moved lighter, as though the noise frightened him.

“What is it, boy?”

“It’s Genji.”

“… ah. Come in.”

A different night, the air frosted and still, to the last. But the same balcony. The same call for Hanzo, when it was Genji at the door. And Goro was still smoking the same kind of cigarettes.

“Tou-san.” He tried not to sound too exasperated. Or too frightened. “You need to stop.”

“Oh?” His brow furrowed, his eyes still stormy from whatever discussion he’d just had with his elder son. “And why’s that?”

“Those things are killing you.”

He held his cigarette out of reach, just in case his son got any ideas. It was a new one, just lit. Hanzo must have snatched the other one. “And, what, you think if I stop smoking, I’ll just magically get better? That my lungs are just going to… Fuck. I’m dying, Genji,” he snapped, “Just let me have my vices.”

Genji stared at his feet, shoulders hunched. The silence was undisturbed. Even the falling snow did not seem to whisper.

Goro blew out a plume of smoke into the frosted January night, before he sighed, and ground the cigarette into the ash tray. “Your brother was trying to convince me to get chemotherapy.”

“… and you don’t want to?”

“Waste of time.” He folded his arms. “I’ll just end up sicker and weaker, and for what? An extra few months before the cancer kills me anyway? Forget it. I don’t want it. All men choose how they die, and I chose this a long time ago.”

Genji tentatively leaned on the balcony, settling into his usual space at his father’s side. “Don’t you mean ‘all men choose how they live’?”

He snorted. “Who taught you that nonsense? No man chooses how he lives. A man’s life is always in the hand of another. Family, friends, the government, the expectations of his world. Hell, even he never even chooses to be alive in the first place. It’s a woman that decides that for him. But death? A man can choose that. That’s the only thing he really can choose.” He sighed, head tilted back to stare into the starry sky above.

“You’re not supposed to die.” Genji huffed, his eyes burning. “You’re not supposed to.”

Goro sighed, and placed a hand on his son’s head, gently ruffling the bright green hair. “… you’ll be ready for when I do. Between you and your brother, the clan could not be in better hands.”
As soon as Genji got back to his room, he threw his cigarettes away, crushing them down into the bottom of the bin with sharp, frustrated stabs of his heel. The tears were warmer than they should have been, even on such a cold night.

Notes:

- There was one more segment to this chapter, but I had to omit it due to thematic reasons (and because I felt like I had been procrastinating on this chapter for long enough). It shall appear in the next chapter.
- The three geisha are Butterfly (fluttering lightly around Hanzo), Sovereign Handmaiden (serving the King Shimada), and Companion chrysanthemum (an imperial flower of love and power). Each of these names were used by geisha between the 1600's-1800's.
- I spoke before about how I like the power and symbolism of names. Discussion of Ken's real name and the nickname given to Goro will follow in the next few chapters.
- The price of fugu has been exaggerated due to what I believe would be a rational rate of inflation 60 years in the future (especially given current real-world events, not to mention a world-wide robot uprising). Hopefully, it was not also too much of a stretch to see fugu preparation as a dying art, for similar reasons.
- The dish Genji made is a modification of one that I have eaten before, from a world-famous restaurant. So good it brought me to tears.
- I was double-checking with tempestofarrows what cake would be appropriate for Hanzo. I wrote the segment, and went to sleep. I woke up, and the Reflections comic had been released, with Hanzo standing over the exact cake we had been discussing (chocolate and all). I should have written faster (or been less psychic).
- Genji is technically not supposed to receive his 3-dan rank in Kendo, due to strict traditional requirements about age and time training, but perhaps this is one of the 'flaunted traditions' that Uncle Ken had a problem with. Genji should have been 16; technically, he was still 15, with his birthday happening later in that same year. Extra training since he could walk would certainly have given him an advantage, to the point where he may have been granted his 3-dan early without too many objections.
- The sun has set. The days will get darker, until the Dragon falls and leaves his sons, and then darker still.
Chapter 6

“OH MY GOOOOOOOOOOOOD!”

“Hey!” Goro’s brows furrowed, and he glowered out from under them at his younger son. “No English!”

Genji amended his mistake with a faint bow, but did not stop screaming. Nor could he stop running, practically leaping around the castle courtyard in sheer unabated joy. It was no exaggeration to say he was running up the walls... and backflipping off them.

Hanzo sighed softly. “You’re so noisy, boke.” But his lips were twisted in a faint smile. There was a sack of claw-machine plushies under one arm, the smell of the arcade clinging to him and his clothes, and a half-empty bag of potato chips in his other hand. He had done his job well: a morning at the arcade playing every single game Genji wanted, until it was time to return to the castle, where the surprise had been waiting for the younger brother to find... and to start screaming about.

Genji might have been irritated at how easily he had been distracted - and his dragon, too, which was still hovering hopefully around the bag of chips - but right now he couldn’t care less. She was beautiful. She was perfect. She was sleek curves and graceful lines and hot as a geisha’s wink. She was the sexiest fucking thing he’d ever laid eyes on.

His father tossed him the keys. “Happy birthday.”

Genji stopped screaming long enough to catch his breath and the keys, and let himself into the sleek silver-and-black vehicle, kicking off his shoes as he slid into the driver’s seat. The anti-grav systems were so perfect that she didn’t even dip as she took him in. The space was so small, intimate. The smell was so rich and new. His hands fit so perfectly onto the wheel, his body cradled by the seat. It felt like a throne. Better than a throne. “Ohhh…” He stifled his yells, choking them back behind his teeth so he didn’t scare her, but sitting here in this beautiful car - no, more than a car, she was a work of art - he couldn’t be silent. “Mmmmmmmmmmm… Ooohhh… nnnhhh…”

Hanzo winced. “I take it back. I think I prefer his screaming.”

Their father laughed. “Start it up, then, sparrow.”

The car didn’t need to roar. She was style and grace already, sharp as an arrowhead and three times as classy. But she purred - sweet fuck, did she purr - and as he set his foot down on the accelerator… The tigress sank her claws right into him.

He leaned out the open door and howled over the sound of the engine. “I’M SO IN LOVE.”

Hanzo rolled his eyes. Goro laughed until he started to cough. The sound dampened the excited mood, as both sons were reminded, reminded of what was to come, unavoidable. But the patriarch slammed his fist on his chest a few times, and breathed, and smiled. Pretending that hadn’t happened, or that his sickness wasn’t going to interrupt today, of all days.

“I thought you’d like it. Wasn’t easy getting it into the country, but...” He grinned.

Genji slid out of the sports car, blowing her a kiss as he shoved his feet back into his shoes. “I can’t wait to take her out on the roads. Hanzo! Hanzo, anija, you gotta come with me.”

“And be the third wheel?” He said dryly, batting Genji’s dragon away from the chips once again. It
would not be deterred.

“Oh man, just think about how fast she’ll go…”

“I’m not coming with you.”

“Anijaaa…”

Goro snickered. “You pop her cherry first, sparrow. You can share her with your brother afterwards.”

Hanzo flushed, and Genji doubled over with laughter. Seeing an opportunity, green dragon snatched the bag of chips and bolted, swimming through the autumnal air. The blue dragon, all storm and propriety, lunged after its sibling. The bag tumbled end over end, scattering their contents, but they were snapped up quickly as the two dragons chased each other’s tails, and the breeze of their playfulness kicked up the cherry blossom leaves.

Laughter and late summer in Shimada Castle, as a family. It was perfect.

It wasn’t perfect.

Goro breathed deep, slamming his fist on his chest one more time, then tilted his head towards the dojo before turning away.

Genji’s grin lingered, but faded as he watched his father walked off. He glanced to Hanzo for answers - was this another part of the birthday surprise? - but Hanzo was staring back at him, just as bewildered. They fell into step behind their father.

They were not permitted inside. Not while they were dressed so casually. Before Genji was led off by the footmen, he caught a glimpse of the inside of the dojo. The whole household was there: all of Goro’s bodyguards and agents, all the maids and servants, everyone. Everyone was dressed in black.

They were made to change, shedding their casual clothes for haori and hakama. The fabric was new, stiff and formal, the knots bound for them tight and formal. He could feel the embroidery heavy on his back, the Shimada dragon, the mon that so few were permitted to wear. Over his chest, left and right, the geometric Shimada crest. White - not true white, no, but closer to cream - and orange, the colours of the clan.

As soon as the footmen bowed and departed, Genji turned to his brother. “Hanzo?”

He was distracted, lost in thought. “Mmm?”

“… are we getting married?”

“Don’t make me smack you, boke.”

Genji’s expression was instantly contrite. Levity, it seemed, was inappropriate. “So you don’t know, either.”

“… no.” The elder son rolled his shoulders.

The younger wrinkled his nose. “But tou-san always tells you about any traditions or rituals. I mean, even if he doesn’t tell me, he tells you.”

“Mm. Usually.”
They barely had time to think of the reason why things might have changed - as though it were not already so obvious - when the doors slid open. A servant bowed, and gestured forward. They were welcome to enter, now.

The servants had their faces and palms pressed to the floor. The agents and bodyguards were bent at the waist. Incense wafted from braziers at the other end of the room. The room was lit not by the electric lights now, but candles. Real candles. The light was warm and intimate, but the shadows seemed deeper, the room seemed older; odd shapes shivered and flickered over the walls and paper screens. Goro stood beneath his grandfather’s scroll, head held high, watching his sons cross the tatami. Behind him were three objects covered in cloth patterned with waves and leaping carp; the cloaked object in the centre was waist high, flanked left and right by objects that were almost as tall as Goro was. Something vast and powerful swayed in the air overhead, visible only to those of Shimada blood, and even then only as the smoke passed over its blackened scales.

It was so quiet. Neither brother dared to let the sound of their feet disturb the hallowed silence.

“My sons.” Goro looked between Hanzo and Genji. “You have grown to be men that the Shimada clan can be proud of.” A faint smile. “And I know I am proud of you, too.” He made a small motion, and both sons dropped down to sit seiza. Behind them, all around them, the room sat down, too. The shadows moved to match, all but one. The one overhead just made slow lazy circuits of the dojo ceiling. Even if they couldn’t see it, they could feel it.

Genji glanced left, to his brother. Hanzo stared straight ahead, jaw set and focused. Genji was quick to follow his brother’s example; he could already feel the burn from having to sit like this, and so still, fighting the urge to leap and run and scream. But he wasn’t a child anymore. He could stay seated. He would.

“Today is an auspicious day,” Goro said. He did not raise his voice, but it carried through the whole room. “Today… Genji. Your sixteenth birthday. For once, you and your brother are two years apart in age.”

Genji remembered his childish whining about never being as old as Hanzo was, and he almost smiled. Almost, but not quite, for the air was thick not just with incense but tense anticipation.

“Hanzo.”

“Yes, father.” The eldest son sat up straighter.

Goro reached to his right, and pulled the cloth. The patterns of carp and waves leapt and shimmered as the silk fell to the ground. A beech-wood stand held a bow, and a quiver full of arrows. In the flickering candlelight, it gleamed both as sleek and modern as any rifle may, and yet seemed steeped in history.

“This is Storm Bow,” he said, low and reverent, his eyes grave and dark as they stared Hanzo down. “A weapon of ancient power and glory given new life. This… is yours.”

Hanzo stared, lost in awe.

“Genji.” Goro went to the other tall stand, and pulled the cloth down. Again, there was the shimmering of fish and water as the silk slipped down to puddle on the floor. “This is Dragon’s Straight-Edge. This is yours.”

It was an ōdachi, cradled in a pine wood stand, and for a moment Genji could swear he’d seen something very much like it on television, or at a convention. He’d certainly seen them at shrines,
historical relics that served as offerings to the gods and spirits. But he’d never seen one like this. The blade gleamed, the metal catching the light in the ancient traditional technique of swordmaking, though the handle and sheath were decidedly modern. Bow and blade together seemed like a matching pair, that same design and design of colouration. Old Japanese iron and modern carbon fibre. Old and new, but utterly and without question a mark of Japan’s might and power. And it belonged to them, the sons of Goro Shimada.

“You may have it when you come of age.”

Genji blinked out of his reverie, tearing his gaze away from the sword. “… When I come of age? But it’s my birthday today.”

His father chuckled softly. “Yes. But Hanzo is eighteen, and you are not. Do not worry, it will rest here for two more years. In the meantime, you have your own weapons to practice with.”

The temptation to protest at the unfairness was great. You don’t just show off a huge and significant present like that and then say ‘you can’t have it yet’. If he was a man in the eyes of tradition, it should override modern law, shouldn’t it? But he felt the ripple of ancient power overhead, and held his silence. This was neither the time nor place to be acting like a child.

The sportscar outside was a very nice consolation prize, anyway.

Goro smiled in approval, then turned to the third cloth-covered stand. “These, however… you can both claim now.” He pulled, and the carp leapt through shimmering patterns, before the silken cloth fell away.


“Hanzo. Genji. My sons, heirs to the castle.” He paused to clear his throat, the sound rough as thunder’s rumble. “Sons of Japan that bear the Shimada name. Today, I gift you with a warrior’s soul and a warrior’s honour.” He claps his hands. “My sons, my boys, my pride and joy! Come, and claim your birthright!”

As one, the boys bowed low, then shuffled forward. Hanzo took the first sword, the one with handle bound with royal blue silk; Genji claimed the one beneath, whose handle was woven with pine-green silk. They exchanged glances, both silent in awe, holding their blades outstretched before them. They unbound the silken tie between guard and sheath. For Hanzo, the binding was yellow, bright as a buttercup. For Genji, the binding was orange, like a flame, like the sunset. But for both of them, for both of their swords, the guards were the same: the Shimada mon, the circling dragons. The sons of Goro retied the knots at the sheath; the blades were ready, now, to be used by those who wielded them. Unbound. The motion came automatically, as though on instinct, to bind the weapons at their waists, and to reach for the matching wakizashi to do the same.

Shikkō, they retreated, moving back on the tatami until they could bow to their father, to the ancestral scroll, to the castle above and around them. And then they stood, breathless.

Genji felt the weight of the swords at his left hip, and - god - it felt so right.

“Take your stances,” Goro said, quietly, though his voice seemed to ring through the hall.

They did so. Hands braced and ready to draw, knees bent, chins tilted low.

Genji could feel the power coiling in his limbs, the dragon stirring in eagerness in his blood and
marrow. In his sight, the hall seemed to ripple; he could see further, now, all around him, the dojo was filled with watching eyes and steady heartbeats. It sounded like applause. He didn’t need to even turn his head to see behind him; he saw with the dragon’s eyes.

The dragon thrummed and shivered, shaking its mane as it emerged, looming over him, then turning to gently headbutt playfully, joyfully, at its sibling, at the blue dragon looming over Hanzo. The blue dragon growled back, then headbutted in return. Hanzo glanced at Genji, and his eyes were ringed with the blue of lightning. Genji grinned back, knowing his own eyes were likely sparking with St Elmo’s fire. The dragon’s power could be subtle. Could be unseen. But not today. Today, they had awoken, and the air was practically crackling with their power.

Goro cleared his throat, palm splayed over his chest, before recovering and looking at his sons. “My sons. My pride and joy. The Shimada name was blessed by your births and your youth. But now you bring so much more to the clan.” He stretched out his hands, one hand on Hanzo’s head, the other on Genji’s. “Listen. Those blades were made of the same iron. Forged in the same fire. Quenched in the same oil. They can be drawn together, but never be drawn against each other. Not even in jest, not even in play.” His eyes burned, dark and smoky as a looming stormcloud; like his sons, the usual deep amber gleam of his irises was replaced by a sign of the dragon he was bonded to.

Goro’s sons bowed in acknowledgement. Lost for words. Trembling with barely-restrained power.

There was a rumble from the ceiling. Goro stepped back.

In silence, Hanzo and Genji drew their blades. A perfect mirror of each other, though they were as different as blue from green. Just as they had on the night when they were children, they moved. Step by careful step, what had been childish was now perfectly trained. The children had danced with empty hands, but the men moved with the blades of their ancestors. The candle flames flickered; outside, the autumn skies darkened. Hanzo and Genji moved in that ancient and silent dance, the storm thrumming in their veins, the air sighing as it was sliced. Overhead and beside them, the dragons twisted and pulsed, matching every smooth motion of limb and posture, fangs bared to gleam with the reflection of candlelight on ancient steel. For them, the world fell away; dragon, and blade, and tradition, and the brothers side by side in harmony and balance.

Outside, the thunder rumbled, and sheets of rain broke down to wash the streets of Hanamura. The wind howled through the dojo’s open door, bringing the smell of water soaking into the soil. The great black dragon circling around at the ceiling watched, and watched in silence, shimmering in and out of sight.

When the dance was done, they sheathed their blades, and knelt. The power faded, flicker by flicker, though they could feel it lingering. Genji ground his teeth together, and felt the sparks. His pulse thrummed with the sound of rain on the roof, even as the winds dissipated, and the storm calmed itself.

“My sons.” Goro looked down at them, and smiled. “Now, let’s get some blood on those blades of yours.”

The night was so rich, so alive. The sunset deepened every shadow but with the eyes of the dragon he saw every stone and tree and leaf as though rendered in watercolour. He felt like he was flying. With every breath, there was a puff of steam. He could run for hours. He could run to the sea and back again.

_Faster, urged the dragon. Further. Hunt!_
He vaulted the rusting body of a fallen omnic, leaping forward. He grabbed a pine branch, swinging his body around to the other side of the tree. Vaulting forward, the earth rushing to meet him. He landed in a crouch, rolled forward, kept going.

And then froze, stopping as though pinned to the earth by an arrow.

He could hear a heartbeat.

The dragon bared its teeth, hungry, panting from excitement, as it faded out of view. But it was still there, in the effervescent feeling in his body, the motion and power that could not, would not, be restrained.

Genji crouched low and squinted. Through the shadows and the leaves and vines that dripped still with rain, he saw it. A deer was grazing, unconcerned. Its ears flicked, but it had not heard him, scented him, seen him.

He rested his hand on the hilt of his blade. Blood. It was tradition, was it not? A blade can be crafted by a master, and wielded by a master, but until it is woken by blood it is not a real sword. Not the weapon worthy of a Shimada. In the centuries past, the samurai had tested their blades on criminals - and, earlier than that, on peasants. But these were new days. A new era. Modern and civilised and entirely enlightened.

It was a shame he could not anoint the blade with wine, as they did with ocean-bound ships. Some traditions could not change. For a weapon, wine would not do. Blood it must be.

Blood it must be.

Genji drew the blade, eyes fixed on the deer. It felt so heavy in his hand, heavier than his shinai. But he knew how to wield it. He slowed his breath as his hands closed tightly around the katana’s hilt, as he leaned on the balls of his feet. He would be quick. He would strike cleanly. He would not make the animal suffer. He would--

Something spindly-legged moved out of the shadows, making a soft bleat. The deer lifted its - her - head, and nuzzled at the dapple-coated fawn, before returning to grazing. The fawn skipped, kicking up its legs out of time, stumbled from lack of practice, then stood at its mother’s side. Its little tail flicked, a blur of motion, before it gave another soft bleat.

Genji watched, then lowered the sword. He smiled wryly, then tapped the blade against the tree trunk.

The deer turned her head, staring through the dark at him. Now she could see him, the white-wearing man-shape with green hair. Now she could see him, and hear him, and smell him. Now that he was letting her know he was here, she could not possibly miss him. Nor could the fawn, whose nose twitched and flared. It had never seen a human before. This was the first season of its life.

“Ch-ch,” Genji hissed, tapping the blade against the tree trunk again, louder this time. “Eku, eku.”

In a russet flash, doe and fawn bounded off into the forest together.

Genji stood in silence, then chuckled. Those creatures might have been descendants of the deer that used to bow at Nara, or the ones that used to run messages for the gods. It certainly won’t be their blood that anointed his blade tonight.

But he had drawn the katana with the intent to kill. He couldn’t just put it away. That wasn’t how things were done. Some traditions were too old to break. Blood had to be shed.
He lifted the blade, examining it. It was beautiful. Perfect. Everything a warrior could wish for. His reflection stared back, barely distorted by the gleam of the metal. For a moment, he said nothing, staring into his own eyes.

“… hm.”

Genji held out his left hand, and placed the blade against his palm, and drew the blade back. There was no pain, not for a moment, not until the blade was halfway through. Then there was the sting, lingering. His blood looked black, under starlight.

He hissed, softly, and clenched his left hand into a fist. The blade was blooded, now. He could relax, and smile, his duty done. Tradition had been met.

“Genji!”

He lifted his head. Hanzo. Hanzo was calling. Genji flourished the blade, twirling it around to angle behind him, and began to leap and run back the way he had come.

In a clearing, the brothers reunited. For a moment, it seemed like Hanzo’s face was haunted. The white clothing made him look so pale. If he didn’t have both feet on the ground, Genji could have sworn he was looking at a ghost.

“You left,” Hanzo said, and there was something plaintive in his voice. “Why did you leave? This was something we were supposed to do together.”

“I thought you were right behind me.” Genji twirled his sword. “Suman.”

Hanzo gripped his hands into fists. “You can’t just -- I needed you to --” He paused, catching his breath, eyes locked on the blood leaking from his brother’s clenched fist. “You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine,” he grinned, holding his hand out for inspection. “Hora, anija.”

His brother crossed the clearing in a few strides, squinting through the dark as he took hold of Genji’s hand and leaned over to peer at the injury. “You’ll need stitches,” he said, accusingly. “Boke, what did you do to yourself?”

Genji flourished his sword, edged with his own blood. It was all the explanation he needed to give.

There was a look in Hanzo’s eyes that Genji couldn’t recognise, and it was gone too quickly to place.

“Fool,” he muttered, letting go of his younger brother’s hand.

Genji shrugged, and wiped the sword on his sleeve. A flash of inspiration, and he turned the blade, flicking it. Silk parted easily under the gentle touch of steel.

Hanzo looked horrified. “That’s a ceremonial haori!”

“It still is!” He sheathed the sword, then pulled the sleeve down his arm. “But now it looks even more badass.” He flexed his arm, posing, pursing his lips and winking as though for a calendar. “Ne, what do you think?”

“I think you look like an idiot with only one sleeve.”

“You’re right. I should cut the other one off, too. Two tickets to the gun show, instead of just one.”
“Otōto,” Hanzo snatched the sleeve from Genji’s hands, tearing it into strips, “I wish you would grow up.”

“No, you don’t. You want me to be your little brother forever.” He held out his hand, letting his brother bandage him up. “No-one else could ever annoy you nearly as well as I could.”

“Boke.”

“Hime-san.”

Hanzo didn’t smile.

Genji felt his own grin falter, but didn’t know why. Something was wrong.

Eventually, Hanzo seemed satisfied with the makeshift bandage, tying one last knot before nodding. “You’ll still need to go to hospital.”

“Yes, anija.” The younger son bobbed his head in a bow. “Thank you.”

Hanzo frowned slightly at Genji’s sudden meekness, but he rolled his shoulders and the tension seemed to ease out of him. Just a little. “Let’s go home.”

There were no dragons to keep pace with them, now. Just the brothers, leaping and running through the trees and over rusted wrecks of old war-machines. The forests gave way to the edge of the farmlands and paddocks, then to the outer city limits. Their hakama were soaked with rain and dew as they switched from speed to agility, leaping over cars and clambering up buildings and drainpipes. Genji was forced to slow, his hand tender and unable to support him, but Hanzo did not leave him behind. They made it to the rooftops, and ran and leapt their way uptown, uphill, to Shimada Castle.

Genji put on a little burst of speed at the last moment, planting his heel down hard to make a longer leap across, and landed on the platform by Rikumaru. He turned, intending to laugh at making it just before Hanzo, to claim victory for something that had not been a race until he had won it, but there was motion that caught his eye. A mise-en-scène outside the castle.

Under the soft, golden glow of the streetlights, Aki and Honoka were waiting by the car. Koto and Noburo were carrying something between them, a long black bag. Something heavy, from the way they grunted, and worked to heave it into the open trunk. It made the car dip from the weight.

The rain had passed. The air was still, a calm and peaceful autumn evening. But Genji felt a shock of fear down his spine that he couldn’t explain.

He turned his head to look at his brother, as Aki slammed the trunk shut, as all four of them got in, as the car started and backed out down the narrow streets. The light from the parking brakes reflected off puddles from the street, bathing the narrow alley in red. Bright red. Vivid.

Hanzo wouldn’t look at his brother. His eyes were fixed somewhere ahead. The mon carved on the castle gates, probably.

There was that look in his eyes again. The expression Genji didn’t recognise.

In the centuries past, the samurai had tested their blades on criminals. Or peasants. But these were supposed to be new days. A new era. Modern and civilised and entirely enlightened.

Hanzo leapt down from the platform and walked into the castle. He did not look to the right or to the left as he returned to the dojo, where their father was waiting. The blades at his side clinked softly as
he walked. A heavy weight to carry.

There had already been a black bag in the trunk before Koto and Noburo tossed in the one they had been carrying. Two. Two of them.

*Oh god. Hanzo.*

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**Chapter notes:**

- Genji's cyborg mask reminded me of the shape of a particular brand of Italian sports car. So of course I had to reverse-engineer a reason he'd pick that design.
- Once again, I need to write faster. The line about 'disappointment' that was unearthed in the PTR came not long after I had written Goro saying how proud he was of his sons.
- The colour of the dragons has become more significant the more I research and write. It will be explicit as to why in a later chapter.
- There was a significant difficulty I had in finding a means to explain Genji's sword. One official Blizzard source says he has named his ōdachi Ryu-ichimonji and refused to allow anyone to touch it, and yet the same name is given to his katana on entering his room in the Village map in-game. I consider *Ryu-ichimonji* to be his larger blade, while his official katana will have a different name.
- The wall scroll - which has a phrase on it in Japanese which is highly inappropriate for a shrine - will be discussed in a later chapter. Like Ryu-ichimonji, it took some time before I could find a way to explain and justify it without poking too many holes into canon.
Chapter 7

It was different now, with a katana in his hands. The motions were the same. The weight was the same. Each strike and lunge and pivot was the same.

But in the shadows on the dojo walls, Genji did not see a man wielding a warrior’s honour. He did not see a hero, tall and proud in the home of his ancestors, katana in hand. He saw a little boy, training with a bokken. No matter where he stood, no matter where the light came from, Genji trained with the shadow of his younger self.

He almost felt like he owed the boy an apology.

The boy had wanted a secret identity, to have been ‘extraordinary’ while maintaining a face of ‘ordinary’. Did he know the price of what he wanted?

He did not stop with the parties or extravagantly-spent ‘free time’, between training, yet he was fulfilling the promise he made to work hard, with extra classes, online correspondence, late nights and early mornings. He knew his extended family didn’t believe him: they thought he was basket-weaving, coasting by on his father’s money and prestige, not living up to his full potential. And his friends, what did they think? They all had their lives to lead, and he still acted like a child. Everyone knew who Genji’s father was. Everyone knew the green-haired teen have to grow up eventually, and everyone knew exactly what he’d have to grow up into.

He shifted his stance, moving through the motions of cut and slice and strike. Each movement precise. Sharp. Accurate. Unwavering.

With every passing day, it felt less like a secret identity, and more like a lie.

“Tadaima.”

“Okaeri.”

Four days a week, he caught the train to the airport, and a flight to Fukuoka. He watched the sunrise over the clouds. He looked good in chef’s white, a headband holding his hair back as he focused on improving, and making, and learning. He worked with dough and sugar, with vegetable and meat and spices. Far from the fertile valley of Hanamura, he almost felt like he could breathe easier. Focused cuts of the knife and the precise work of his hands helped create something, to nourish, to feed, to bring a smile to a face. He had a knack for customer service; he knew how to haggle with the stallholders in the fish markets and open-air stalls for fresh ingredients; he learned names and tastes of every meal he sampled, and he never forgot to greet a stranger like a friend he hadn’t met yet.

He’d always bring something home, in a pastel-coloured box. Usually things that were lop-sided or a missing a crucial ingredient, or were otherwise not quite what the teacher needed to see. Sometimes, if he was lucky, there were leftovers from the store to take home. Sometimes he stayed late just to make something. He always brought something back, and guarded it watchfully on the plane and train trip home.

Hanzo always had a headache. His hair would be down, a cup of tea would be nearby, and he’d be in his room with a book trying not to be troubled by the day. No matter how he complained about Genji collapsing on him, complaining of a long day, he never pushed his brother away. They missed
each other, after all. Three years is not so much of a distance between them, when there is a half a country between them four days a week.

“You spent all day making food. How tired can you possibly be?”

“Stop being noisy, hime-san. I need a pillow.”

And they’d sprawl, like children, distracted by book (for Hanzo) or phone (for Genji) as they ate food and decompressed from their days. They used to share a room when they were younger; rare moments like these were echoes of the fonder days. The days when they couldn’t bear to be apart.

“… I like these.”

“I picked the strawberries myself.”

“Make more of them.”

“Only if you say ‘please’ very nicely, hime-san. Pretty pretty princess please.”

A light smack to the grassy-green mop of hair, before Hanzo would return to his book. Genji would laugh, and return to his phone.

These moments when they could breathe, and be themselves, were far and few between. The calm before the storm, before they changed for training or put on a suit to attend one of the family dinners. The days felt like they were getting shorter. Childish things were being put aside, and forgotten.

The boys were all grown up, though in quiet ways they fought not to have it be so.

It was Italian silk he was wearing, but it felt stiff and starched and strangling. His leg bounced silently under the table in a desperate effort to sit still. He listened, but the lessons today, and the week before, and the week before that, were dry and cold, and there was no chance to speak. He was expected to sit, and listen, and learn. How could he learn like this?

Genji wanted to scream. His only consolation was that he wasn’t being forced to wear a tie.

He didn’t allow himself to breathe a sigh of relief until they were at least three blocks from the meeting room, and the tall building that held it. Habit and stress had him reaching for his smokes and lighter; he gave a soft grunt of disappointment (not that he wasn’t carrying them, but that he had forgotten that he no longer wished to), and loosened the collar of his shirt instead before shoving his hands in his pockets. Hanzo swept a hand back through his hair, pretending his head wasn’t pounding, as though all that sleek modernity in the room was something he could handle. Matched in black, besuited and entirely-respectable sons of the dragon. Both exhausted, and champing at the bit in the early evening.

The frustration and exhaustion was only made worse from their father not being in the room with them.

"We do a lot more overseas than I thought," Genji murmured quietly.

Hanzo barely nodded in reply.

"... and we actually have people in the Naichō?"

"Yes." He gave his brother a slightly-disappointed look.
Genji rolled his eyes at the look. "I did my homework, anija, calm down. It's just... knowing is one thing. Seeing it? Something else entirely." The knowledge now had a new weight, one that didn’t sit comfortably on his shoulders. The family had always been important, powerful. To know how far the Shimada reached made Genji wonder: just how far would the family think is too far? Does such a limit exist, to the dragons? They were addressing the Prime Minister’s son by his first name, for crying out loud.

There was no follow-up question. This told Genji that his brother's headache was a bad one today. Steel and electronics and closed doors and windows were no place for the winds. So he nudged Hanzo in the arm, tilted his head in a follow-me way, and took off down a side street.

The elder son hesitated, glancing between the path his brother had taken and the path that he was still walking. "... we're supposed to go back to the castle."

"We missed lunch because Uncle Sa-sa talked too much. C'mon. I know a good spot."

Not even an exasperated sigh. No resistance whatsoever; Hanzo followed his little brother.

Genji freed a hand from his pocket to gesture, turning around, walking backwards so he can meet his brother’s gaze as they go. "You're gonna love it. Best spot in Japan."

A grunt. "You've never even gone further than Fukuoka and Samukawa, boke."

"Not true! There was that trip to Tokyo, once." He grinned until Hanzo had no choice but to snort a derisive laugh.

Progress was progress. He needed the sound of his brother’s laughter, to know things could get better.

Genji kept up the chatter, and sometimes Hanzo even responded. A grunt. A nod. A non-committal sound. But as Genji weaved through side streets and gardens and little shrines, Hanzo visibly relaxed. Away from the modern centre of town, towards the places where tradition clung tighter to the earth and the narrow streets and the people’s hearts. This is what Hanzo needed; this is what they both needed. Real Hanamura, not what had become of it.

“Tada.” He waved his hands theatrically. “We’re here."

The elder brother raised an eyebrow. “A yatai?"

“Yup!” The younger strutted forward.

“Not even a restaurant? Genji, this is just sad.”

“No, no, hear me out, this place is great. C’mon.” There were six old seats, all empty, but he hurried forward to claim the one he had always used. The smooth wooden seat creaked familiarly beneath him, and he swung his legs eagerly. “Hey, Chef Arata! What have you got for me today?”

The middle-aged man looked up from the other side of the cart to grin at his customers. “Shimada-kun, good evening! It’s been a while!”

“I brought my brother with me.” He jerked a thumb towards Hanzo. “Hope you don’t mind.”

Of course, there was the flicker of nervousness in the man’s eyes. Both sons of the Shimada, at once? But he smiled, and started bringing out the biggest bowls he had. “Not a problem. You boys are in for a treat.”
“Oh, thank god.” Genji laughed, then leant forward to stage-whisper. “I spent this entire trip bragging about how good these noodles were.” He clasped his hands together in prayer and bowed his head. “I’m counting on you.”

“Two bowls of the usual, then?”

“You’re the best, Arata-san!”

Hanzo slid into the seat beside Genji, eyes narrowed slightly. “You let him refer to you so casually?”

Genji shrugged. “Well, yeah. He’s known me for, like, eight years now.”

“How?” Incredulity and disbelief was plain on Hanzo’s face. A noodle-cart vendor, knowing his brother for so long?

The younger brother leant back, and tilted his chin down the street. Hanzo turned to look, and saw the sports centre down the street.

“I’d come here after hockey practice,” Genji said cheerfully. “Liked it so much that I just kept coming back. Oh man, Arata! Remember the first time I came with the Tanuki-ji?” He threw back his head and laughed. “Poor Arata-san nearly had a heart attack. Thought we were going to rob him!”

“You and your brightly-coloured friends ate everything I had to sell,” the noodle vendor chuckled, as he presented the Shimada boys with two bowls of ramen. “So, in a way, you did.”

“Ha! That’s right! We had everything! Even the bottles of sauce!” Genji cackled even louder. “Oh man, how drunk were we that night?”

“Not drunk enough that you forgot your manners, Shimada-san. You and your friends have all been regular customers since then, and some of my best. It is almost like you are making up for your rowdy behaviour that first night.” He beamed, and bowed. “Please enjoy.”

“Tabesugimashou!” Genji dived hungrily into the bowl, slurping hungrily at the noodles and gulping down the broth.

After glowering slightly, still concerned at how Arata spoke of and to his brother, Hanzo pulled his bowl closer. For the moment, he ate with a little more decorum, listening as Arata explained his business. There aren’t many yatai left in Japan, with the law preventing entrepreneurs from recovering the dying business model. It’s by sheer luck that he was descended from a family of vendors, and thus was able to sell ramen like his ancestors did. He learned in Fukuoka - yes, at the same culinary academy Genji was currently attending - before coming to Hanamura to try setting up his own business. The restaurant was too expensive to maintain, local customers don’t have the taste for ramen anymore, and no staff ever stayed loyal enough. But he’s doing well, here, especially with customers who know what good food is, or the tourists who want something authentic. Arata poured a second bowl for each of Shimadas, setting them down within reach for when the boys wanted seconds.

Hanzo looked dubious. Genji just grinned, setting aside his empty bowl to take the second. “My record is five bowls.”

“Lightweight,” Hanzo smirked, drinking the last of the broth before he, too, took his second bowl.

Genji smirked back as he slurped up the noodles. Nothing like a good meal to help chase away a headache, and nothing like a good challenge to keep the boys in friendly competition.
When the third bowl was presented, it was slightly different from the first two. There were streaks of red oil in the broth, and odd pickled vegetables. Arata bowed to Genji. “I decided to take your suggestion and try a spicier variation. A friend of mine sent over something from America.”

Both Shimada boys scoffed. “What do Americans know about spicy food?”

Arata just laughed, knowingly. “Let me know if I need to add more of these.” He tapped the jar labelled in English.

Genji tilted his head as he brandished his chopsticks. “Habanero? Oh, I know that one. Spanish for ‘white boy’s pepper’. How spicy can they possibly be?”

Hanzo deliberately waited, barely able to repress a grin as Genji wolfed down half of his bowl. An elder brother’s patience was soon rewarded, and he practically howled in laughter as Genji panted and kicked and slammed his fist against the table.

“Did you confuse ‘habanero’ and ‘jalapeno’, boke?” A snicker. “You’re right, you’re so right, Spanish isn’t a language worth knowing.”

“I love it!” The green-haired Shimada screeched, tears streaming down his face, gasping for air and fanning his gaping mouth. “Anija! Anjia, this is amazing, you gotta try this!”

“You look like someone set you on fire.” His eyes lit up. “No, you look, heh, like a strawberry!”

“IT’S SO GOOD!”

“I prefer for my food not to try to kill me,” he said, mildly, flicking most of his ‘American peppers’ into Genji’s bowl.

“So how are you ever going to know you’re alive?” The younger brother laughed between gasps, and finished his bowl in eagerness. Extra habaneros and all, though he howled and yelled and even got up to run down the street to the nearest vending machine to get a drink before the peppers killed him. “… Arata, I’m gonna need a usual to follow up on that one.”

“Hai, dozo.”

Genji mopped the sweat from his brow, loosened his collar, and started on his fourth bowl.

Hanzo was still grinning when they’d both finished. It brought a little light to the darkness.

Arata took back the empty bowls, and noted the lowered chopsticks. “Not staying for a fifth, Shimada-san?”

“Sorry, Chef Arata.” Genji waggled his phone. “Just saw the time. We’re late. We gotta get home.” He opened his wallet and pulled out a small sheaf of notes. “I’m leaving a big tip for that spicy bowl. I’m totally bringing the boys back for that one. They’re going to love it as much as I did. Do you mind if we livestream it?”

“Oh god, Genji. No. Don’t.” Even exasperation couldn’t kill Hanzo’s good mood.


Arata looked duly amused, tucking the money away in his apron. “Whatever you like, Shimada-san. I’ll make sure to keep the American peppers safe until you and your friends arrive.” He bowed.

Genji bowed as he slid from his seat. “Gochisosama deshita.” Hanzo murmured the same, as he
likewise bowed. Together, the brothers left the yatai, and started the walk home. The Block, first, to change, then to the castle. They knew the plan without even having to speak. It wasn’t routine; it was instinct.

The roads were quiet and empty, and side by side they passed between the falling haloes of streetlamp, and the stretches of night between. Wind kicked up the leaves. If Genji focused his eyes enough, he could see his dragon moving playfully, bounding along before them, snapping at the debris, while Hanzo’s followed at a more stately pace above, ruffling trees and banners idly with its passing.

“… we did the right thing, didn’t we?”

Genji looked at his brother. There was no need to clarify. A good meal and some laughter hadn’t removed their concerns completely. There had been no empty seat in the family meeting today - the Shimadas had filled Goro’s place with Goro’s sons - but the lack was still troubling. They’d been there, to listen and learn, while he’d been on the other side of the city, in a room of white, resting after the treatment. Treatment he hadn’t wanted, until his sons had pleaded, until his heart had folded and he had agreed.

“… yeah. It gives Dad a fighting chance.”

“He didn’t want to.” Hanzo’s eyes were faraway. “He’d just…”


Goro was convinced he was going to die. The doctors all said the best thing they could do was make him comfortable. But neither son was willing to let their father just fade. Fight. Fight, that was the Shimada way. Medical advances had come so far. Cancer was just another battle to be fought; if the Shimadas could train since as soon as they could walk, they could fight until the end. Goro would recover. He would live.

“We did the right thing,” the elder brother murmured, echoed, tried to convince himself. “For Dad’s sake.”

The younger nodded, thumbs hooking into his belt loops. “Yeah.”

The streets changed as they walked, the lights getting brighter and more colourful, the streets getting wider, the buildings more modern. More parked cars and motorbikes, more music, more people out and about. The heart of the old city, where modernity ruled. The brothers paused at a crosswalk, two faces in the crowd. A part, yet apart. An old woman glanced over, then took two steps away, giving them respectful room. One of the teenage girls smiled at Genji’s green hair, and her friend giggled and whispered behind her hand. They took a step back to admire the Shimada boys from behind.

Genji casually smoothed a hand through his hair, swooping it back, before it flopped back down just as messy as before. Hanzo deliberately stared ahead, his bangs hiding his eyes, his jaw set.

Genji casually smoothed a hand through his hair, swooping it back, before it flopped back down just as messy as before. Hanzo deliberately stared ahead, his bangs hiding his eyes, his jaw set.

The light turned green, and they crossed the road. More crowds, as the usual Hanamura crowds blended and meshed with the passengers arriving from the late-night train. There was plenty of space for the Shimadas to walk. There always was, when people got out of their way in respect or awe or fear.

One more street to go, and someone called them by name. Hanzo stopped, Genji a half-pace forward before he did the same thing.
“Noburu.”

The cousin sidled over, beer glass in one hand, cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth, and lackeys lounging and leaning nearby. The gang’s latest girlfriends - paid or otherwise - stuck close. “Cousin Hanzo, Cousin Genji.”

“Yo.” Genji kept walking.

“Good evening.” Hanzo started to follow.

“Whoa, cousins, c’mon. Don’t tell me you’re too good to have a drink with family.” He gestured back to the bar. “There are a few spare girls around. Or boys, if that’s what you’re after.”

Hanzo’s nose wrinkled in barely-disguised disdain. “Some other time, cousin.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Genji grinned, showing all his teeth. “We’re needed back home.”

More of the lackeys were sauntering over, now, stopping them from leaving. Hanzo rolled his shoulders. Genji rocked back and forth, heel to toe.

“More training, is that it? Don’t you guys ever stop?”

“There is a lot of responsibility on our shoulders,” the elder brother said, coolly.

“Sure there is.” Noburu smirked in Genji’s direction. “How was the meeting today?”

“Oh, super boring.” Genji answered, breezily, prompting a frown from Hanzo. “You know how they are. I mean, Uncle Ken probably tells you all about them.” The subtle cut earned a very faint approving look from his brother.

Noburu flicked ash into the gutter, and blew a plume of smoke through his nostrils. “Must be nice to move up in the world. You’re lucky that there’s a space being vacated, so you can fill it.”

The thud of the music from the bar seemed to stop. No traffic in the background hushed past. There was nothing but a hum of white noise, and the sound of Genji’s own pulse rising in his ears. The light from the bar’s sign gleamed off the dragon embroidered into Noburu’s suit, neon on silk.

“Apologise at once,” Hanzo said, quietly.

“For what?”

“For disrespecting our father. For disrespecting the head of the clan.” He glared from behind his bangs, looming over his cousin.

Noburu held his ground. “There’ll be a new head of the clan soon enough. I’ll show my respect then.”

And then he staggered back, choking, beer soiling the fine grey cloth of his suit. Genji tightened his grip, wrenching away the bottom half of the beer glass, before bringing it down to shatter it over Noburu’s head.

The others moved, but not fast enough.

A foot planted in a gut caused one to crumple. Head snapping back, eyes rolling back, checked hard in the chin by a knee. Pivot. Kick. A clatter of garbage bins as they embraced a new friend. A flick of the arm, flying glass shards, a scream as hands clutched face, covered an eye. A woman’s scream;
she was shoved towards him, a human shield for the man turning to flee. *Step, avoid, step, catch up, heel of hand into the fool’s nose, crunch, pivot, fist to stomach, drop to a low sweep.* Two lost their footing; something snapped. More screams. A flick of a knife. *Grab the elbow, grab the wrist, twist, pull, release, heel of hand into nose, fist into solar plexus.* The knife fell; his foot snapped out, caught it on the edge of his shoe, *flick, pivot and kick*; it found a target in a fleeing back. Someone moved behind, *elbow drive, pivot, grab hold of that expensive suit; turn and flip backwards.* The pavement was not welcoming. Then --

“Genji!”

He turned at the sound of his name, fists raised. Teeth bared.

Hanzo. That was Hanzo’s face, staring at him. Those coppery eyes wide. That was his brother.

*What? What had--*

Genji breathed, and the sound returned to the world. The club music pulsing, the train rattling past in the distance, the crowds on the main street, the agonised moaning of the people on the ground.

There was blood. Broken bones standing up through broken flesh, stark and white. Eight men unconscious, or wishing that they were.

*When had-- how had--*

The motions had come as smoothly as training had instilled them. Smoother than that.

“Genji.” Gentler now. Still afraid, still commanding regardless. Hanzo’s hands are raised, palm-first, as though to calm a wild horse. Or a something more vicious.

Behind him, the dragons of blue and green watched. Coiled in the air, twined, still and steady, fangs bared as if to say *the human body is so fragile* to what they had just witnessed. No judgement, but their eyes were unblinking. They shimmer in the air. The air, so still. Crackling with their power.

But it had not been their power that had moved him.

The younger brother lowered his fists, breathing - why did he feel so steady? - and for a moment there was nothing. Nothing from him. Then he fumbled in his jacket for his phone.

“Genji, we need to leave.” Hanzo frowned. “Who are you calling?”

The voice at the other end asked the same question. “Ambulance,” he said, and now, *now* his voice trembled. *Now* the tense muscles were releasing with shivers and shakes. *Now* his heart was pounding, *now* his breathing was ragged. *Now,* as he gave the address, and described the victims and their injuries. Only now that it was over, and he stood here without a scratch. They hadn’t even laid a hand on him.

Hanzo’s mouth settled into a grim line, but he did not turn away. Only the dragons faded from sight, and the breeze of their passing made the power lines swing.

There was something about hospitals that he found unnerving. It smelled so sterile in here, unreal. False. Artificial. People kept their heads down and shuffled past in their own grief and concerns. White walls. Machines that counted heartbeats, measuring a life away.

The headaches he never got on planes or surrounded by electronics, like his brother did, seemed to
be right here. But tonight, he didn’t say a word about it, as the pain clawed back and forth behind his eyes. The curdled sensation in his stomach was distraction enough.

The human body was so fragile. More fragile than he’d realised. Eight men could testify to that.

The police bowed as they left, to the doctors and nurses of course, but deeper still to the Shimada brothers. Would charges ever be filed? Genji drove his hands deeper into his pockets, and doubted it. This was a family matter… and, more than that, it was a family matter.

The heavy clack of a cane in linoleum had the younger son clenching his jaw in unease, and he looked up to see his father walking down the hall towards them, flanked by his bodyguards. Hanzo straightened up; Genji tried to do the same.

“As much as I am pleased that you have come to visit me,” Goro said mildly, leaning on his new silver accessory, smiling as though he wasn’t pale and wan, as though the bags under his eyes were only from lack of coffee, “I sense that somehow that wasn’t your primary motivation for being here tonight.” He glanced briefly to Hanzo, then more lingeringly at Genji, before turning and walking down the hall.

The boys quietly and obediently fell into step behind him.

The patriarch’s room was larger than most. Significant donations to the hospital had ensured discretion and privacy, as much as it had ensured the best treatment possible. Goro hooked his cane - the handle of which was a dragon’s head, fangs bared in a silent roar - over his arm, and started to pour himself a drink. Water, this time, not the rich northern-islands whiskey of which he was fond. But though he was in white, and his hair unbound, and he was drinking from a plastic cup, the room held the same kind of odd expectancy to it that the meeting room in The Block held, whenever the boys had been summoned to explain certain misbehaviours.

Hanzo glanced at Genji.

Genji stared at his feet.

Hanzo cleared his throat. “Cousin Noburu disrespected you. Genji answered that disrespect, swiftly.”

“Did he,” Goro said, setting down the empty cup, and turned to face his sons. It wasn’t a question. “And how many answered for this disrespect?”

“Eight. Noburu and seven others.” A small pause. “I don’t know their names.”

Genji did. The fluorescent lights overhead made odd shapes in the shine of his shoes. He had plenty of time to notice as the silence dragged on, even if the sight of those reflected lights made his head pound.

“And… if there’s one thing we both learned today,” Hanzo had that tentative tone of voice, the kind that would creep in whenever he would try to tell a joke, “It is that I was right. Genji is a lot more effective when he doesn’t, heh, shout the names of his attacks first.”

The joke didn’t provoke any kind of laughter from anyone in the room.

The cane hit the floor hard - Genji jumped - and Goro leaned his weight against it. “Hanzo. Give me a moment to speak to your brother. Alone.”

Even though the headache, Genji knew this was wrong. When had they ever been separated? Lessons were to be taught to both of them at once. That was how it had always been. Hanzo seemed
just as bewildered, lips parting in a prelude to a denial.

“Now, boy.” Goro’s rare impatience showed, and Hanzo was forced to meekly bow his head and leave the room.

The brothers maintained eye contact for as long as they could, both trying to speak with their eyes. Neither of them knew if they were heard. Neither of them could do anything but stare.

As soon as the door slid closed, Goro relaxed. Fractionally. “Eight members of the family at once. Eight men, including Oka’s own son.”

“… yes, tou-san.”

He tapped Genji’s arm with his cane. “Show me your hands.”

Left and right held up for inspection, palm up, and then palm down. No marks or bruises, not even any swelling.

Goro grunted softly. “No brawling. You put them down with your training, then. It was quick.”

He nodded, lowering his hands. “Yes, tou-san.”

“Good.”

“Good?” Genji blinked, startled.

“Yes.” Both hands closed over the dragon on the cane. “You did your duty.”

“My duty?” His nose wrinkled in disbelief. “I lost… I lost my temper, tou-san, how is that…?”

“You did not leave an insult unanswered. That was your duty. You protect the clan, even from itself. And, before all else, you reminded them of just where succession lies.” His eyes were as sharp and alert as they had ever been. Impossible to think he was sick. Impossible to think he was dying.

Genji’s gaze flicked between those eyes, feeling pinned by them.

Goro said nothing for a moment, then shook his head and looked away, losing himself in the seascape painting hanging on the wall. “But now you have a problem. Now your cousin and his friends will all have scars. And every day they look at their scars, they will remember that you were the one who gave it to them. They will never forget. And they will hate you, and they will plan a way to return the favour. A scar for a scar. That is the Shimada way.” His attention switched back to his youngest son, and he leant forward, closing the space between them, his copper eyes gleaming. “But it is far cleaner to make sure no such revenge is taken. Next time, Genji, no half-mercy. Putting them in hospital will only make more trouble for you, in the long run. It is far better if those who insult you do not live to regret it.” He grunted as he leant back. “No more ‘losing your temper’; speed and force, but no more being sloppy. Strike hard. Learn from your mistakes, Genji. It’s the only way you survive. It’s the only way I expect my sons to behave.” He tapped his cane on the ground, ending the discussion (such as it was), then walked past to slide open the door.

Genji moved obediently to follow, the throbbing ache behind his eyes growing unbearable.

Father hadn’t said a word about the night those months ago, when he’d handed his son a sword. It seemed like he was saying something now.

At the end of the hall, Hanzo was waiting for them. Talking to Uncle Ken and Aunt Atsuko.
Whatever the discussion was about, it ended swiftly as soon as Ken laid eyes on Goro. The uncle closed his mouth, leaving a sentence unfinished, and raised a hand to his wife to maintain her own silence. There was a slight break in the rhythm of footstep and cane, but the Shimada patriarch kept his head held high as he strode down towards them. Hanzo looked uncertainly between his brother and his uncle, but kept his mouth shut. He glanced to Genji, but Genji didn’t know what to make of the look on Hanzo’s face. Was that… suspicion?

Atsuko bowed, white-knuckled hands gripping tightly together. A deliberate second later, and Ken bowed, just as low, though not with haste.

“I’ll be in the car,” Goro said mildly, to his sons, as he brushed past his brother and sister-in-law without so much as a glance.

Genji tried to see what Hanzo’s face was telling now, what his eyes were trying to say. For once, they were guarded. Something was happening, but through the pounding in his head, Genji couldn’t figure out what.

“We humbly thank you.”

Genji looked back to his aunt, who was still bowing.

Her voice trembled slightly. “For educating our son. We are most grateful for the instruction he has received.”

Ken straightened up before his wife, and fixed Genji with a cool look. “Very grateful, yes.”

“I am sure your son will not forget his manners in the future,” Genji answered Aunt Atsuko, without taking his eyes from Ken. Strike hard, Goro had said. “Though he seemed quite keen to talk of filling an empty chair.”

A crack appeared in Ken’s composure. Genji took no pleasure in the fear he saw there.

“He will not be so impulsive in the future, Shimada-sama.” Atsuko dipped lower in her bow. “Isn’t that right, dear husband?”

Ken glanced deliberately to Hanzo, then bowed once more to Genji. “He will learn to be… patient.”

Genji pushed past. These halls were stifling, choked by veiled threats and family matters. He could hear Noburu’s heart monitor beeping in the next room; Genji’s head throbbed double-time to that. He needed out. He needed fresh air.

He held the door open for Hanzo, who followed behind a lot less quickly than the younger brother would have liked. But they were out, and they were away, together: father and his sons, returning to the castle. That was enough. That’s all that mattered.

The teacher, Mr Kudo, was one of those ‘halfers’. Half Japanese, and half something else, with the wide chin and big nose so common to Westerners but friendly, familiar eyes. It must have taken quite the trouble to secure a place teaching here, given his mixed heritage. But English classes, taught in English, were hard to come by in Japan, especially since the Crisis. Genji was glad to have him as a teacher. Mr Kudo made the lessons easier to remember, helped encourage a real interest in the subject matter.

And he was cute, so, bonus.
“Listen up. Final round of presentations is next week. Shizuki, Takeuchi, I hope you are all very prepared.” Mr Kudo gave a small smile to each of them, then gestured to the screen. “Ogawa, you have the floor. *Hajime!*”

The small classroom rioted gently on cue. “Teacher! English!”

Mr Kudo laughed good-naturedly, and waved an apology.

Ogawa had picked Hamlet, and it looks like she’d had fun with it. The class were all familiar with the story by now, but there were ripples of laughter as, amongst the grave, serious-faced actors on the screen, there soon were clips of cartoon lions and dancing vegetables. Ogawa followed a light-hearted introduction to the topic the class had been given, before veering into something a little more academic. Genji rested his hand on his chin as he listened and watched, smiling. His smile faded somewhat, as she moved away from cartoons, and began to draw a comparison between an American version of the tale, and a Chinese one. He felt a shiver curl down his spine as the banquet-hall dominated the screen, filled with blank-faced servants and courtiers, and surrounded by tall, dragon-wrapped pillars.

When the presentation was over, he quietly leaned over and asked Ogawa for a copy of that last movie.

“No Japanese subtitles,” she murmured, as she emailed Genji the file link. “Only Cantonese, Mandarin, and English.”

“It’s the last one that actually matters to me. Thanks, Mei.”

Mr Kudo called out, as he put his score for Ogawa’s presentation away. “Shimada, you are up now.”

“Yes, teacher.” He flicked his homework into the display unit, and watched as the hologram filled the far end of the room. “Okay. Hello, everyone.” He leant against Kudo’s desk, barely referring to his own notes. “Another Shakespearean play. This one, it is King Lear. I’ll try to keep it interesting, but I do not think I can be beating the lion or the onion. If you need to fall asleep, I do not blame you!” He grinned at the laughter, then began.

He’d tackled the assignment in a different way. He focused on the story itself, and on how it was told by both the English and the Japanese. His focus was on the blurring between fact and fiction, and how both stories - influenced by the history of Leir of Briton and Motonari Mōri - had endured so well due to the way that history and fable were mixed. To make sure people were paying attention to the dry academia, he spliced his talk with clips from two different versions of each movie (though Father was right, the remake of *Ran* didn’t hold a candle to the original).

“… some stories carry a universality---” A wince, and he quickly self-corrected, “Universality to them.” Genji had started pacing as he’d talked, characteristically unable to keep still. He weaved between the display, bobbing and ducking between gesturing courtiers and samurai. “Back to what Harada said, last week - I am sorry to borrow the word, but it was just so cool - some stories have a resonance that can be found across cultures. Just because there are vast differences between a people, there are some things that are similar no matter where it is that you are: power, family, deception, control over inheritance, violence... Maybe it isn’t that we own the stories, but the stories own us. The human condition can have…”

When it was over Genji lingered in the classroom after everyone else had already packed up to go to their next class. “Not my finest work,” he admitted, with a grin. “But I hope I at least got a pass.”

Mr Kudo exaggeratedly put away his papers, and heaved a sigh as though Genji was difficult to deal
with. But only in jest, as the smile soon showed. “I get the feeling you watched Ran last night, Shimada.”

Genji shook his head. “I have been working on this for weeks, teacher! Hah. Actually, it is one of my father’s favourite movies. We watched it a lot, when we were children.” He waved a hand, to explain the ‘we’. “My brother and I watched it with father.”

“An unusual movie for a father to show his son. It is very… heavy. How old where you when you first watched it?”

It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Mr Kudo was a foreigner. That he didn’t know the Shimada name, or everything it implied. Of all that could be extrapolated. “I don’t know. But I remember it being exciting. Father would talk over the movie and explain it to us.”

“Your father sounds like a good man. My father was always away on business.”

Genji threw his backpack over one shoulder, and there might have been a shrug in the gesture. “Every man is different, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it,” Mr Kudo chuckled. “That’s not grammatically-correct English, Shimada.”

“Oh.” Another flash of a grin. “Isn’t it?”

Mr Kudo laughed, and waved Genji out the door. “You did well, don’t worry. I’ll post the grades on Thursday. Now, hurry up, or you’ll be late for your next class.”

Genji bowed, and left. He walked down the hall, took the left stairs to the ground floor, climbed over the wall, changed school jacket for something sporty and light, and caught a taxi to the hospital.

“Don’t you have class, boy?”

“It’s Genji,” he smiled, as he let himself in to his father’s room. “Yo, tou-san.”

Goro looked like he was relieved for some distraction from the boredom of recovery, though he was trying to pretend he wasn’t. “Same question applies, sparrow.”

“I brought all my classwork.” He sat down and sprawled the books and papers over his father’s bed. “It’ll be like I’m still there.” He’d brought a book with him every time he’d come to visit Goro. Reading, he’d found, was a decent way to keep the headaches from making it hard to think. Of course, the younger brother needed to read aloud (he was never silent, he could never be), and who better to read to than his own father?

The headaches in the hospital had never been severe as they had that night. It was probably the books.


Goro chuckled softly.

Genji raised an eyebrow, looking up from the book. “I thought you said you didn’t speak French.”

“Not anymore. But I know enough… and I know you’re not fooling around.” He heaved a sigh, fingers rubbing together as though rolling a cigarette. “You always stop, if you make a mistake. I
know you, Genji. You stop, and you figure out what went wrong, and you fix it. You never just keep going. You always stop.” He lifted his hand, weakly, and gestured to the book. “You haven’t stopped once.”

He felt warmed by the compliment, by the praise. And more still by the unspoken but heavily-implied forgiveness he’d been hoping for. Water under the bridge. “Should I keep going? I could read it in English if you like.”

“Fuck English,” he said, in English, then switched back. “This is a very useful language for you to know, given some of the people we work with. Keep going.”

“Oui, la semaine dernière. Et vous?” Genji’s voice rose once again, “Moi? Hier. La cérémonie n’est pas achevée. Le vent dérange le voile de ma soeur.”

He’d almost finished the play when Hanzo opened the door, looking equal parts frazzled and disbelieving. “You’re here.”

“Yo, hime-san.”

“Hanzo,” Goro smiled warmly. “How were your classes?”

“They were fine, tou-san.” He bowed, and then turned his attention back to his younger brother. “I waited for you. I spent over an hour looking for you, and you were here all along?”

Genji shrugged, gathering up his notes, feeling a small stab of guilt for making his brother worry. “Yeah. Suman.”

“I spoke to your lecturers…”

Oh, shit.

“… and they say you’ve been skipping classes recently. Why, Genji? You can’t do that.”

“All the lectures are downloadable. I’m still keeping up with the work. My grades are still high. I’m making it to every class in Fukuoka. There’s no problem.”

Hanzo barely restrained his anger. “That’s not the point. Tou-san, tell him.”

Goro sipped water from a plastic cup, and assumed a thoughtful expression. “Both of you are reaching the point where you are discovering just what kind of men you are. Hanzo. You have always been studious. By-the-book. You like to do things the right way. But what if there is more than one right way? Don’t they say that each man must walk his own path towards enlightenment?”

Most men at this point would piously rub the prayer beads at their wrist, but Goro never did have time for piety, except when it proved a point. His wrist was bare, besides. “If Genki Genji can keep his grades high, and graduate university with the same honours his big brother does, then I have no complaint.” Before the younger son could grin, the father turned and fixed him with a severe stare. “But if he cannot match his older brother’s grades, then there will be a punishment. Am I clear?”

The younger bowed his head. “Yes, tou-san.”

Goro ruffled his hand through the messy green hair, and nodded. “Good.”

Hanzo’s expression lingered in sourness for a moment, before he fixed his eyes on the seascape painting, losing himself in the painted sky and painted waves. “Why do you always spoil him?”
The younger brother lifted his head and stared at the elder, frowning slightly. He’d heard that phrase before, but never from his brother.

Goro said nothing, clearing his throat and helping Genji tidy up his notes and books. Once they were securely away, he smiled pleasantly. “Sparrow, you and your brother need to go outside and get some fresh air. When you both come back, Hanzo, you can ask me again. Hopefully, you will ask me yourself, and not on behalf of another.”

The gardens were empty in the late afternoon, aside from a watchful couple of bodyguards. Genji took a seat on one of the picnic tables. Hanzo didn’t.

“… you want to tell me what’s wrong, anija?”

Hanzo said nothing, his face hidden behind his hair.

Genji reached out and grabbed one of the bangs, lifting it out of the way. “Yo. I want to speak to my brother, Shimada Hanzo. Is he present?”

“Stop it, boke.” A slap of the hand, a turn of the head.

“Ah, there he is.” Genji swung his feet idly, sitting forward with elbows on knees, and head in his hands. “Now talk to me. Come on.” When nothing was forthcoming, he sighed, and leant back, leaning on his hands. “Dad was right, though. You’re not Ken’s answering machine.” He lowered his voice. “And you know I’m not spoiled.”

“Do I?” Hanzo turned to look at his brother directly, expression twisted sourly. “You’re skipping your classes. You’re taking all the easy classes you can find and you’re still not taking them seriously. You dropped out of kendo - I asked, I found out, you forfeited your 4-dan. Never even showed up for the examination. You turned your back on all that you had done. And!” He raised a finger to point, to shake. “And, you dyed your hair green the day before an official ceremony. You never get in trouble. You don’t even get a slap on the wrist for… for anything! You either talk your way out of it or Dad just… lets you get away with anything you want.” He breathed angrily through his nose, hand dropping to his side.

Genji said nothing for a moment. “Hanzo, you’ve been attending Dad’s meetings with him since you were eleven. Your copy of the Sunzibingfa came from a private museum.” He leant forward again, voice dropping. “You didn’t start school until you and I could go together; you would always fight Dad anytime he tried to do anything that would have you going off on your own, without him or without me. There isn’t anything Dad wouldn’t sacrifice to make you successful, or even more to make you happy. He’s even here, in this hospital, getting chemo, because his sons wanted it. Because you asked. You want to call me spoiled? Go ahead. Just don’t forget to look in the mirror.”

There was still that same stubborn anger in the set of Hanzo’s jaw - he never too correction well, when he knew he was right - but the temper had faded. What was that there now? Baffled outrage? Indignation?

“… I’m not you. I’m supposed to do exactly as well as you.” Genji hugged one knee to his chest. “We’re not the same. But they expect the same things from us. You cast a very long shadow, big brother. But I don’t think I fit in it.” He rubbed his face with his free hand, and peered through his fingers at Hanzo. Waiting.

The elder brother heaved a sigh. Exasperated. “It’s a shadow I must cast, Genji. Don’t you understand?”
“I understand just fine.” He let his hand drop, knee still hugged close. “We’re expected to be better than everyone else, I get that…”

“All the more reason to meet their expectations.”

“No, Hanzo, it’s all the more reason not to!” He gestured wide with both hands, sliding to stand on his own two feet. “I don’t want people knowing the full measure of what I’m good at. It’s like tou-san said: the only one who knows who you are is yourself. And I like it that way. I don’t the world to know I’m the best swordsman in Japan. I want to know that, only me. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

Hanzo gritted his teeth, chest filling with an indignant breath.

“… except you.” He punched his brother lightly in the arm. “I care about what you think.”

“Then I think you should stop skipping classes.” It was with great self-control that Hanzo didn’t punch back at all, let alone with greater force. “People are noticing, people are talking, and it reflects badly on not just you, but on me, and on father, and the whole family. You need to be present.”

Genji’s voice was small. “But what if he needs me?”

The air was still. A cricket querulously sang from the hedge. Neither of the brothers looked up, to the window several stories above them, where the half-open curtains looked on a man lying in white sheets, staring into a painted sea.

Hanzo had no answer, but a frustrated growl that he repressed almost as soon as it had begun. He started to turn away.

“Anija.” Genji reached out. “Anija, please.”

“You don’t understand,” he growled. “And you never will. You’re a child,” he added, quieter, as he started to walk away.

The older brother had good reflexes, and managed to duck at the last second, but Genji was quick to recover, to rise from the crouch he had leapt into after his kick had missed, and to raise his hands, and to lunge into another attack. Hanzo took two more steps back than necessary; from the look in his eyes, it was clear he was remembering the violence that had landed eight Shimada-gumi in this very hospital (it hadn’t really been a ‘fight’, seeing as they hadn’t even been able to fight back, but official explanations were what they were). But Genji’s eyes weren’t wild. They were steady, and they were calm. And he blocked the only way back inside.

“Move, boke.”

Genji shifted his weight before lunging forward. A shallow swipe with one fist, a drop to a crouch to sweep the leg, a rise into a leap with knee driving forward. Hanzo blocked and countered, grunting softly before he was able to fall into the matching stance.

“Stop this,” he growled, lunging forward in an attempt to pass by. An open palm drove him back, but he answered with a kick, a sidestep, and a palm of his own. Genji did not smile as he circled and feinted, keeping Hanzo from moving forward, deflecting and striking. Back and forth, hands and feet and motions well-practiced. This was no dojo, no sparring ring, but they knew the motions by instinct alone. It came as easily as breathing.

So Hanzo knew exactly what was coming next. When Genji shifted his weight forward in a sudden lunge, Hanzo moved his leg an inch to the right, then threw all his weight downwards, his hair
swinging out behind him like a silken curtain. It should have been a successful pin. Just like when they were boys.

But Genji shifted his stance before even being caught, grabbed hold of his brother’s waistband, and pivoted backwards. Both brothers saw the earth become sky, before they hit the ground, and were still.

No doubt Hanzo would have tried to ask, indignantly, how Genji learned to move that quickly. At least, he would have, if the wind were not knocked out of him, and his young brother were not sitting on his back; with face pushed in the grass and arm pulled back at an awkward angle, he was all he could do to just catch his breath.

Genji caught his own breath. His chest heaved from the sudden exertion, but he kept his voice level. “Hanzo.” The younger kept his knee and hands in place, just a little longer. “You’re my brother. You know me. I’m loud and I run around and people find it exhausting to deal with me. But I’m your brother. I haven’t changed. You need to trust me.”

“T-trust… you?” He turned his head when Genji let him, spitting grass as he turned to glower. “It isn’t my trust you need! The family…” The older brother squirmed, trying to get free. “You think you have room for imperfections. I do not!” He winced as he felt his arm strain, and he relaxed solely to avoid hurting himself. “This is how it will always be, for the sake of the family!”

“Oh, spare me the self-righteous martyrdom, Hanzo.” He pushed his knee down, grinding Hanzo’s face back into the grass, before he let his brother’s arm go. “Stop defending them, and what they think of us!” He swung both legs around, sitting cross-legged on his brother’s back. “We weren’t made to fit in any of their moulds! We’re better than that! We’re better than them! We have the dragons! We should not be confined by what they decide for us!” He leant down to impress the words right in his brother’s ear, eyes intense. “They do not contain us!”

Hanzo was very still.

Genji said nothing for a moment, though he was tempted to continue. It was enough to drive the point home, for now.

“… dragons,” Hanzo murmured, eventually. “… the dragon brothers.”

“Yes.” The younger brother smiled faintly, remembering their father’s story. He planted his down hard on the back of Hanzo’s head, but this time not to push him back into the grass. This time, he just ruffled his brother’s hair affectionately. Making a mess, of course, the long threads tangling around his fingers. “… you need to use a better conditioner, anija.”

“Get off.”

“What, is a single pushup too much for you?”

A surly grunt was his reply. He made no effort to move.

“… Hanzo. I will always, always, put family first.” He gave Hanzo’s hair one more tousle, then slid his weight to one side, half-sprawled on the grass beside his big brother. His smile was lopsided and sincere. “And you’re my family, you and tou-san. My father and my big brother. So please… trust me.”

The elder brother rolled over, staring at the sky. He looked exhausted, suddenly. Tired. Wrung out. He searched the skies as though looking for directions, as though the stars were a map he couldn’t read to a place he didn’t know.
Genji stroked his brother’s hair. “… Tou-san loves you, you know. First and foremost. Don’t ever think that you have to prove anything to him. Just… just be, Hanzo. Be his son.”

“Like you are.” Hanzo’s gaze left the stars, looking to his brother. A huff of a breath. “Loud, noisy, insolent… with green hair…” His voice dipped into something small and fragile. “… yet he loves you all the same.”

“He loves both of us,” Genji stressed, smiling crookedly. “His boys. His baby dragons.”

Another huff from Hanzo, but this one seemed closer to a laugh. He sat up, and hugged one knee to his chest. “… you shouldn’t hide your talents. If you’ve worked hard, you should be recognised for it.”

“Aww, hime-san thinks I’m talented?”

He batted at Genji’s hands. “Stop touching my face. Pay attention to me.”

“I am paying attention to you.”

“Stop touching my face!”

“I’m not touching your face.”

“You were.”

“I’m not anymore, stop complaining.”

“Genji.”

Genji quieted and sat still.

His brother took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “You should be recognised. I don’t like hearing what they say about you. You’re better than that.”

“I know.” He smiles. “And you know. And that’s all that matters.” He stretched his arms. “And if you need reminding, I’d happily kick your ass again.”

“Genji.”

“What? It’s true.” He innocently picked a piece of grass off Hanzo’s collar, and twirled it between his fingers. “I’ll keep your secret, hime-san.”

“Boke,” Hanzo snorted, then was silent. Staring off into nothing, the strands of his hair falling forward to hide his face again.

Music came softly from one of the upstairs windows. Mumbled conversation. The distant hum of traffic. The brothers sat together in silence. The wind picked up, gently hushing over the treetops.

Genji tore up little pieces of grass, one by one, gathering them in his hand before sprinkling them to the breeze. He watches the way they spin and dance, then looked to his brother. “Ne. Let’s go running tonight, anija. Like we used to.” A gentle nudge. “To Taiheyo Orchard and back. We’ll sit in the biggest peach tree and watch the stars over the mountain.”

Hanzo glanced at his brother, peering through the dark strands of his own hair. “… I’d like that,” he said finally. Then he paused, and heaved a sigh. “But tou-san wanted me to speak to him first.”
The younger nudged the elder. “You’re not alone. Genki Genji is here.”

The elder brother stood, and offered a hand. The hand wasn’t needed, both of them knew that, but Genji grinned and took it without hesitation.

When the air was still and Hanamura slept, the brothers ran. They clambered over cars and buildings, racing each other through the street lights and the long evening darkness, through the city streets that narrowed into tight-wound alleys filled with neon signs and hanging lights, streets that broadened once again once taller buildings were left behind and the sky opened up above them. Their shadows raced each other, up the gentle slopes where the land of leisure had been transformed into pastures and orchards. The air was fresher, and cleaner. They sat on the same tree branch and looked northeast, Genji’s legs swinging, Hanzo perfectly still. They ate their stolen peaches, and smiled in quiet pride to look over their hometown, which slept under starry skies and the gentle, looping bodies of the blue and green dragons. It was quiet. It was safe. They were content.

Just like when they were boys.

“Saori?”

The woman who had been kneeling stood up at the mention of her name, and looked around. When her eyes fixed on Genji, they widened in recognition almost instantly.

He grinned and jogged over. “I knew it was you! Long time no see, Saori-chan!”

“Genji-san!”

God, she looked great. He spent a moment just admiring the gleam of her hair, the fullness of her cheeks, the way her smile was so full and real and happy. “You look... amazing.” He leaned in closer and tapped his cheek. “Can I have a kiss?”

“No!” She shoved him back, but laughed. “I’m a married woman now!”

“You are?!?” He raised a fist and skipped upwards, unable to stop himself from leaping for joy. “Married! Ha! Yes! Oh, Saori, that’s amazing! I’m so happy for you!” He paused, then stared at her, with exaggeratedly-fearful goggles. “Good thing I asked for a kiss on the cheek, then, or I would be in trouble!”

She blushed and waved a hand at him. “Stop it, you’re embarrassing me!” But she laughed, and the sound was so lively. He laughed with her, aching to give her a hug, to spin her around in sheer joy and celebration.

“Mama. I’m hungry.”

“Ah!” Genji looked down. “And who is this handsome fellow?”

She glanced downwards, to the boy clinging to her skirts. “This is Isamu. Say hello to Genji-san, Isamu.”

The boy hid his face, shyly. When he peeked out again, he was face-to-face with the green-haired stranger. For some reason, the stranger was in a hand-stand.

“Yo,” Genji said, upside-down. “Nice to meet you, Mr Ohashi.”

The boy stared a moment, then giggled and hid his face again.
“Are you a good boy for your mamas?”

Isamu nodded, shyly, smiling, then hid once more.

“Gosh, he’s cute.” Genji tipped sideways, standing upright and grinning at the boy’s mother. “Are you sure he’s not mine?”

That made Saori laugh all the harder. “You haven’t changed at all, Genji-san.” She looked him up and down: sleeveless white keiko-gi, bracers, bright orange scarf. Dragons embroidered all over him. “Why are you dressed like this? Did you just come from a convention?”

“Oh.” He flicked unseen lint from his shoulders. “It’s the weekend. I can wear what I like.” He glanced down to grin as he felt Isamu tentatively touch the ashiko claws at the end of his feet. “Careful, Mr Ohashi! Those are sharp!”

Isamu looked up at Genji, and uttered in perfect clarity the name of a classical cartoon ninja.

The Shimada gasped. “Saori! I’m so proud. You’re raising a young otaku. Again, are you completely sure that he’s not mine?”

She snorted and scooped her son up into her arms, shifting her weight to balance him on one hip. “Unless you’re donating to the same bank…”

“Hah! Oh, I can see the Shimada-gumi being pleased about that! I’m already having enough trouble with the nakōdo! Ha, no. You know I prefer to do things the old-fashioned way, anyway.”

She snorted a laugh and rolled her eyes; he laughed with her. A fond look passed between them, as the laughter faded. There were no pains, no regrets, that had been from their parting, from the last time they had seen each other all those years ago. Good memories had not soured, as so many can, after time and distance, and as lives move on. Only joy, between them, fondness for the moment their paths had crossed.

God, it was good to know she’d chosen to live, and had lived so well.

Saori reached out a hand to him, finally extending a welcome to touch her, and he took it, gladly, squeezing it. It wasn’t quite a hug, but it would do. It would more than do. She was so warm, and her ring gleamed silver in the streetlight’s glow.

“Your hands are all rough,” she commented.

“Rock-climbing, archery, and swordplay are not friends to soft skin,” he sighed, setting their hands to swinging between them, as though they were children in school. “Ne, I hope I’m not stopping you from getting somewhere important. I know I can be annoying.”

Saori tittered. “Sometimes annoying is good,” she murmured.

In the distance, the train shot past on the rails, sleek and silent. They both glanced to see, to watch its lightning-fast passage, and they both squeezed hands at the same time. Nothing needed to be said. They remembered.

“I’m going to meet Hiroko. Yuasa has a dinner arranged for all of us, and for our children.” She smiled. “A little dinner party at her place.”

“A nice, relaxing mothers’ group? Well, if you need a babysitter, I’m great with kids. I can keep them distracted, put them all to bed, and then I can wash the dishes after dinner so all of you can sit
and have your coffee…”

The ground rumbled, and the air moved like the puff of something breathing. Genji tightened his grip around Saori’s hand, taking a step protectively closer. *Earthquake?* But the power lines were not swaying, and no dogs were barking. His dragon had not roused, either, nor Hanzo’s across the city. The night was quiet. Almost.


Saori and Genji both turned to look. Two streets away, something bright and glittery was fading in the night sky. Light, dancing and orange grasped at the open windows of a certain building, before the fire started to crawl outside the building, growing as it consumed.

Genji grabbed his phone, and dialled the emergency number, quickly giving his location. “There’s a fire. It looks like the laundromat. I don’t know what happened but it is burning very quickly.”

Something roared from within the building. Saori screamed and turned away, half-bending at the waist to protect her son. Genji could feel the heat on his face, even though they were two streets away. The night lit up as bright as day for a few heartbeats.

The flames caught against the rooftops and clotheslines of nearby apartments, and started to chew. Alarms started to blare. Someone started to scream. A downstairs door flew open and hunched-over figures started to flee. The voracious fire moved onwards, shedding smoke into the sky. It moved so fast, so fast and hungry. It cackled and roared.

“Hiroko!” Saori clutched at Genji’s arm. “That’s Hiroko’s apartment!”

He shoved his phone at her, stepping between her and the sight of the blaze. “Saori. Listen to me. Take this. You and your son need to go a few streets back. Keep talking to the fire department. Tell them everything. Tell them about Hiroko, and her kids, and all the neighbours. Tell them how many people are there. Tell them everything. Okay? And you tell them to hurry.”

The same low, urgent voice. The same firm, commanding eyes. The same way he stepped between her and the painful light. Saori remembered, he knew she did, he knew she would. She nodded, eyes wide, and bounced her son in her arms to calm him. By the time she looked up, Genji was already running.

He pulled his scarf over his mouth as he charged into the growing flames.

There was laughter, voices raised in celebration and congratulation. He could see their shadows on the wall. Hanzo’s voice was among them. It was the first voice that called out.

“Sparrow, is that you? I thought you quit smoking, *boke*.”

The laughter of sycophants died, utterly died, as Genji stepped into the room. He brought the smell with him, in his hair, in his clothes, in his skin, in his very breath. Smoke. The smoke of a bonfire, of dozens of bonfires; of a conflagration.

Hanzo stood there, at the far end of the room, a glass of sake cradled in his hand. His smile had dropped the moment he’d uttered the last word, when his brother had entered the room. The snap of the sliding door against the wall loud enough to put an end to celebration.

Genji breathed, hard, before he doubled over to cough. His lungs had been seared, there was no doubt of that. Or maybe the ash had sunk in. Maybe both. Every drawn breath was painful. He
straightened up, and he looked over the room.

There was sake, and champagne. There were more people in here than there had been before: moneylenders and real estate managers and branch liaisons. They all wore the same black suits, and the haori over their modern outfits, in keeping with the tradition of the castle. They were all in black, except for Hanzo, who stood out in a pale orange yukata amongst all these suits like a lily amongst rocks. Or a flame among charcoal.

“There was a fire downtown,” Genji croaked, as he straightened up. “Eight people are dead, including a child.” He wheezed, determined never to forget. For all that he had managed to save, the burden of the ones he hadn’t reached in time was the heaviest it had ever been. “Five years old.”

Hanzo half-turned his head away.

In that second, that split second, Genji felt his whole body shaken by something he had never felt before. It shook him like the force of a storm, something that struck like lightning and - by god - he thought the fire and the grief of those lost souls had burned everything out of the heart of him. He was wrong. Right now he felt like there was an inferno in his chest.

He could feel the heat radiating off him. Boiling, just below his skin.

“Get out,” he told the men in suits. His voice was not loud, but it filled the space. This was the castle, and he was one of its lords. His voice filled the room.

Those closest to him put down their drinks, bowed, and departed. He did not even look at them as he walked down the length of the room. They peeled away at his passing, like crows taking wing, or shadows banished by the growing light. Only one remained, drawing himself up at Hanzo’s side as Genji approached.

Hanzo turned his cup in his hand, shifting it between his fingers, and did not look up.

“I said get out,” Genji looked at his brother, not at the stranger to whom he was addressing.

“Mr Shimada,” the stranger addressed Hanzo, “Are you going to let him speak to me like this?”

Hanzo said nothing.

“Dare.” There was more contempt in those two syllables than Genji had ever felt in his entire life.

The stranger drew himself up proudly. “I am Hokusai Masaru…”

“I didn’t ask for your name,” Genji said, coolly, though he felt about ready to breathe fire at any second. “I asked who you were.” He did not step forward, he did not move, but he seemed to fill the space between them. “I am the son of Shimada Goro, heir to the castle and bearer of the dragon of the north wind; who the hell are you?”

He had never pulled rank before, had never used his family name or his dragon’s presence solely for power. Not like this, not in the castle, not with strangers, never. It tasted so sour. Just another foul taste amidst the ash and smoke.

Masaru eyed Genji for a moment, mouth opening and closing, before he set down his cup and bowed in deference. It was done in bad grace, and he glanced again to Hanzo as though pleading for intervention, before he, too, left the room.

Hanzo still wouldn’t look up.
For a moment there was nothing at all. Not a word said, not a gaze met. Nothing. Nothing at all.


Hanzo licked his lips, and turned his cup. “That is a shame. But the lower second ward has always been a district where accidents have claimed many lives. The infrastructure needs a complete overhaul, to prevent such things happening again in the future.”

“I said the fire was downtown,” Genji said softly. “I didn’t say where.”

Hanzo said nothing.

Genji said nothing either. There were days when he could forget there was blood on his brother’s hands. This wasn’t one of those days.

Hanzo still said nothing.

“Her name was Yue,” Genji stepped forward, closing the space between them. “Fuck you, look at me!” He slapped Hanzo’s hand, and the sake cup bounced across the floor, rolling to the other side of the room. “Look at me!”

Hanzo peered through the dark strands of his hair. That look in his eyes, the same look from that night the forest, dressed in white, the sword hung heavy at his side.

“You killed them.” Disbelief. “Seven people, and a child, they’re dead because of what you did. What you ordered people to do. Why?!” He remembers the faces of the men who had been celebrating with Hanzo. It clicked into place. “For business? Insurance fraud? Real estate? Eight innocent people are dead because you wanted to make a deal with the Takeshi?!”

Hanzo turned away, folding his arms in his sleeves. “They were unfortunate collateral damage.”

“For fuck’s sake, Hanzo! Talk to me like my brother would, not like a piece of shit yakuza!”

Maybe Hanzo wouldn’t look at him because the fire was in his eyes. Flickers and sparks, the soot on his skin and the smell of smoke in his hair and clothes.

When Hanzo continued to say nothing, Genji clenched his hands into fists. “Why are you trying to justify this?”

"Because it's what the family wanted of me."

"We ARE the family! You and I, Hanzo, we're family. We're Shimadas. We are the Shimada family.” He paused, breathing in hard, as the ugly truth bloomed inside him. This is family. This is what we do. Yakuza. He made a noise of frustration and pain, and tried to reach for Hanzo. Reaching but not touching him. “... you know this isn't right. You know it shouldn't have been done."

"It had to be."

His voice rose, louder. "No, it didn't! There are other ways to get-- People are dead, Hanzo! Eight people, one of them a child! A child who will never grow up, two brothers who will never know their sister; there are children who have lost their parents, friends who will never see each other again, families that have been irrevocably broken and ruined, and for what? A little extra insurance money and a new plot of land to build on?"

The elder brother turned aside, the bangs of his hair hiding his eyes.
"... don't you dare, Hanzo. Don't you dare look away from me." He moved, stepping in front of him. "Do you honestly think you can just trample over anyone you like? To treat the lives as others as though they matter less than yours?" He was shouting now. "You can’t fucking do that! You can’t!"

"What would you have me do, Genji?" Hanzo exploded, agonised, furious, desperate, pleading. "How am I supposed to command their respect or run the family business if I don’t make difficult decisions? Things are always, always going to go wrong, to change or get worse or... look, I need to stand in a position of strength! Not just for me, but for Father! When I am lord of this castle, nothing will be required of me, but until then I need to prove that I am my father’s son, and I can make these decisions without flinching." He paused to take a breath, to speak as though reminding himself of something he had been told a hundred times before. “We are heirs to the castle, and heirs to the name.” His voice dropped lower, and he chanted something new. Something familiar. "We won’t be contained by those beneath us. We are dragons. We are better than them." His voice dropped lower, and he chanted something new. Something familiar. "We won’t be contained by those beneath us. We are dragons. We are better than them.” He looked up, and saw the twisted expression on Genji’s face, as the younger brother heard his own words twisted. “… oh come on. Stop that. … stop it. It had to be done. It had to. There are some things we cannot escape from, Genji, and this? This is one of them! We are Shimadas and we have a duty!” He gestured both hands wide, leaning forward. “Am I supposed to care about every single person in Hanamura?!"

"YES!"

The word was a roar. It felt like he’d been choking on it, down to his marrow, squeezing it in his clenched fists, gritting it tight between his teeth, and now the roar was free and it had brought his whole body with it. A sheer force filled the room, like a storm. He felt like he was something more, something wild and furious, like a tornado, all storm waves and rising clouds. Huge towering waves churning the sea, water dashing against the rocks, trees shaking, lanterns flickering.

His mouth felt toothy, his shoulders wider, his hands bigger. He felt like something more than himself. The entire room seemed brighter, and he could hear - no, he can see - the heartbeats of the men waiting outside, of all the guards in place, of all the people within the castle grounds. Sparks flickered off his skin, his teeth, his hair. Motes of ash that burned and brightened and ignited around him, the smoke that poured from his lungs.

He remembered the glass in his hand, the way that a nose had broken against his palm, the easy way an arm snapped from a swift strike. He could move faster than any of them, stronger than any of them. He knew that he could hurt Hanzo. In that very moment, he could probably kill him.

Judging from the look in Hanzo's eyes, the older was thinking that exact same thing.

He was cowering.

A soft voice echoes through his memories, a father’s hand on his shoulder. Don't fight with your brother.

Genji arched back and roared to the ceiling, feeling the light sparking off him, feeling his too-big teeth gnashing in his mouth. The glasses of champagne rattled and shook, and the ceiling lights swung. He roared, breathing it out, breathing all of it out...

… and then he turned away. The light was snuffed out, instantly. It was hard to breathe; the fire must have burned up all the air in the room. He flung the door wide, and strode out, leaving a smouldering trail behind him. Soot and ash, and footprints burned into the tatami where he stood. Clawmarks scoured into the tatami… surely from the ashiko.

To the balcony, he leapt; the rooftops, the eaves; away, away, as far as he could get. He wanted to get as far from the teeth and fangs and fire as he could, but it followed. It followed, because it would
never leave him. It was him.

He was a Shimada, after all. Heir to the castle and heir to the name.

“… sir? Sir, excuse me. Please wake up. The plane has landed.”


“… sir?” She was flustered, but managed to keep it together. “We have arrived at Hanada.”

“Ah, thank you.” He bobbed his head, then started gathering his things. Satchel over one shoulder, backpack over the other, and he made for the door.

“Don’t pay any mind to him,” he heard one of the other attendants say, before he was entirely out of earshot. “He says that to everyone.”

And I mean it every time, Genji thought, the shadow that had been dispelled by a good nap quickly moving back in again, like a cloud over the moon. Apparently, sincerity did not go hand-in-hand with a smile. Or maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t expected of him.

Look at him. Fairytales and cakes, movies and lunch specials; a waste of the family name, of family funds, of family power. Centuries of honoured lineage and tradition had produced this careless, insincere wastrel.

Nobody knew him.

Things were so much simpler back when he was a child, when he believed everything he saw on television. When he thought he was going to be a hero when he grew up. When he believed in what he dreamed.

The world had changed faster than he’d realised. Ryouichi got a job downtown. Arai stopped playing the violin. Masuyo became a Christian. Yua got married. Sumiko moved to Tokyo. The children were all growing up, becoming adults, and learning all of what that meant. College. Work. Family. Becoming a good upstanding citizen of the city. There was no more time for hobbies, or to pursue paths they enjoyed, because this was the real world, the ordinary world full of ordinary responsibilities. They were ordinary people, with extraordinary opportunities slipping through their fingers. They had no choice.

So, did he?

Everyone else was giving something up to fit in. Compromise. He couldn’t afford to do that, for the sake of the family. But if he wanted to belong amongst the people, he couldn’t afford not to.

So, who was he supposed to be? Or what?

A chef, maybe. It felt right. And even more than that, it felt good. There was a sense of purpose to that, the same kind of purpose he felt with a sword in his hands. But the family thought it frivolous, a waste of time. Maybe what they believed was starting to get to him; maybe he was starting to ache, to feel torn in two directions. What was Fukuoka but a stage? And what was he, but an actor? Or worse still, a liar?

Insincere.

From the airport to the station, alone in the crowd. The train hummed over the rails, smooth and
practically silent but for the rest of the late-night passengers. He stared out of the window, chin on his hand, watching the lights of the cities and countryside, and the huge looming shadow of the Mountain growing ever closer. Bringing him back to that valley cradled in the hills, that self-contained kingdom that he was due to inherit. He was a man now, and he couldn’t treat this place like a playground any more. It was his responsibility. And then not just Hanamura, but beyond that too. The district. The country. And everything that the Shimada clan possessed.

His castle. His city. His village. His land. His legacy.

And no-one believed he was capable of living up to it.

… what was worse? That they didn’t think him capable? Or that he was, perfectly and utterly?

Genji ground the heels of his hands into his eyes, feeling tired down to his bones. His thoughts were on rails, like this train. No matter where he went, no matter what he tried, it all came back right where he started.

He cared too fucking much.

'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown'.

Well, then. Maybe he didn’t want it.

Fuck. He caught his breath as he grabbed his bags, rising as the train slowed at Hanamura station. Just… fuck. Where had that thought come from? If only he knew, so he could tear it up by the roots and pretend it was never there.

Dad is dying. Genji shouldered his bags, dully noticing the rain hitting the windows. He needs me to keep it together, to hold on to his empire. And I will, by god, I swear I will. ... but I can’t be Hanzo. I can’t. I can’t do what he does. I won’t. Not the way the family wants it.

… So, what’s left for me?

He put his head down and stepped onto the platform, moving forward with the rest of the crowd to avoid the rain. He didn’t make but two paces before he stopped. The rain beat down on him, and the crowd flowed around him like a stream around a stone.

And, ahead, the crowd flowed still, to avoid a figure standing on the train platform, just past the gates. A long-haired prince in a storm-patterned kimono, layered three times beneath the patterned silk: sky blue, gold, and navy. Heavy zōri and stark white tabi. A bamboo umbrella, with a blue painted dragon in the classical style swimming in a loop for eternity. He paid no attention to the people who stared at him as they passed. His gaze was fixed ahead, staring through the falling rain.

Staring right at Genji.

Genji’s hands tightened around the straps of his bags. He stood there, the rain soaking him through, in his jeans and borderline-obscene t-shirt, hair newly-dyed, sneakers scuffed, pachimari charms dangling from his bags, a new stud gleaming with the others in his ears. It was a long moment before he moved, tapped his card on the reader, and strode forward to face this familiar anachronism.

“… Genji.”

“Hanzo.” He shrugged his pack further on his shoulders, and swept a hand through damp leaf-green hair. “Yo.”

“I…” Hanzo shifted slightly. “… I hadn’t seen you in three days. I was worried.”
“I was at work. And class.”

“In Fukuoka. But… not here.”

“Not here,” Genji nodded. “Sou.”

The rain tapped against Hanzo’s umbrella. A car hummed past, tyres hushing through the puddles. Hanzo shifted forward. “Would you like to share the umbrella?”

“No.”

He shifted back, hurt. “I see.”

Genji tilted his chin, a quick indicative jerk of the head. “You brought mine, I see, on the seat over there. I don’t need to share yours.”

“Ah. Sou.” He turned to collect it, and held it out. A matching bamboo umbrella. Genji grunted with effort as he opened it. It was stiff. He hadn’t used it since he was… what, eleven? He was surprised to see that the painted green dragon was still vivid, that it wasn’t full of holes.

He spun it on his shoulder, watching the dragon circle around over his head. And then he looked back at his brother.

Hanzo shifted again. He opened his mouth, and closed it. He stared down at his feet, pained, then squared his shoulders and looked ahead like nothing was the matter, or like he deserved to feel hurt. The younger brother understood almost immediately: there was no pastel-coloured box in Genji’s arms.

The silence stretched too long for a suitable excuse - I forgot, I left it on the plane, I left it on the train, we were sold out - to be the reason why. The truth of it might have hurt even more than a lie. So Genji said nothing, but swept the last of the rain from his hair and face.

“I have…” Hanzo fixed his eyes on something in the distance. “… made arrangements for those who were killed in the fire. … the city has made a very generous settlement to the families to make amends for--”

“The city.” Genji twirled his umbrella.

“… yes. Seeing as it was a civil accident…” He faltered at the look on Genji’s face, then hurried on, almost tripping over his words, “There has been a generous settlement to the survivors, and there will be a memorial built for them on the site…”

It was on the tip of his tongue to remind Hanzo that memorials don’t bring children back to life, that these people were dead and gone. But his father’s words echoed again through his mind: don’t fight with your brother. So he held his tongue.

Twisting the metaphorical knife in Hanzo’s gut wouldn’t bring anyone back, either.

The thunder rumbled overhead. A dark dragon circled through the air over Hanamura.

“… Genji?”

He breathed a sigh through his nose. “What?”

Hanzo shifted. “… you have homework tonight, right?”
“Yeah. And I’ll probably hit the gym.”

“… do you have time for tea, first? I had it made for us…” His eyes flicked to the pastel box that wasn’t there, to that deviation from tradition that stung him far worse than Genji anticipated. “… if you wanted to.”

Hanzo hated being in public. Hated people staring at him. Hated small talk. And, clearly, he didn’t handle guilt very well. Yet here he was, all dressed up, waiting in the rain for his brother. Three days of silence, of distance between them, and he was extending the olive branch. Trying to make things right, not just for what had happened, but between the two of them. All dressed up for a formal apology, delivered in the rain.

It would be unbrotherly to refuse.

Genji heaved a sigh, then managed a weak smile. “… a tea party with the princess? I don’t have to dress up for it, do I?”

Hanzo smiled back, relieved and started to bow.

“Stop that, Hanzo.” No amusement, no joke, no teasing or story. “Just… stop.”

Hanzo kept his eyes on the wet ground regardless, until Genji hit him with the umbrella and told him to hurry up or they would be late for tea. Until Hanzo made some snarky comment in reply. Until they walked together, side by side, back to the castle, chatting, nattering, laughing. Until it felt like the three years between them wasn’t crumbling at the edges, turning into some vaster void than either of them were prepared to acknowledge.

Chapter notes:

- Minor grammatical mistakes updated in previous chapters, cleaned up for better readability.
- Despite Blizzard releasing the name of the Shimada patriarch, I will continue to use Goro as his name, as it continues to be relevant for the story at hand and the unfolding saga between the elders. Later chapters will make it clearer.
- The Naichō is an abbreviated term for the Japanese intelligence agency that reports directly to the Prime Minister. It has a reputation, these days, for being somewhat ineffectual, which I thought would be a fitting springboard for the Shimada Empire (much like how the crime lords in the US in the 1920s and later were able to operate freely by their infiltration of government and law enforcement agencies).
- Yatai are the noodle carts popular around larger cities. The law that Arata quotes is actually a law that is still in effect today.
- Habaneros are one of the spiciest peppers in the world. Jalapenos are not.
- Credit to @tempestheir for one of the lines within the hospital scene. Goro’s line about half-mercy came about from each of us working independently, in which we both managed to came up with the exact same phrase, but tempestheir posted first.
- Even with the resurgence of Japanese culture and yamato damashii within the Japan of the Overwatch era, I believe that English literature would still remain a very popular field of study for high schools and colleges, just as popular as it is today. If the values are the same in the future as they are today, it would fit the way that others view Genji as a time-waster and a dreamer. And to choose a class and field usually dominated by women follows the playboy image he’s chosen. Literary comparisons and intertextuality were a large part of my own studies, and continue to influence my writing today.
- Genji is reading from Huis Close, ‘No Exit’, a play by Jean-Paul Sartre. Of particular interest is the one character being welcomed and flattered, then talking in good humour of watching her
own funeral.

- Genji's mention of a nakōdo will be discussed in greater detail in the next few chapters, but they are matchmakers and marriage brokers.
- The next chapter will be the last rays of sunshine before the night sets in.
It was hard to see him like this. The glorious, infamous Shimada patriarch was a pale shadow of what he once was. His long lustrous hair was all gone. Even the prominent Shimada brows had given up the fight. Shadows remained under his eyes, constantly, and red veins through his sclera. His skin was tight over his bones and muscles, rendering him into sharp angles under those pale hospital robes. Those robes weren’t white, no, closer to taupe than that, but still a colour that left Genji feeling ill.

A reminder of the unavoidable future, regardless of the chemo.

“You always loved your stories,” he murmured. He pulled one of Genji’s borrowed holovids into his lap and read the cover. “Hah. Still not planning to move on from Shakespeare, are you?”

“It’s a good foundation for Western literature. All those tropes and clichés had to start somewhere.”

“Stories,” Goro smiled, tired but fond. “Stories are a good foundation for reality. It’s how we remember basic truths. It’s how we pass on what we have learned to the next generation, and to anyone with wisdom to listen.” He watched Genji read for a moment longer. “Our family has a story. The story of the dragon brothers. Do you remember it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Goro’s bare brow furrowed. “… sir. You never call me ‘sir’ unless you’re frightened, sparrow.”

Genji idly flipped the pages of his book, then closed it, running his thumbs over the picture of Henry IV on the cover. “Ken’s been hanging around a lot. With Hanzo. I keep having to shoo them apart.”

“He’s not getting the castle,” Goro settled back into the cushions with the self-possessed air of a king. But his eyes were sharp, and gleamed with barely-concealed anger. “You heard what they were speaking about?”

Genji looked up. “… sometimes. This last time, Ken was making a point about the ‘proper line of succession’. Like Hanzo owed him something.”

“Motherfucker.” He closed his eyes and growled. “… Hanzo’s too smart to fall for that. Ken is due for a long fall, and I hope I’m still around to see it happen.”

The green-haired son sat back as well, to watch in silence. Nothing was said for a long moment. “… tou-san. How did Uncle Yōzei die?”

“… why do you want to know?”

“‘Proper line of succession’, tou-san.”

Goro took a deep breath before answering. “He used to take naps in the grounds of the castle. Fall asleep admiring the beauty of the sakura trees, and the peacefully-circling koi.” His eyes opened, fixed on his son, and his smile curved ever so sweetly. “I poured poison in his ear while he slept.”

Genji’s spine went rigid.

And Goro hooted with laughter. “The look on your face! Hah! Oh, my dear sparrow, I know you love your stories…” He tapped the holovids, grinning. “But sometimes you need to know when to
separate fact from fiction. There is a point where stories can take on a life of their own if you let them.”

Genji scooped the holovids off the bed, angrily jamming them into his bag. Flushing to think he had been made a fool of so easily.

The father sat forward to ruffle the hair of his son, to calm him down. “Suman, sparrow. I couldn’t resist. But you’re filling your head with too many of these stories.”

“I ask a serious question and you make fun of me,” he deliberately emphasised the whine, making his eyes as big and soulful as possible.

Goro laughed until the coughs shook him, and he was reduced to breathlessness in the pale sheets.

“…Genji. Hanzo. Ōka, Sadaakira, Hatsusebe. Goro.” The youngest son leant forward, once his father could breathe again. “Lots of stories in these names, tou-san, in the names of the Shimada men. So what was Yōzei’s?”

“Sparrow…”

“These stories matter, tou-san. You told me so. … please. Tell me.”

Goro shrugged casually. “To lead the clan. To falter. To fail, and be replaced by someone far more capable.” He smiled, and glanced out the window. “How’s that for an ‘anti-climax’, you old bastard?”

He followed his father’s gaze, but saw nothing. Not even a dragon on the wind. Whoever his father was speaking to, Genji was not part of the conversation. “… You named your firstborn son to honour him.”

The patriarch almost bristled for a moment, and turned his head like a snake to a mouse. His smile remained in place, but it did not look right. “… Ah. Yes. Hanzo. Hah. Just because my brother is dead doesn't mean I can't honour him,” he said, calm and casual. “In fact, it's altogether far easier to honour him now that he's dead and gone.” The smile seemed more genuine now. Triumphant, too.

Genji felt uneasy. His head, which had been silent and calm, now began to throb and ache. An oncoming migraine. He’d been in the hospital for hours, so why had the pain started only now?

There was a sudden vision in his head, of a single empty chair in an otherwise crowded meeting room.

“… how did he die, tou-san?”

Goro snorted. “He’s dead. It doesn’t matter how.” He clapped his hands, ending the discussion, then turned his attention to the door. “Boy.”

Hanzo entered, closing the door quietly behind him. He looked both flushed and pale at the same time. The whites of his eyes showed like a panicked racehorse finally away from the track, while he fought to maintain his priceless composure.

Goro cackled. “I know that look. You finally met her, huh?”

Genji also grinned, and beckoned his brother into the vacant chair. “So, is she as pretty as her pictures? Do you think I’ll have a lot of cute little nieces and nephews soon?”
“Shut up, both of you.” The eldest snapped, choosing to pace, awkwardly, tugging at his collar.

“The suit looks good on you, anija.”

“Shut up.”

“Sit down and tell me all about it, boy.”

“Shut-- yes, tou-san.” Hanzo slumped into the chair, his legs almost seeming to give out on him. He took a deep breath, and heaved a sigh. “…She was just like the nakodo said. But she was… more than that, in certain ways? I don’t… she was…” He let his head hang forward, hair obscuring his eyes. “I don’t know what she thinks of me now. I didn’t know what to say, and neither did she.”

Goro looked over the decidedly-frizzled Hanzo, and chuckled in sympathetic amusement. “Sparrow, I think I need to have a word with your brother in private. God, what I wouldn’t give for some whiskey right now… and Hanzo, too, no doubt needs some. Heh. But, before you leave… I need you to get something for me. In my office in The Block…”

Genji was already on his feet. “Yes?”

“I need you to bring your mother here.”

His breath caught in his throat.

“She should be here,” Goro murmured, softly. “With me. I need my wife by my side, for when my sons cannot be. Go and get her photograph from the shrine and bring it back here.” He glowered to the painting hanging on the wall opposite his bed, at those silent rippling waves.

“… yes, tou-san.” Genji glanced at Hanzo. Something about the request felt wrong, so wrong. Hanzo blinked blearily back at him, feeling the same way, but his own concerns were still forefront in his mind.

Go and get your mother. Genji felt his skin crawl as he left the room. He was tempted, to linger by the door, and listen to Hanzo describing his meeting with his fiancée. But no, father had made a request. Even if it was an odd one, even if it felt like an excuse to get Genji out of the room… no, Father wouldn’t do that. He was dying. He missed his wife; he was trying to fix her image in his mind so he would meet her all the sooner in the next life.

Which was rapidly approaching.

The evening sky was still overhead, a few wisps of cloud to block out the tiny stars. The Block was only a swift run away, a clamber over walls and a series of leaps between rooftops. As Genji pulled himself onto the balcony, he frowned slightly. There was a light on in the room. His father’s computer. Why was it turned on? He unlatched the sliding door and let himself in.

First, he turned to the shrine, kneeling down to pray. He didn’t know if the gods were real, any of them, but the dragon nestled close to him day in and day out. Maybe there were things out there, like the dragons but older, stronger; or maybe younger, weaker. Maybe the dead could hear and speak and reach back to those they knew in life. Who knew? He was just a man. A man kneeling to greet his mother, a woman he had never known, and never would.

She gazed back at him, from her portrait, like she was measuring him, judging him, and there was a faint hint of knowing around the corner of her lips. A Mona Lisa smile. Genji smiled back, rubbing his thumb over his own lips, knowing they matched. And the hairline, too, and the eyes. Noda Akane had brought good genes to the already-amazing Shimada gene pool.
“You made some good looking boys,” he murmured, seeing his reflection in the glass. “Heh.” But his reflection distracted him, again: the light from the computer shone from behind him.

Warily, he rose, and moved to stand behind his father’s desk. The log in screen flashed, awaiting the password. Odd. Genji leant over the keyboard, and tapped in the secret command to bring up the list of incorrect password entries. Goro hadn’t been in here for weeks, now that his treatment was progressing. But someone had been trying to log in. Genji’s brows rose as he looked over the record. Someone had been trying to guess their way in. And they’d tried everything to do with Goro: the name of his college, the name of his wife, the name of his sons, Shimada code words, birthdays, important events… everything. There were number/character replacements, hiragana and katakana, combinations and mismatches and a desperate attempt to find an answer. Any answer. And judging from the date stamps, they’d been trying all month, day in and day out.

“Motherfuckers.” His eye flicked to the shrine. “… sorry for the language, ka-san.”

His mother’s photograph just smirked back.

Genji scrolled down the list, frowning as he considered every option. It would only be a matter of time before they guessed his password. Or until they brought in someone who could bypass the security entirely. He drummed his hands on the edge of the desk. Dad needed to know about this. … unless Genji could find a way to scare them off. And also to hide Dad’s data for him. But in order to do that, he’d need Goro’s password.

“And there’s no way I’m guessing it.” He sank down into the chair regardless, scooting it closer to the keyboard. “No way in hell.”

His eyes flicked to his mother’s photograph. The shrine was positioned so that she was watching over him, perfectly in line of sight of whoever was sitting here, at this desk, in this office. Goro.

“Keeping an eye on the rascal, huh, ka-san?” He smiled, stalling for time as he tried to figure out what the password would be. It nagged at him. Mother was right there, a stranger he didn’t recognise, a stranger who looked so much like him. His mother. A woman he’d never met. She was here, in Goro’s private office.

The answer was staring him in the face.

Genji bit his lip. Impossible. All variations of Akane’s name had been used already, numbers replacing characters, different characters for the homonyms, first name and last name mixed… It hadn’t worked. But there she was, continuing to gaze at her son sitting in his father’s chair. Dad wouldn’t make it that obvious. There had to be something. Some kind of trick, some kind of…

*You’re filling your head with too many stories. I poured poison in his ear. Go and get your mother.*

Genji hesitated, and leant forward over the keys. He typed a single word, a name, no letters, and hit Enter. The bar cleared itself, and a warning flashed on the screen: ‘incorrect password, you have 2 more tries before you will be locked out for the next 2 hours’.

“Of course it wouldn’t be that easy,” Genji muttered. He rubbed the back of his neck, but his skin kept crawling. Like he was on the precipice of something big, or a storm was about to break.

Across the room his mother continued to stare at him, expectantly.

“This is stupid,” Genji muttered. But he tried again. This time, he didn’t use hiragana. He wrote in English. An outrage, an insult, impossible for a pure-blooded Shimada to even consider. But the
password bar cleared itself, vanished, and opened the desktop immediately. “… no fucking way.”
Genji gave a laugh, part triumph, part disbelief. “‘No English in the house’, huh? You need a better
password, tou-san.” He scooted the chair closer to the screen, and started to type.

It didn’t take too long to set up, to make sure his father’s data was backed up somewhere safe and
unreachable. While the data transferred, Genji opened the menu and browsed, opening a game in the
background so he had a suitable excuse for hanging around in his father’s office, should anyone
happen to come pay a visit. “Mah-jong? Who the fuck still plays mah-jong?” He clicked a few tiles,
listlessly, while the timer ran.

The name of a file caught his eye. A date, twenty years ago, flashed past, a folder with a title that
could be a pun or a threat, much like the name ‘Shimada’ could become in the right tone. Genji
hesitated, then moved in to look for it.

Buried deep within official and unofficial sensitive documents - a myriad of things Genji had no wish
to see, for even thinking about it made his head throb - he found a folder sharing the name with the
computer’s password. It felt like a moment of no return. If he delved here, what would he find? Did
he even want to know?

Akane watched him from across the room.

He clicked a few more mah-jong tiles before entering the folder. There was another folder, and an
image. He clicked the image first.

She was gorgeous. A woman - no, not just a woman, a bombshell - in a red cocktail dress and a coral
comb holding up her dark hair, captured mid-stride across a crowded hotel lobby. Her slim arm was
linked through the arm of another man: besuited, harried, talking on his cell, familiar enough to
recognise as one of the Shimada elders. This must have been years ago, at least twenty, maybe more.
Definitely more, because the more Genji stared at the woman the more he knew exactly who she
was. Just the way that she was dressed, the way she walked, the way she was looking directly into
the camera from across the room like she had known she was being photographed, and revelled in
the way she was the focus of clandestine attention.

And for further proof, her Mona Lisa smile was the exact same one in this photograph as the one
across the room.

“Damn, ka-san.”

The man she was with… that must be Uncle Yōzei. Younger, much younger, and very much alive.
Too busy to notice anything around him, while the woman on his arm saw everything.

Genji frowned to himself, and delved into the files. They opened up before him, a chronological
documentation of the years gone by. Quick glances into the early folders showed more photographs
of the woman in red, taken from long distances by a steady hand and a hunter’s precision, always
from a long distance, never straight on. She always seemed aware of her photographer, her stalker.
She always seemed posed, ready, willing to be seen by someone who was not supposed to look at
her. Genji hurriedly skipped ahead. A funeral, a widow before a marriage, a marriage not long after.
The name ‘Noda’ left behind at last, as she moved into the castle with her new husband. The
photographs were closer now. She still stared, still smirked, from under tangled bedsheets or
wrapped in a towel or sitting side by side with her husband - with Goro - at some tropical resort.
Between the heatedly intimate photographs were hundreds of selfies, Goro and Akane’s heads
pressed together, kissing, holding each other close, drinking, celebrating, just being in love. Genji
skipped ahead again by several years, leaving the honeymoon to the honeymooners. There was
someone else he wanted to see.
“Hime-san,” he murmured, delighted. There was the baby. The boy with chubby cheeks and pouted lips and a look of sheer indignation on his face, and with him, a proud mother, no longer smirking knowingly at the camera but gazing at her son. A proud mother, a prouder father. Hundreds and hundreds of photographs, as the years went by. Cute outfits and holidays and presents and family gatherings and selfies. Goro couldn’t stop stealing his son for fond kisses and wide grins, and Akane looked so pleased that she might burst into tears or songs at any moment. A son with doting parents, in the castle they called home.

Genji’s heart was singing, and he couldn’t keep the smile off his face. His own birth year was coming up next. He clicked onwards, looking forward to the shots of the family all together.

But there weren’t any. The next folder only held documents. Hundreds of them. He frowned, scrolling through, then clicked one at random. A PDF from a hospital, a Shimada-coded description for a very costly procedure. Payment in full. He checked others, and found similar descriptions, similar huge bills. All of them for the same hospital. Eventually he found a name, and the title of the doctor. A pediatrician.

The singing in his heart had stopped. Now all that remained was cold dread, which was settling in the pit of his stomach. Was Hanzo sick? No, it couldn’t be. It wasn’t. The dates on the forms were almost like accusations. “… Was I sick?” It seemed impossible. Genki Genji? He scrolled forward. Day after day, month after month… three years of receipts and doctors letters of recommendations. Specialists had been flown in from overseas. Every treatment had been tried, everything from the cutting edge to traditional medicine, and everything inbetween. Over and over again.

The next folder was labelled the day before his mother died, and it held only a single image. Akane, sitting on the couch, dressed in muted shades of sakura pink, smiling proudly. That familiar smirk was back, but her eyes held triumph of a sad, quiet kind. Hanzo, a young child with the same serious eyes he had now, sat beside her gravely, hands on his knees, head tilted slightly to his mother’s hand on his shoulder, as though wanting to press his cheek against it. There was an infant in Akane’s lap, wide-eyed, grinning with barely-protruded teeth, chubby fists blurred from flailing in happiness. Unable to keep still, even swaddled safely in his mother’s lap with her arm around him. Genji. Genki Genji. He didn’t look sick at all. The photograph was taken squarely, precisely, framing the three of them in a way that was lifeless in comparison to all the rest that had been taken, all those action shots and selfies. Goro was not in the photograph; was he the photographer? Who else would Akane smile for like that?

This was not the shrine photograph. But it felt like one. A memorial. A memorial for a woman who was going to die the next day.

Genji sat back in the chair, feeling an odd sense of hollowness and unease. He took a breath, and it escaped in a stuttering sigh. He didn’t know what he’d found, or even what to make of it, but it left him cold. Disbelieving. Unsettled. It took him a moment before he could keep going, and even then, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know what else he would find.

The folders after that held just documents. Personal records that Goro kept for himself, that the rest of the Shimada clan wouldn’t know of. Business he’d conducted on his own terms. He didn’t take any more photographs. Not until a few years ago, after the Yabusame tournament. Genji remembered posing for it, leaning on his brother’s shoulder and flashing a peace sign, while the castle rose up behind them in the sunshine. A memory of victory and family. He had a framed copy in his room.

He hadn’t realised how significant it had been for his father to take that photograph.

The data had transferred. Genji hurriedly closed the mah-jong game - incomplete, unfinished - before finishing what he needed to do. Logging off. Shutting down. Disconnecting the mouse and keyboard
both, and wiggling some of the power cables just out of place enough that they wouldn’t work. A little extra security.

Not that anyone in the Shimada clan would ever guess the password.

He grabbed her photograph as he left, locked the door, and clambered back down the outside of the building.

“Those FUCKERS!”

Genji froze, hand on the doorknob, at the sound of his father’s yell, at the sound of something shattering. The guards determinedly stared ahead, so he got nothing from them. He hurried inside, just in time to get involved with Hanzo’s plea for Goro to calm down. “… What did I miss?”

Goro fumed at the far wall, at the seascape painting that bore a dent and a tear from his phone’s recent demise. Scattered pieces of metal and plastic lay over the floor. “The Italians. The fucking Italians. Twenty years, twenty FUCKING YEARS, of negotiations and agreements and promises… Now they’re backing out of the Bridge deal. Those fuckers are going to cite my failing health as the reason, not the fact that they don’t want to FUCKING PAY FOR ALL WE’VE GIVEN THEM!”

“Tou-san, please…” Hanzo had unplugged the heart monitors, in case the sudden increase in blood pressure made an orderly or nurse come running. He twisted the cable in his hand, anxious.

“They’re as bad as the fucking Americans. Fucking foreigners! Filthy parasites!”

Genji quietly set Akane’s picture down on the bedside table. Goro whipped his head around, more vitriol prepared, but he seemed to deflate at the sight of her.

“… she helped me broker this deal,” he murmured, taking the frame in both of his hands. Losing himself in the sight of her face. “I can’t… I can’t face her, if it… if I’m the one who lets it fall through… After all she’d done…”

“Well, tou-san, you have an advantage that you didn’t have before.” Genji smiled, trying to sound confident, though the air felt brittle in the wake of their father’s rage.

“Oh?” Goro looked up, brow raising, stretching the skin on his bare face. “And what’s that?”

“Two incredibly good-looking and talented sons.”

“Hah!” A rough bark of a sound, but a laugh nonetheless. The mood completely turned. “That’s right. That is very right. I do.” He set the photograph of his wife next to him, and smiled at her, before he folded his hands and drew his bony shoulders back. Calm authority once again reigned.

Hanzo let out a slow sigh of relief, and stared at the floor.

“They’ll be here in a few days for an official meeting.” Goro looked severely between his two sons, who moved to stand obediently before him, side by side. “They told us they’re coming here to discuss the final stages of the contract, especially in regards to repayment and consolidation of our loans to them. My contact in Sèvres is telling me they’re here to tell us ‘thanks but the deal is over now’.”

Hanzo folded his arms and scowled.

“Blame the Germans for that one,” Goro nodded, his scowl almost identical (but for the missing
Genji scratched his jaw uneasily. Uncle Ken did business with the Germans.

“These foreigners…” Goro’s eyes darkened. “They think they can take advantage of us. They forget that we carry a lineage older and greater and more powerful than they.” Dark clouds swelled in his eyes, flickers of lightning lancing through his irises. “They will learn that the Shimadas cannot be betrayed without consequence.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes. “You two. My sons. You will go to them, and make sure that they understand that they are to honour the deal that was made. You will demonstrate that just because I am ailing, it doesn’t that the might of our clan has faltered. In fact, it is stronger than ever.” A sneer lifted his lip. “Europeans, Russians, Koreans, Americans… they all think the same. They’re pitiful, selfish scavengers with no respect for true power. They think there are no wolves in Japan.”

Both his bony hands curled into fists.

“Prove them wrong.”

“Alright, here we go!” He let the silver tigress purr as he slipped out of the driver’s seat. “C’mon, Hanzo, got the passenger seat all ready for you.”

Outside the gate of the castle, surrounded by Shimada men in expensive black suits and sleek black cars, Hanzo looked at his brother in disbelief.

“What? They love their fancy cars. And there’s no way they could say ‘no’ to someone driving this baby.” Genji patted the sportscar affectionately, and imagined her idle-engine rumbling almost sounded affectionate.

But Hanzo didn’t move, and there were awkward glances between the Shimada men. Most of them, anyway. One man murmured something to Hanzo; Genji recognised him. Masaru.

“… C’mon, anija. I know Italians are allergic to punctuality, but we still have to be there on time.”

“There is no ‘we’..” Hanzo straightened the cuffs of his suit, drawing himself up like Father did. That same tilt of the chin, the same semi-roll of the shoulders. “I will be attending the meeting. I will be representing the Shimadas. You will not be there.”

Genji stood in disbelief. Staring. Waiting for the punchline.

His brother shifted. “It’s already been decided.”

“Funny, I don’t recall being part of that conversation.” Genji rested a hand casually on his hip. “But I do recall hearing Dad say that the both of us had to be involved.”

Masaru whispered something. Hanzo gave an impatient sigh, and pushed his way through the crowd to be closer to his brother, so his words would be quieter. So that some semblance of honourable dignity could be maintained.

But it was Genji that spoke first, cutting off the speech before it began. “Don’t you dare, Hanzo. This is Dad’s deal. This is Mum and Dad’s deal. This is a f--” He caught himself. He almost said ‘family’, and brought down that implication into the conversation. Family, or Family? Shimada, or Shimadagumi? “… this is ours, Hanzo. We inherit this, you and I. We have to do this together.”

“… no, Genji. I don’t need you.”
He set his jaw. “Those aren’t your words, anija. Those aren’t your words.”

Hanzo said nothing.

Behind him, Masaru lit a cigarette, hands rising to cup the spark against the wind.

Genji bared his teeth, but controlled himself, smothering the fire before it could burn. Don’t fight with your brother. He reached into his jacket, grabbing his sunglasses. “Fine.” A flick, and his eyes were covered, masked. “You don’t need me. I’ll go.”

“Genj–”

“Bye-bye.” He slammed the car door behind him.

There were no rubber wheels to screech across the road as he peeled out, not like there would have been with the model a few generations back, but the sportscar roared for him, the revving violent, affronted, derisive.

Her roar a few hours later, as she spun to a stop in front of the hotel’s marble steps and glorious glass entryway, was a little less vicious, and much closer to a purr. Eloquent little darling.

In the honeyed light of the afternoon, Hanzo and Alexander turned to stare, caught in the middle of a polite handshake; the Italians were all lined up the farewell the Japanese with barely-concealed smirks, smirks which faded as the silver sportscar went quiet before them. Genji emerged from the driver’s seat, sliding over the bonnet and landing on his feet on the other side. The green-haired youth grinned, and waved at the covetous looks of the brown-and-blue-suited Europeans, before he composed himself, straightened his shirt, smoothed back his vibrant hair, and opened the passenger door.

“Daddy!” An excited young woman, with streaks of gold and red in her hair and her arms laden down with paper bags of various colours and sizes, darted up the steps, practically tackling Alexander off his feet. Hanzo stepped back, giving father and daughter some space, and looked at his brother in a fury, all flared nostrils and tense shoulders, and a demand for an explanation in his eyes.

Genji folded his arms and leant against his car. Behind dark glass, his eyes could be whatever he wanted them to be, and no-one would see where he was looking. For instance, he could see the tomato sauce stains on Hanzo’s collar, and could guess anija might not have been as successful or impressive in eating Italian food as he had supposed he was going to be. Had they laughed at him? They must have. They’d come here to end the deal, so they must have enjoyed the mockery.

“Sofia?” Alexander spoke in English, for the sake of his guests. “I thought you were in your room. I told you to stay there while we did business.”

Her reply was fast and chirpy and peppered with excitement. She understood her father’s will completely, but this was Genji of the Shimada family, and he just wanted to show her around Hanamura. And that made it okay, right? Just look at all the presents he bought for her! The shopping here was amazing, the place was just so cute, and everyone in Japan was so friendly! It was so much more exciting than sitting in the room and waiting for everyone to come back from their boring meeting. He wasn’t mad, was he? Of course he wasn’t mad.

“Of course I’m not mad,” Alexander muttered, as he hugged his daughter, face like stone the second she couldn’t see it, eyes fixed in suspicion and anger at Genji.

Hanzo continued to glower at the same target, his fury unabated. The gaze was focused, in particular,
on the corner of his brother’s mouth.

Ah, right. He’d almost forgotten that. Genji casually lifted a hand, and thumbed away the lipstick marks that she’d left. Hanzo looked even more infuriated, and Alexander looked like he wanted to snap his neck. Genji rolled his shoulders, folding his arms once again, and waited.

Sofia happily continued to pass on information to her father about the day’s outing. One of the places he had taken her, she could Mount Fuji while they shopped, and there was a really nice bridge they’d stood on to take photos together!

A ripple of tension rolled over both Italians and Japanese at the mention of the bridge.

Alexander quietly tried to shoo his daughter upstairs, but she got louder, asking why, what was wrong, these people were good friends, weren’t they? And they were going to keep doing business together? After all, they’d been good friends for so long, Genji said so!

“I’m sure they will, Sofi-chan,” Genji smiled politely. “I know your father watches out for your happiness.”

The slight emphasis on the word had Alexander baring his teeth. “You dare--“

Genji tilted his head slightly, and murmured something in Italian. Loud enough to be heard and soft enough to make a point. Something about time ticking away. It was a phrase he’d got Sofia to coach him on, and one that she applauded him now for getting it right.

He envied her, that she could be so wilfully oblivious to the workings of the mob around her. Or maybe she’d accepted it, found peace with the knowledge she was a mafia girl. There was consolation to be had in the pretty boys who flattered her, and bought her presents, and kissed her like she was all they wanted. Maybe that’s all it took. Maybe that’s all some people wanted. Genji watched her peck at her father’s cheek and flounce away, taking her treasures upstairs to unwrap and coo over, and he envied her.

Alexander’s hands balled into fists, turning again to Genji once she was gone.

Hanzo frowned, looking between his brother and the Italian. Sensing there was something here that he didn’t quite keep pace with. He knew a victory when he saw it, sensed the tide turning in the Shimada-gumi’s favour, but the how and why remained somewhat elusive.

“So, Hanzo!” Genji grinned brightly. “How did discussions go with our friends? Are they all willing to continue in our long and dedicated friendship?” He lowered his sunglasses, looking directly at Alexander. “Or do we need to have one more chat with them, before they catch the 11:35am flight out from Hanada airport tomorrow morning, to Korea, where they will change carriers from Cathay Pacific to Lufthansa?”

More uneasy glances. Incredible how a repeat of information giving innocently by a young woman could sound like a threat.

Alexander calmly forced a smile to Genji. “As I was saying to your brother, Mr Shimada, today was very… definitive.” He forced the smile a little wider. “But perhaps another friendly chat before we part ways might be a good idea. No sense in… burning bridges.”

“Of course!” Genji flicked his glasses back over his eyes. “I would hate to lose a friend. Ciao.” He wiggled his fingers as the Italians withdrew into the hotel. Alexander spared one final look over his shoulder, frowning, puzzled. Had he been told that this would be a simple deal to break? Had he been told that Genji was the least of his problems, some young punk who didn’t care for the family
business?

_Surprise, motherfucker._

Hanzo waited until they were gone before stomping down the steps, a bare foot between them so the hissed words could be somewhat private. “What was that? What just happened?”

“I bought you some more time,” Genji answered, flatly, arms still folded. “And I might have just saved Father’s deal in the process.”

“I had everything under control.”

“Did you?” Genji cocked his head. “So he was going to pay? And he wasn’t just going to take his money and our guns to the Germans, and their friend the Chasovshchik?” He stumbled over the pronunciation of the word. Russian was harder than it had a right to be.

A moment of hesitation, slight unease in Hanzo’s expression. “How did you even know about that? You weren’t in those meetings.”

“The meetings I was never invited to?” Genji tilted his head. “Well, _she_ was. And it’s remarkable what kids pick up about their fathers’ businesses, _ne_?” He drummed his fingers on his arm, humming softly.

The elder brother set his jaw, still frowning, still angry.

The younger stretched, rubbing the back of his neck. “They’re not pieces on a _go_ board, Hanzo. They’re people. They have their own lives and secrets and, sometimes? Sometimes, giving an order won’t get you to do what you want. Sometimes, you make the right friends and learn the right things...” He pushed away from the car, wandering around to the driver’s side. “… and doors start opening.” He opened the door, slid inside, and rolled down both windows, so he could lean over and salute his brother. “Maybe that’s why Dad said we had to work together. But, seeing as you had everything under control, I guess you didn’t need me after all.”

“Genji. Wait.” Hanzo grabbed the doorframe, leaning down to murmur through the open window. “… don’t tell Father that I almost...”

“Sorry, bro. Only three shops in Japan sell the wine I need tonight, and the one in Yokohama will be closed if I don’t book it right now.”

“Wine?” His brow furrowed. “What for?”

“To seal the deal, like Dad asked.” Genji waved Hanzo away, wiggling his fingers. “_Ja, ne!_”

He could have peeled down the street in a roar of triumph, showing off in the same way he’d arrived. But he chose to be a little more sedate. After all, so many people were staring. It would be rude to rush past without letting them see what they wanted to see.

The next morning, Genji’s head felt like a well-used anvil and he was making plans to destroy the sun. Every single sparrow’s chirp sent bolts of pain through his skull, and the rustling of the sakura’s branches overhead sounded like a matron deliberately clearing her throat in an effort to make him move. He groaned, and turtled down further into the protective wall of his scarf.

Getting dressed had been difficult, but here he was, _hakama_ and _haori_, proudly bearing the Shimada crest and _mon_, waiting in the garden while Hanzo did whatever it was he needed to do. Lots of
phone calls, ordering people around, getting the maids to prepare tea, whatever. Genji was the very inch the traditional son of Japan, but for the huge sunglasses over his eyes and the half-empty packet of painkillers clutched in one hand, and the way he was leaning against the tree, collapsed in a half-sprawl.

“Sweet fuck, don’t talk to me,” Genji whispered, as he heard his brother approaching.

“I told you not to drink so much.” Hanzo sounded smug and fond in equal measure.

“You lying hound,” Genji risked squinting up at his brother. “You kept refilling my glass as much as his. You’re an enabler, you are, so fuck you.”

“No English in the castle, boke.”

“Bukkorosu zo.”

First impressions were important. But more important was the follow-up. That’s why Alexander had been invited to the castle at midnight, and why Genji had bought the wine. To talk. No business, just two men on equal footing, introducing themselves, and just talking. By the time Hanzo had come to investigate, one and a half bottles of expensive foreign wine were gone and it was as though Genji and Alexander had been friends for years. Then, then things could get started. Confessions could be made about family, about the fears for their father’s life, how they loved him and wanted to do him proud, about how the sons had huge shoes to fill and they’ll need the support of people that could be trusted. People like the ones who had made a deal with their father. People who were honourable and loyal, because god knows that that’s a hard thing to find when family is involved. Well, Genji had done most, if not all, of the talking. Hanzo had mostly just stared at the way his brother and a mob boss could come to a more productive agreement over midnight drinks than an entire room full of people had in a conference room of obligation.

It had all been calculated, of course. Careful. Genji couldn’t afford to lose his father’s hard work on a misspoken word. The conversation had been recorded and the bodyguards of both groups were confirmed witnesses, just in case Alexander changed his mind when he sobered up. But he wouldn’t. Genji prided himself on his ability to make friends and influence people.

Hanzo was smiling. He ruffled his brother’s hair, relaxed, centred, proud. “Money has already started coming in. They’re paying. And what they aren’t paying, there’s talk that some of their assets will be moved into Shimada-gumi control before the end of the month.”

Genji groaned softly. “What did I say about talking?” But he gave a crooked smile and a small nod. “You should listen to me more often, hime-san. I have some great ideas, you know.”

“I don’t think any idea which leaves you in as much pain as you are now counts as being a ‘good’ idea.”

“And you thought eating spaghetti would make him like you?”

Hanzo flushed. “Shut up, boke.”

Genji laughed, groaned, and popped another two tablets, swallowing them dry.

A voice called from the castle. Masaru, telephone in hand, announcing a call from the hospital. Genji’s smile faded as Hanzo turned to go, pretending he didn’t see the disdainful look from the flunky, pretending he didn’t hear Hanzo’s anxious query.

He only heard half of the conversation. He knew he was missing part of it, one always missed
something when eavesdropping, and even more so when one’s head was pounding. But it sounded
remarkably like Hanzo was taking full credit for the success of the negotiations. There was nothing
about the process, only the results that the morning light showed, and how those results were being
handled, in Goro’s name, by the eldest son. How proud father must be.

Genji was no longer slumped in the shade of the sakura when Hanzo ended the call. He’d left, and
left his brother no sign of where he had gone.

“You!” She stared, wide-eyed, a hand to her throat. “What are you doing here?!”

“Hi, cousin.” He continued to leaf through the book. If he was caught, he might as well keep doing
what he was doing.

“Genji!” Kasumi glanced over her shoulder, frantically checking for guards, then closed the door
behind her. “You shouldn’t be here! What are you doing?”

“Looking for something.” He paused to lean over and peck her cheek, before turning the pages
again. Old names, the histories of the Shimada family written in ink and preserved for eternity.
Distracted, he flipped through the generations.

“You have a copy of this in your own home,” she scolded, her anxiety fading. “You know the kind
of trouble you could get into if you get caught trespassing.” There were rules, after all. One of them
being ‘don’t go where you aren’t invited’.

“I know. But I think something’s missing.” History was written by the victors, after all. He paused to
read through the account of great-grandfather’s life, reading each character carefully on the off-
chance what he knew from memory was faulty. “I just need to see things from a different
perspective.”

“If the guards catch you…”

“They won’t catch me. They’re not even looking for me. They didn’t even see me come in.”

“And the cameras?”

“Cousin,” he looked up to give her a wry smile. “Please. You think I didn’t know about the
cameras?”

She huffed, and poked his nose. “If you’re as good as you think you are, you wouldn’t have let me
spot you.”

“Or maybe I just like you. You’re the sweetest little cousin I could ask for.”

“Flattery gets you nowhere.” She folded her arms, lips pursed to try and hide the smile.

“And yet, you haven’t called for the guards. So I clearly made the right choice.” He turned the page.
Here, grandfather’s life. His childhood, his education, his nakodo-approved wife, the five sons.
Yōzei, Ōka, Sadaakira, Hatsusebe and the youngest, Goro. His life. His death. A handful of pages to
sum up an entire man’s life and his contribution to history.

He turned the page. Uncle Yōzei barely had more than a page that had been worth writing down.

“… how’s Uncle Goro?”

“Fading,” Genji admitted, looking at the words without reading them. “The cancer’s too deep and
too strong. It’s growing faster than it can be killed.”

Kasumi rested a hand on Genji’s arm. “… I’m so sorry.”

He could believe her. He wouldn’t have believed her father. “… I don’t want to think about what’s going to happen when he’s gone.” He rested his cheek against hers, seeking a brief and rare moment of familial comfort.

“You’ll have to.”

“… I know.” He flipped the pages forward, just to check, and gave a short breath of a laugh. Goro had twelve pages. God, what a legacy. Look at all he’d done for the family. How many pages would he and Hanzo have, in the family annals? “But not right now. I can’t.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “Some kind of answers. I don’t even know what the questions are, and I’m not even really sure why I’m looking, I’m just…” He looked up at her. “Kasu-chan, did you know I was sick when I was little?”

She blinked at him. “You were? I… no, I didn’t know. You’ve always been so healthy.”

“Yeah.” He frowned as he flipped back to Yōzei’s life. “I never get sick. But apparently, when I was born… something was wrong. I don’t know.” There was any number of things that could keep a child at death’s door. But what would allow him to recover so quickly after so much had failed?

Kasumi bit her lip, glancing to the door, then back at him. “I heard Father say once that Uncle Goro was careless with his money in the first few years of his marriage.”

A few years after the marriage? Not Genji’s birth, then, or the medical emergency that followed. The loss of money might have been for the new dresses and jewellery for Akane, and the extended honeymoon that they both thought they deserved. Careless, this youngest son and this new bride, celebrating their inheritance and their marriage by frittering away their wealth. A shame on the family name.

… Or was it really a shame, or was it an act? Was Goro good at pretending to be something he wasn’t? Is that where Genji had gotten it from?

He focused again on the words. Noda Akane, betrothed to Yōzei, approved by grandparents on both sides of the family, two nakodo, and a soothsayer. Approved by them, but not by her… or by the man who would photograph her from across the room while she smiled and casually posed and pretended she didn’t notice him.

Genji had known the contents of these pages since he was old enough to read. His family tree was drilled into him, all the way to the shogun’s decree, and further still when names and myths were intertwined. So what was he looking for? What was he hoping to find?

“After that?” He murmured.

“… I don’t know. Apparently financial records became harder to get, but even my father couldn’t deny that they were doing better than they had done in grandfather’s time. Even the thefts were answered, and returned more than twice over.”

Yōzei. His death, no marriage, no heirs; barely more than a page as a memorial. Succession should have passed to Ōka - the one his parents brutally and mockingly nicknamed ‘Ken’ - the secondborn.
But it skipped to the fifth child, the only one who didn’t have a grandiose name. The one who was supposed to have no prospects or future inherited the clan, the castle, the widow, the businesses… All of it.

Something had changed the proper line of succession.

“… I wish I knew what,” he murmured, sighing. “… Suman, cousin. I just…” He turned the page, reading through the record of his father’s life from the copy that the Hatsusebe branch kept.

Something had to be different. Something had to be. There had to be an answer. Something to help him understand. “I might be here a while longer.”

Kasumi gave a knowing smile, and stood up on tiptoes to peck his cheek. “You have twenty minutes,” she whispered.

“Love you, cousin. Kissu kissu.”

“Fool. Just make sure they don’t catch you.”

He kept reading, but there was nothing that stood out. Maybe the Ōka branch’s copy would have a footnote or two that the others didn’t have. Some kind of fraternal rage from Ken losing his inheritance.

“… Genji?”

“Mm?”

She lingered in the doorway. “If you need to see things from another perspective… maybe you should start at home, first. Sometimes we miss things, when we’re familiar with them, or when they’re close to heart and home.” A small smile, a bow, and she slipped out.

What an excellent idea.

“… And here we are at our next destination, Shimada Castle!” The tour guide’s English was a little strident, but the rest of the group didn’t seem to mind, as they filed out of the bus and lined up on the street to listen to her. “The location of this castle dates back to the 14th century, and has been a site of cultural significance ever since then. Though the grounds had been damaged by fire, civil uproar, and wartime limitations, careful records have been taken, and the reconstructions done with utmost care and respect to preserving such a landmark of the area’s history. The two dragons you can see on the gate here are replicas of the 8th century Shimada family mon, the family symbol, and due to their connection with an ancient royal bloodline, they were permitted to use a royal animal while other families might have been executed. See how they are chasing their tails? They form a tornado. The storm was a symbol of Japan’s military power: the typhoon, the ‘kamikaze’, the divine wind. Alright, let’s go inside!”

Genji dutifully took several pictures of the massive gates before following the leader, mingling with the group of chatty foreigners and wide-eyed out-of-towners. Shimada guards that would normally have straightened their posture in respectful attention didn’t even glance over as Genji walked past. It was a good thing he’d had a lot of cosplay practice, otherwise this might not have worked. He wore darker contacts, to turn his copper eyes darker brown. A carefully-combed dark wig, bound in a short ponytail, a backwards-facing cap that proclaimed “I <3 Japan”. His distinctive Shimada eyebrows were plastered over, and thinner, lighter ones glued in place instead. His makeup was a few shades off his original skintone, carefully contoured and shaded to hide the shape of his
cheekbones, making him look a little rounder, a little fatter. A padded suit to match that image, a bit of a paunch under one of those mass-produced t-shirts bearing a Hokusai print. Baggy khakis, cheap running shoes, white golf socks, selfie-drone clinging to his wrist.

He looked like a tourist. Just another one of those gawping nobodies following the tour guide through historic Hanamura. He left his shoes at the gate, lined up with all the rest, slipping on the straw sandals given out by the gate guard, and slipped inside Shimada Castle. Staring around him like it was his first time here.

“You see before you the castle’s copper bell. See the symbol of the dragon again? You will see this in many places in the castle, because it is the family symbol.” She paused so people could take more photographs. “The castle, as you will soon see, is built on high ground overlooking the city. In centuries past, the bell would be rung in times of danger, and villagers would come to the castle for safety and protection, from a storm or from the invasion of another warlord’s attack.” She points upwards, to the ceiling, and everyone leant forward over the threshold to see. “They ring the bell with that big log. It would be pulled backwards on rope, then allowed to slam forward. Bong!” She laughs, and others laugh with her.

But these days, Genji thought, no-one would come running to the Shimadas for help. Nor would we ever ring that bell for the sake of alerting anyone in the city below. We ring it on new year’s, or during an eclipse. Tradition. He took a photograph. When was the last time we cared about what happened below these castle walls?

Alright, this way. Please stay on the path. Here we have an excellent view of the city, and of Mount Fuji. Feel free to take as many pictures as you like. It is very hard to find a view like this anywhere else in Hanamura. The elevation here is perfect, to see the city in the valley between the mountains.”

Genji released the selfie drone, letting it hover in front of him until it got the shot just right. Peace sign and big touristy smile.

“To your left… this koi statue was gifted to the Shimada family in 1745, in recognition of the family’s contribution to the traditions and protections of the area. The early Tokugawa period was a time of great military might, and though the Shimada family had a very small standing army, and were barely able to protect themselves, they were shrewd tacticians and their contributions to the shogunate were highly prized. The statue was moved to several of the Shimada family’s homes, depending on where the heir to the clan lived… but at one point it was lost. After World War II, the statue was recovered from a nearby shrine, and brought back here, where it was reinstated to the family that had survived the conflict.”

Genji remembered the way Father had told it. A tug of war between dragons that saw the fish slip away into the stream, to hide amongst the mud and ash. When it had fed on enough corpses, it rose over the mountain, red and fierce, the biggest dragon anyone could ever remember seeing. The clan had been dying. The return of the red dragon fuelled a fire that would never die. And yet, after the fire was reignited, it vanished, leaving only its memory - and the statue - behind. It hadn’t been seen since.

“Now, the legend of the koi is that those that are strong and powerful enough, if they swim upstream and leap over the mountain, they will turn into dragons.” She gestured to the Mountain over her shoulder. “No easy task for a little fish! This is why dragons are so rare.” She raised the flag and continued on, answering a question from the American couple about the connection between the Shimada’s twin-dragon and the Emperor.

The emperor uses a flower crest. He has for generations, for almost as long as there has been an emperor… and as long as we have controlled the dragons. Genji took more photographs, and
chewed the inside of his cheek. So far, there was nothing in the tour that immediately stood out. Maybe this was a waste of time.

The tour guide pointed out the *dai-dōrō*, explaining that these small lanterns - with their ancient stone designs and their modern anti-grav locks that allowed them to hover where they glowed - encapsulated much of the Japanese spirit, the *yamato damashii*. Genji thought that might have been a bit much, but he did his best to nod and look as impressed as the rest of the group. And, of course, he photographed them.

… perhaps it was true, in a way. The Japanese people were irrevocably modern, and yet firmly rooted in their own traditions. What other nation could be as proud of so noble and ancient a heritage? To have survived so many disasters and misfortunes, and still stand proud, well-rooted, strong, and advancing into the modern age?

“Now, we are not permitted inside,” the tour guide said, lowering her voice, “But this is the main dojo of the castle. This particular building has served many purposes. Once, it was a meeting hall for the lord of the castle to welcome important guests, and before that, it was a shrine to the *kami*, to the gods and spirits. These days, it is a training hall for the Shimada family, though it holds much of the dignity and sacrosanct nature as it ever has.”

Genji smiled to himself to see Storm Bow and Dragon’s Straight-Edge on their stands at the far end of the hall.

“What’re those weapons down there?” The American asked. Her husband nodded, taking his own photographs.

“Oh, those are the ceremonial weapons of the two sons of the family’s current head.”

“Are they real?”

“Yes, indeed, madam. The two sons are known to have sterling reputations in martial arts, archery, and swordsmanship.” She gestured higher. “Please, see here. You will note the massive mural overhead. See the twin dragons? This is an illustration of the Shimada family story. Two dragon brothers that ruled the land together.”

“They look kinda like the ying-yang,” the American said, taking a quick shot of them.

“Yes,” the tour guide smiled. “They worked together, the dragons of north wind and south wind, and maintained balance over heaven and earth, and particularly over the hills and valleys of Hanamura.”

*Are you going to tell the rest of the story, Genji wondered, Or is there a limit to what is told to outsiders?*

There was, apparently, a limit, and she summarised only that the two dragons protected the city and the castle, working in balance and harmony together. Then she moved on. “While the painting overhead is part of the clan’s ancient history,” she pointed below it, past the weapons, “That hanging scroll is more recent. The current family head is Shimada Goro. When he was a boy, he and his brothers were gathered together by their grandfather. They had their fortunes told, as was the family custom, so that they would know the future they would have within the clan.”

Genji frowned slightly. *Hanzo and I never had our fortunes told.* Another of Goro’s breaks from tradition. Why?

“All of Goro’s brothers received a painted scroll with their fortune written upon it, to be hung in a prominent place. Most of the fortunes were about long life, or the strength of the leaping koi, and so
on. Something symbolic. But Goro’s scroll is as you see here now: Dragon’s Head, Serpent Tail. To translate, it means ‘to start big but end small’, or ‘anti-climax’. His fortune was not a favourable one.”

Genji shifted slightly.

The tour guide shook her head, sadly, dramatically. “They say Goro’s brothers all laughed at him, and mocked him. But he took their mockery and the words of his grandfather, and used it to strengthen himself. You will never see any shrine in Japan that has such an unlucky saying hanging in such a place of honour, except here, where a youngest child turned his fate around and became the heir to the castle.”

Stirring, inspirational, unsettling.

“How did he become the heir to the castle if he had four elder brothers?” The Americans looked hungry for more.

The tour guide smiled faintly. “The eldest brother died unexpectedly. The father, still alive at that time, changed the line of succession so that the youngest would inherit.”

“I bet the other brothers weren’t happy about that.”

“I do not believe so, no.”

The man nudged his wife. “Gee, honey, it’s just like those K-dramas you watch. All that murder and plotting and stuff.”

The tour guide continued to smile politely - refusing to comment on ‘murder’ - as she raised the flag and made the tour continue onwards, talking now about some ancient battle that the family participated in, where damage to the outer walls could still be noted. Genji chewed the inside of his cheek, lost in thought as he followed, going through the motions of his disguise. There were more questions than answers. Great-grandfather had thought to doom Goro, by giving him a weak name and a bad fortune. Why? Grandfather had agreed to change the line of succession for Goro’s sake. Why? Had there been a threat? A promise? Some combination of the two that would convince a staunch follower of tradition to agree to such an impossible change?

Injured animals bite hardest. Seemed like Goro went for the throat.

Genji remembered the movie Ogawa had sent him, that chilly, dramatic interpretation of Shakespeare set in the Chinese court. The blood and betrayal had left a sour taste in his mouth. That sharp-faced queen, who would not have been out-of-place at a Shimada family gathering, stood in the middle of blood and betrayal completely unshaken. A disquiet stirred in his soul, as he wondered again who killed her, in the end. The maid? The poisoner? The ghost? She must have known them. She looked them in the eye as she died.

Maybe what had been missing had been more obvious than he realised. All these dragons and brothers and sons, and he had forgotten that there was a woman in red in the middle of all of this. That her name unlocked all of Goro’s secrets. She had helped broker a long-standing deal with a foreign power. What else had she been capable of? What else had she done? Where would it be written, if it was written at all?

Maybe all her secrets went into the sea with her.

He shivered, and his head throbbed.

Genji took more photographs, his selfie-drone hovering at his shoulder for a few well-rounded snaps,
before it settled back onto his wrist to charge. And he tried to smile gormlessly, as the tour continued, as they recovered their shoes, and as they went to Rikkimaru to fuel up on ramen. It was overpriced, and tourist-quality, but he had appetite enough that it didn’t bother him half as badly as it could have. He did make a small promise to visit Arata later in the evening, to make up for such a poor meal today.

He’d need the consolation, and the distraction, from the path his thoughts were taking.

Back on the bus, still playing the role of the tourist, he watched out the window at the buildings old and new, at the rolling hills and green-leafed trees, the way the bus seemed to be the only vehicle on the lonely road southeast out of town. Genji half-listened to the running commentary, to the explanation of where they were heading next, caught up in the thoughts of his mother’s name, bribes, photographs, words painted on a scroll to damn a child… He was almost caught offguard when the bus stopped and everyone was beckoned to disembark. As a group, they walked along a long stone path, their destination ahead of them.

The building looked foreign against the backdrop of Hanamura’s hills and forests. A stark white dome and tower, a sconce holding a golden statue of the Buddha. Two dai-dōrō flanked the lower shrine, and the path leading up to the stupa was flanked by two stone lions, one missing a head, sheared off by what must have been an energy weapon. It was odd how the bare plaster-coated bricks seemed to gleam in the late morning sun, as though made from a much richer material. It was still well-maintained, still well-cared for, despite the damage evident to the earth around the shrine.

The tour guide was talking, and Genji took photos as he listened, letting his drone hover as it snapped away. “This Peace Stupa was built in 1964, by the Nipponzan-Myōhōji-Daisanga, a branch of Japanese Buddhism concerned with world peace and an end to violence. During the time of the Omnic Crisis, this building sustained some damage - as you can see, plainly - but there is a local belief that those machines who were responsible for the damage were so stricken by guilt for damaging a holy site that they killed themselves to atone for their sins. After this, no omnic invasion force ever came anywhere near the valley.”

Really? Genji scratched his jaw. I hadn’t heard that before. I thought it was the EMP emitters from the university that kept them away.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, please step back from the path. The procession is returning to the shrine.” The pride in her voice was quiet and genuine. “Members of the Nipponzan-Myōhōji still worship and practice here today, spreading their message of peace to any who ask. Three times a day, they make a circuit of the hill, praying for the city and all of its people, before making three circuits of the shrine, and then they disperse. After this ritual is over, you will be welcome to speak to the monks, and they will be happy to answer any questions you may have.”

Genji turned to watch. In yellow pants and white hooded garments, they came. Some carried flags, others small drums. Others worked prayer beads through their hands, or kept their palms pressed together. But they all stepped slowly, singing and praying in time with each other. Genji felt a little winded with disbelief when they came closer, and he saw the gleam of metal amongst the faithful. Omnics. Some of the monks were domestic-model omnics.

He’d never seen them before. Not in person. By law, they might have been granted permission to live and work within Japan, but the Shimadas kept a strict control over their valley. Everywhere but here, it seemed, where religion gave the machines immunity from yakuza influence and government control.

One of them turned a placid head as he walked past, and Genji would have sworn it was looking straight at him. For a moment, he almost panicked that perhaps his disguise had slipped.
But it just nodded, and kept walking, warbling in its odd lilting way the same chant that the rest were singing. Human and omnic, side by side, and in Hanamura, of all places.

The tattoo artist had come, and no-one had told him. He found out only when he returned to the castle, pastel-coloured box in hand, to find Hanzo sprawled out on the tatami, chest bared, and a man with a scowl tapping needles into his skin. Dark lines swirled over his brother’s bicep and shoulder, tracing a fluid, winding shape down towards his elbow.

“Is it going to be a bunny?”

The room was far too crowded, with guards around the edge of the room and a couple of clerks in seiza and Masaru - that bastard - and his friends, and no-one laughed. Even Hanzo looked over in irritation, brows knit together as the needle were driven into his skin.

“You’re such a child.”

Genji’s smile faded. “It was just a joke, Hanzo.”

“You are distracting me,” the old man said, squinting at the open doorway. “Remove yourself… Shimada-sama.” Belated respect, as he saw the green hair, but there was a curl at the edge of his lips to show he didn’t mean it.

“I thought we were going to get our tattoos together, aniya,” Genji turned the pastel-coloured box in his hands.

“You’re too young,” Hanzo watched as the artist continued his work, brow furrowing as he fought to hide his pain. Either he didn’t see the box, or he didn’t wish to. “And there’s only one in Hanamura. You’ll have to wait your turn.”

There wasn’t a friendly face in the room. Not the artist, not the clerks, not the guards, not even his brother. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask, to query why this was just one more thing they weren’t doing together when they were supposed to be, but Father’s words came into his head loud and clear. *Don’t fight with your brother.*

“… work was good and my flight was fine, thanks for asking,” Genji muttered, voice low enough only for himself to hear, as he withdrew, heading downstairs to the kitchen. The pastel-coloured box was put into the fridge, and the one who made the contents went for a late-night run to the arcade, where his restlessness could be put into a distraction. He didn’t want to go too far from the castle, and he could turn an ache to run into the motion of his fingers, the swift kicks and punches of an animated avatar, the control of a swinging claw, the pound of feet as arrows flew across the screen to the beat of a song.

The air was too still tonight. Too humid. No wind.

There were only a few traditional tattoo artists left in Japan. A dying art. For the sake of history, tradition, *yamato damashii,* all of them would take apprentices. They should, at least. It took Genji a few days to find out why Master Arakawa didn’t have one. And it took him a few weeks more to find where they’d gone. He considered himself fortunate that the apprentice hadn’t gone too far.

The locals jokingly called it ‘the floating city’, because everyone knew the geishas and teahouses and worthwhile bars were on the better side of town. This place was where the drunks and drug users and whores were shunted, where the streets were narrow and the air thick and foul with desperation, where the tall facades of the city proper hid the narrow lanes and garbage and the sad-eyed addicts and hopeless.
He’d never been here before. It had been hard to shake his guards, but he’d managed. No-one was ever able to keep up with him. Grey hoodie pulled low to hide his hair and shield his face, he slipped through the laneways and avoided anyone who could so much as glance in his direction.

Occasionally, voices would hiss from the shadows, asking what he was here for, what he needed. Pretty girl, pretty boy, cheap fix? He hissed back, ‘piss off’, and made his way through the labyrinth like a local. Street by street, door by door, stench by stench.

How was this so close to Hanamura, and yet so far to everything he’d ever known about his hometown?

Just after the mouth of an alley littered with trash - one of hundreds in the floating city - there was a chain link fence, marked with signs that told that this land was all condemned, that trespassers would be prosecuted, that the land was due for demolition any day now. He was just about to reach for the fence when he thought to glance sidelong. Where the fence was fastened into the wall, there was a scorchmark on the brick. Electrified. And now that he was looking, he could see miniature cameras set into the broken eaves and brickwork, mostly invisible amongst the scorch marks and natural collapse. Good. It meant he was in the right place.

Careful not to touch the metal, he clambered the wall, leapt down into a space mostly free of trash, and crossed to the steel door at the end of the alley. Though pitted with rust, it still looked sturdy. This had to be the place. He slammed his fist three times against the door. No answer. He knocked twice more. Nothing. He glanced over his shoulder, checking that he was not being watched, then he started hammering with both fists.

A panel in the door slid open, and a pair of hateful eyes glared back at him. “Fuck off.”

“You’re the apprentice of Arakawa Hayate. Aren’t you?”

The panel slid shut.

“Hey!” Genji pounded his fists against the door again, until the panel opened and those eyes glared back at him. “I want to commission you. My brother is getting a tattoo from him and I…”

“You brought his name here. I don’t want to work for you.Fuck off.”

“I can pay you.” He pulled the zip of his hoodie down, grabbing a wad of bills from his shirt pocket. The eyes followed the money, as he waved it back and forth. He’d been right to carry cash, even in this part of town. “I know you’re worth it.”

The eyes snapped back to him. “I’m not his apprentice. Not anymore.”

Genji held up his hand, cradling the money close to his chest. “You were his apprentice for twelve years. You practice a dying art. Do you have any idea how important you are?” He took a deep breath, letting it sink in, before he tapped the money against his chest, then offered it forward. “I can pay you. Please.”

The eyes narrowed, considering. Genji waited, keeping his eyes on those eyes, and not at the speckle of scar tissue he could see stage right through the panel.

Capitulation, albeit reluctant. “Eight million yen. I’ll need 2 million right now, to secure your commission. The rest can be paid in weekly instalments as the work is done.”

“Okay.” Genji reached into his other jacket pocket.

The eyes widened in sheer disbelief. “You’re just carrying that much around with you? What is
wrong with you?!”

He pushed his hoodie back, just enough to show a flash of neon green at his hairline. Freshly dyed; he’d had an interview and a photoshoot with a fashion magazine a few days ago.

“… fuck.” The eyes narrowed again. “You. Of course it would be one of the Shimada brats.” For a moment, it looked as though the panel was going to slide shut again, but the pile of money growing in Genji’s hands kept them there. With a sigh, they closed, and bobbed with a small nod. “Fine. Hand it over.”

The thick wads of bills were fed through the panel, and the eyes disappeared for a moment. Genji listened, and smiled to hear the notes being checked and counted.

After a moment, the eyes reappeared. “… how old are you?”

“Just turned eighteen.”

“I can’t tattoo you. Come back when you’re older.” The panel slid shut.

He stood there for a few moments in silence. It was hard to tell if he should be outraged or to find it hilarious, so he just stood there. Then he started hammering both fists against the door again. If he kept this up for long enough, people might come and see, or the police might be called, or… maybe some tourists would come by, thinking this was a taiko performance. Or maybe none of these things. Maybe he would just be annoying until someone paid attention to him. He could be like that.

The panel slid back, and the eyes glowered fiercely. “What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

“How can we at least talk about the design?” He smiled. “I’d rather make sure that was all sorted first, you know. Seeing as these things take so long to complete.”

“… you’re a little shit, you know that?”

He grinned a little wider. “I’ve heard it said.”

The panel slid shut, but this time there was the sound of heavy locks grinding, and the door opened outwards. Just wide enough for him to enter, but no further.

He’d never seen an eta before. On television, maybe, and certainly there were plenty of them who had managed to overcome their disabilities and social stigmas to become celebrities and spokespeople. But there weren’t any in Hanamura.

Yet here she was, looming over him, frowning in such a way that pulled the scar tissue on her face tight. She must have been in her late thirties. There were burns all the way down her neck, shoulder, and upper arm, and from where the scarred skin stopped, metal and bioplastic filled in the rest, wires and tubes holding her together. She wore no shoe on her left foot; the entire leg must have been mechanical, judging from the shape of her skirt and the patina of her toes.

Not everyone could afford the hospitals.

He kept his eyes on hers, as he smiled and held out his hand. “You already know me. The bratty Shimada boy.”

She looked at his hand, then sneered at him. “Yeah.”

Chastened, he dropped his hand, and bowed. “Thank you for agreeing to do business with me.”
She heaved a sigh, making sure the door was locked tight, then turned away and moved deeper into her… what was this, her home? Her workshop? Perhaps it was both.

He caught sight of an intricately-tattooed flower on the back of her neck, and grinned. “… Should I call you Na--”

“Horishi,” she said tersely.

“… Horishi-san?” The question had an optimistic note to it.

She shrugged.

“So!” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth. “I’d like a dragon tattoo.”

Horishi snorted and rolled her eyes. “Of course you would.”

“My brother is getting a nagasode.” He mimed the shape, shoulder, heart, down to the wrist. His own left hand clenched and unclenched. “I think he’ll be getting more done later. He probably wants to end up looking like Dad.” Same authority. Same presence. Same tradition. Like father, like sons.

“Is that what you want?” She dusted off a heavy book, and cleared some old dishes and trash away from the table near the fridge.

“No. Well, yes, I do want to get the same kind of tattoos Dad has. But I don’t want to start with the arms and legs.” He wandered over to have a look at the book, as she idly leafed through it. Her flower work was impeccable, judging from the photographs. And the scales of her koi had a level of detail that he hadn’t seen anywhere else.

“So the back, then.” Horishi grunted. “Fine.” She turned the book towards him, and folded her arms. “Which kind of dragon?”

He grinned. “This one.”

The small, dark workshop was suddenly alive with vivid green light, crowded with the twisting, gleaming coils of something wild and ancient and powerful, and a wind set papers to blowing and dust to being washed around every corner of the room. The eta screamed and stumbled back, pressed against the wall and staring at the massive beast looming overhead.

“Oi!” Genji reached up and tugged at the dragon’s whiskers. “Don’t do that! Asshole. You’re scaring the nice lady.”

The dragon’s head tilted to one side, then it turned and started to swim through the air, its long body undulating behind it. As it moved, it seemed to contract, tighter and smaller, until it could wind itself around Genji’s neck like a scarf or a pet snake. A little breeze, not a storm.

“Yeah. That’s better.” He ruffled the dragon’s head. “You show-off. Where did you get that from? I honestly have no idea.” The dragon nipped his ear, then played with his earrings between sharp fangs and a flicking tongue.

Horishi clutched her chest, staring with wide eyes at the glimmering dragon. It took her a few moments to calm herself, for her gaze to be a little closer to the same kind of hooded and suspicious they had been before. Even so, she didn’t look at him the same way. “… it’s not the first spirit I’ve seen,” she muttered, clearing her throat, fixing her hair.

“Yeah?” He grinned. “I’ve seen a couple of yokai out in the abandoned shrines in the forest to the
southwest. Mostly birds, though there was that frog that maybe lied to me? Anyway. What have you seen?"

She stared at Genji like he making fun of her. Or that he was crazy, or - worse - like maybe they both were.

“… okay.” Her fingers curled and uncurled, “… okay. Yes. A dragon. That dragon. Okay.” She mouthed a curse to herself, then rubbed her face and stared at the vivid green spirit. “… fuck. Okay. Yeah. Sure.”

“You’re great at detail work,” Genji flipped a few pages back, pointing out a scorpion and a bird design, tracing the photograph with his fingertip in admiration. “And I adore this. Look at this. The feathers! I want a sparrow, in flight. And maybe the cherry blossoms, too,” he flipped back to the flowers, humming as he looked through the variations until he found the species that grew in the castle grounds. “This one, here. If you could get a view of the Mountain in as well? That would be awesome. Maybe on my left shoulder?” He started to pace back and forth, hands waving, gesturing, gathering ideas, sifting through them, casting them aside. He couldn’t stop talking. He couldn’t stop moving.

Horishi said nothing. Her gaze kept flicking between the dragon and the young man with green hair. After a moment, she cleared her throat. “Hey. Just a second.”

“… yeah?” He stopped, mid-step, swinging himself around on one foot to face her. “What is it?”

She studied him, frowning. Not in irritation, this time, but in thought. Concern. “If you go ahead with this, there are… consequences. *Irezumi* isn’t just art on skin. It’s not pretty inks. It’s more than that. It’s alive. It will change you.”

He went still for a moment. He didn’t think she was talking about how he was going to be barred from bathhouses and restaurants.

Her gaze darkened, eyes locked on his. “This isn’t something I was taught. It’s something I’ve learned. These tattoos carry meaning. They carry… stories. And stories can take on a life of their own.”

Genji chewed the inside of his mouth, then nodded. “I like stories. It’s fine. I understand.”

“I don’t think you do,” she murmured. Her gaze flicked to the dragon, and she said nothing for a long moment. Whatever she was going to explain, whatever further warning she wanted to give, it tapered away, and she heaved a low sigh. “… no refunds, if you’re unhappy with the result.”

“Why would I be unhappy?” He gestured to the open book, then scratched under his dragon’s chin. “The stories you tell are beautiful.”

With one final dark look, Horishi turned aside, moving through the disarray of her workshop to collect paper and pencils, returning to the table to start preliminary sketches.

The dragon uncoiled from Genji’s neck and hung suspended in the air, eagerly watching itself being captured on paper.

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**Chapter notes:**

- Names have power, and there have been some explanations. ‘Hanzo’, in this case, has his name linked to Hattori Hanzo, the man who saved the shogun Tokugawa. Yōzei’s name refers
to Go-Yōzei, the emperor who was alive in time to see the first shogun arise. For Goro to call his son Hanzo would be a slap in the face for the rest of the Shimada family, especially with how much they respect history. (As a side note, I do not think it a coincidence that the man nicknamed 'the Oni' had his videogame namesake given an Oni skin by Blizzard. Names and stories are important wherever you look).

- Wolves were hunted to extinction in Japan years ago, but Hanzo does have the Okami skin, so it was impossible to resist having Goro making that particular statement, albeit in relation to political power and savagery.
- I did originally plan on having a longer, more detailed scene where Alexander and Genji got drunk together, but having it as a semi-vague flashback seemed appropriate, given the strength of a hangover that red wine can give you.
- The prominent placement of the bell in the Hanamura map was something that intrigued me, particularly that detail you can see within the map itself of the log being bound to the roof. The bell had been polished and maintained, but it seemed it was hardly ever rung.
- Thank you very much Blizzard for your Heroes of the Storm cinematic, released today, that helped stand as confirmation to all I had already written about the bell and the scroll on the wall, and other minor details about Hanamura castle (and for Genji, in future chapters).
- The mention of the Tokugawa period and post-World War II are both periods of time where Japanese identity was threatened and cemented in equal measures. It would make sense that the Shimada family would have emerged or defined themselves through these particular famous periods of history.
- Genji's lines in Heroes of the Storm helped confirm that not only is Genji a major consumer of pop culture, but his father was fond of telling stories about dragons. For any and every situation.
- You cannot tell me that a noodle shop right outside a tourist landmark would be any good. Personal opinion, as a foodie.
- Scott Mercer of the Overwatch team said he did not know what the scroll's translation actually meant. I have done my best to explain away this particular plot hole, inverting the meaning of 'uselessness and lack of plans' with a character who is nothing but a schemer, but it would be very unlikely to any Japanese family to display anything so incredibly inappropriate.
- All due respect to the Nipponzan-Myōhōji-Daisanga, who have stupas in India, London, and the town which has been renamed by Blizzard as 'Hanamura' (again, I will explain this in detail in an upcoming chapter). Their clothing, methods, and beliefs seem to be referenced often within Overwatch (particularly in the Uprising loading screen!) as a current group that omnis would certainly belong to. Life and Art are great imitators.
- The 'eta' - a derogatory feudal term that persisted even until the 19th century (where a magistrate described them as being 'worth 1/7th of a normal person'), and beyond - were relegated to tasks too unclean for regular people, like handling human waste, blood, and bodies. Being the truly modern society of 20XX, Japan has kept the traditional term but updated the meaning and implications.
- Horishi means 'tattoo artist'. Obviously, not her real name.
- The fact the dragon can be big enough to fill a room (Dragons cinematic, and small enough to curl around Genji's wrist (Halloween 2016 victory pose) led me to assume that the dragons can take whatever size they choose, depending on the situation. There is, after all, no limit to what the wind can do.
- Content warning ahead for violence, manipulation, and emotional distress. Please be prepared for what happens next.
Chapter 9

She kissed him hard, a hand grabbing a fistful of his hair and the other at the collar of his shirt. His hands slid down to squeeze her waist, and she pressed her body against his so he could feel every curve, every inch of her. His eyes were half-lidded, so he could see the shock and outrage on the people walking past, or the sulky, jealous pouts from the middle-schoolers sitting by the fountain. She had her eyes closed. Bliss, maybe. Maybe not.

He stopped, leaning back, kissing her cheek, whispering in her ear. “Seems like you missed me, Aiko.” His hands squeezed.

She whined, trying to lean back into his lips, her tongue flicking out, her grip on him tightening. “I hate waiting.”

“So do I.” He rubbed her sides gently. “I feel like going out tonight. Dinner, drinks, dancing. Interested?”

She laughed, bit his lower lip and ground herself against him. “As long as it is just you and me, Genchan.”

“No, I’m your fiancé.” He continued to smile the same way he had been, even to his eyes, though his hands dropped away, hanging by his sides. “I’m talking about the other guy.” He murmured a name, and it made Aiko tense up. “… Do your parents know about him? Does the nakodo?”

Her eyes flicked left and right. “He’s not my boyfriend. I hardly know him.”

“You were using a lot of tongue on someone you barely know.”

She let go of his hair and his clothes, and for a moment it looked like she was going to slap him. But there was fear in her eyes. Fear of him, of who he was, of his name, of the power he had over her. He could ruin her. She was supposed to be moving up in the world so her family could reap the benefits of the Shimada name. He could ruin her, because her heart wasn’t in it.

Luckily, he didn’t have the heart to play the game, either. He murmured a promise to take the blame, then watched her walk away, smiling at the awkward pride in her steps, while he stayed leant against the wall. Silent, still. Alone.

Some things weren’t his to claim.

He thumbed away the lipstick marks she’d left on him, then got out his phone. Rapidly typed a message, to be posted to all his linked social media. Relationship status: single. Feeling: super-duper sad. Need: drinks and a party to cheer up. Lots of crying emoji, and a few broken hearts.

There were some soft pings from across the street, by the fountain. And all the middle-schoolers checking their phones immediately looked as though heaven had blessed them. Shimada-senpai was single again.

Genji pushed his hair back with one hand, answering the texts and media replies as best he could.
Word would get back to the nakodo, another failed attempt to get the younger Shimada boy engaged. Another family would be furious their ambition had been thwarted. There would be yet another demand for an explanation. The lazy smile, the shrug, the sparrow’s reputation for flightiness, all would do the hard work for him.

He’d have to tell Hanzo, though. He did not look forward to that conversation, for he knew his brother well enough that Genji could not, would not, lie.

The ‘help you get through the heartbreak’ nudes were starting to come in on his private messages. Many with phone numbers and addresses attached. “Wow.” He raised a brow; that was a good one. He’d look them over later. He posted a quick message of thanks for all the love and support, pocketed his phone, then turned his feet towards the Block. Hanzo was sparring in the castle right now; Genji had, unfortunately, time to kill. So he tried to be productive until the time came that his brother would return.

“… unbelievable.”

But of course, it was undeniable that Hanzo had the worst timing.

“What are you doing?”

Genji finished painting the last line, then set his brush down. “Convention is next week. It’s crunch time, anija.”

“Unbelievable,” Hanzo repeated, eyes narrowed. His hair was still damp from the shower, but his yukata was bound precisely, each fold and crease made as though measured with a ruler. “You’re still playing dress-up and taking part in something so utterly childish.”

“It’s called cosplay, and there’s nothing wrong with having a little fun.” He puffed his breath onto the panel of canvas, then stood up and moved away, letting it dry. Good, the pattern looked just right. Almost like real wood. “But I know you find a different kind of thing fun. So…” From his bag he flourished a small envelope. “I have, right here, two tickets for a performance at the Magatama Theatre. Tonight! They’re doing Honnôji!” He wiggled the envelope, waving temptation within reach. “Come on, I can be dressed and ready to go in ten minutes. We can take the tigress. Or I can race you there. That would be fun, ne?” Like children. Like they would when they were boys.

But it seemed like it was a few years too late. Three, maybe, or maybe more than that. Hanzo’s eyes focused on the envelope, but then he turned away dismissively. “They employ omnics at Magatama. I’m not interested.”

Genji lowered the envelope, nose wrinkling. “Only to sell the tickets and clean the building.”

“They shouldn’t use those things at all.” His arms folded, and his eyes focused on the pile of half-finished props, the plastic frame for what might be a backpack, the wigs, the way Genji’s training gear was all mixed up with things of far less importance. Like he was seeing it with fresh eyes, not just through the lens of a big brother. His brow furrowed, distaste curling at the corner of his mouth. “Take your fiancée, if you must take someone.”

“Ah. We… broke up.”

“Again?” Hanzo turned, his darkened eyes flaring brightly, his teeth bared. Exasperation made him raise his hands. “Genji, you know you have to get engaged! This is the third woman—”

“Fourth.” Genji tossed the envelope onto the bed.
“F…” Hanzo grew angrier. “The fourth woman?!” Again the hands raised, then fell into a pair of balled fists. “Unbelievable. Just…” He hissed through his teeth. “You have to get married, Genji. I have to, so you do too. You know what Father said.”

“Yes! I know!” Do your duty. Genji took a deep breath, fighting not to let his voice raise. “And I will. I just… I would prefer that there be an element of free will in this. I don’t want this to be forced.”

“You might not have that choice.” Hanzo’s voice was icy. The threat was there, but not for a woman who might already be spoken for. The threat was for Genji, for the one ducking and weaving and refusing to follow his brother’s example.

The younger brother set his jaw, the explanation about Aiko and her lover stifled. “…Hanzo. Come with me to Magatama tonight. Please. I need to talk to you.” He smiled, softening the urgent plea with brotherly charm. “Come on, we haven’t done anything together in ages.”

“I’m done talking to you tonight, boke.” Hanzo stepped back, and shut the door behind him.

Boke. It gnawed at him. It didn’t sound the same as it used to.

He took Cake Shop, instead, maintaining the fiction that the insistent purring was intended to be a salve to a ‘broken heart’, a distraction from women troubles. Cake Shop liked Genji’s fast car and Genji’s money, and he absolutely adored dancing and drinking and letting everyone see just who he was with, but sitting still for a performance of Noh actors and musicians on string and flute seemed beyond his patience. He squirmed, and his hand rubbed insistently up and down Genji’s thigh, before Genji took careful hold of his hand and squeezed tight.

“There’s a twenty minute intermission,” Cake Shop whispered, interrupting a monologue, tongue flicking out to play with the earrings in Genji’s ear. “I’ll go and grab a stall in the bathroom, and wait for you there.”

Genji half-turned, gaze half-lidded, playing the game. “Twenty minutes isn’t enough for what I want to do to you.” His lips curved very deliberately over the word, “Behave.”

The pretty boy’s eyes widened - excitement, fear, delight - and he stayed very still for the rest of the performance. Grinning and eager to please, now that he knew there would be a worthwhile reward at the end. He even stopped pretending to pay attention to what was onstage, and actually watched for real.

Genji kept his fingers entwined with Cake Shop’s, but his mind and heart were with the music, with that mournful song that filled the hall. There was more to it than just the sound, if he listened hard enough. He could feel it seeping into his veins, could feel the world changing around him. There was blood on the floor, smoke in the eaves, the pounding of the approaching general’s feet. A song of power and betrayal; an instant of history, crystallised, forever, into a tale to be told and sung by the generations that followed. Here was a man who wanted to rule everything, sitting alone in a castle, blade against his stomach. What did he mourn most? His empire, or his own passing?

“Call me Ranmaru,” Cake Shop whispered, later that night, unknowingly being more appealing than he realised. The sympathetic grief was close enough that this, at least, made it easier for Genji to pretend his heart was in it. If there was a shiver going down his spine, it was from the tattoo’s first lines, still tender, hidden in the dark.

There was no room for omens.
Summer this year had been hotter than usual. The rain felt like a crash, like the sky was too exhausted to remain overhead and had fallen to earth. The world below was parched, and did not complain. It was glad to drown.

Genji was in the mountains when the water started to roar down, making it impossible to get home. So he had found place, an old shrine, and hoped that wouldn’t be too offensive to any spirits for a man and his horse wait out the storm. And just in case hoping wasn’t enough, he went about making himself a little more acceptable. Haru’s ears swivelled only occasionally, content to crunch away at her feedbag, while her master swept away dried leaves and dust, and lit incense he found at the bottom of some crumbling box.

It was so quiet. The rain smothered the sight and sound of the city in the valley. The smoke hung and coiled in wispy shapes, like letters written by the wind. Water dripped through the leaky roof, dampening the dust, hitting rotting tatami and floorboards, shattered tiles, rusted omnic plating.

There was a big one, out there, in the courtyard, half-draped in arrowroot. They called them Bastion units. ‘Bastion’, English for ‘safe place’. This one was safe now - it had been gutted for parts years ago. It was just a shell, now. A crippled statue of rusted metal caught kneeling, wearing a cape of long vines and broad leaves.

Genji had half-joked to Haru that while they were up here, he should collect ingredients for _kuzumochi_. Yet the place felt too quiet, and as sacred as a place it had been when there were priests and maidens still attending this place. No-one wanted to reclaim this, no-one. No-one even wanted to come out here. People had died here. Brave souls risking radiation damage or robotic retaliation had come to collect the bodies, to see them returned to families and given due ceremony, but then they’d left. The place was as silent as a cemetery. The omnics, draped in vines and covered in moss and grass, were memorial stones; it was best not to disturb them.

As it rained, as time dragged slowly on, Genji moved through basic forms, without hostility, a sword in each hand. This was not one of the rituals that had been performed here, but it was a ritual regardless. A reminder of tradition, of the old things not forgotten. Yet little flicks of his wrists lent flourishes to katana and wakizashi strikes that one might conservatively call ‘unorthodox’, and he kept time with modern music, private speakers that fed the music right to his ears without disturbing the sanctity of the shrine. He moved heel to toe, rolling and freezing his body, bobbing and weaving and shimming in place, choreography of his own making. The modern world, still moving, still going forward. Genji focused on his steps, moving carefully, precisely, over the broken floor, his shoulders and hips giving the old forms new rhythm. Combining past and present; being the combination. Swords and shrine and song and motion.

When the song ended, he sheathed his _daishō_, pulled his earphones out, and looked out at the rain. And the omnics. He remembered the stupa, not far from Hanamura, and the omnics that prayed. That claimed the right to a soul. Perhaps these wrecks here were more than memorials, and nature had left her own gifts at their passing. Perhaps, perhaps. Should he burn incense for them, too? Did a machine have a soul? Could it ever? They were given faces, names, tasks. They had them taken away. Did they have something that couldn’t be taken away? Or did they only think that they did?

Occam’s Razor, Chekov’s Gun; _cogito, ergo sum._

Genji snorted. Philosophy made his head hurt. Or maybe the summer heat had gotten to him. He set weapons down, and stepped out from cover, leaving the broken shrine and setting bare feet on bare earth. The rain soaked him to the skin and flattened his hair in a heartbeat. He laughed, stretching his arms wide and lifting his face to the sky, before striding forward. He was forced to shade his eyes so he didn’t go half-blind from the torrential downpour. He circled the empty omnic shell, squinting up
at it and its cape of twining vines and bobbing leaves. It must look regal, when the flowers bloomed.

“… they say your kind were hard to kill,” he said, voice raised over the roar of the rain. “You were fire and death. A monster.” He wiped his face, slicked back his hair, shielded his eyes again. “There aren’t any monsters here, anymore. Just graves. And people.”

His shoulderblades itched. He glanced back towards the shrine, where his swords rested, laid out on the threshold. They were there, far from him, but he felt their weight at his side. He remembered that night. The darkness. The faun and its mother. The old tradition of whetting the blade in blood.

No monsters. Just people.

He swallowed hard, and looked back up at the omnic, staring into the empty rusted socket where its optic light would have been. It was just a shell. There was nothing left of it that could see him, or move itself. No wires, no chips, no bullets or warheads or firing mechanisms, nothing at all. Nothing but lifeless metal.

… lifeless.

After a moment, Genji swallowed, and bowed at the waist. When he rose, he was shivering. It must have been the rain.

He returned to the shrine, shaking the water from his hair and squeezing it from his clothes. The scent of the incense hung heavy, mingling with the smell of rotting wood and dry summer dust. Haru nickered softly, resting. The rain rattled and hammered against the kneeling Bastion’s metal shell.

Genji was still, goosebumps prickling over his skin.

His dragon bounded forward towards the koi pond, leaping over the gossiping maids. They shrieked and laughed, holding onto their hair and their jackets and their tea, seeing nothing in green, seeing no dragon at all, but certainly feeling the sudden burst of wind as it passed.

“Good afternoon!” Genji called. And he stopped, and stared in joy. “Kanna! You came to visit!” He paused, frowning, and gestured at the wooden cane. “What is this? You don’t need that, you’re not an old woman!”

“A flatterer as always, Young Master.” His former nursemaid leaned heavily on Misa’s arm, tapping her cane on the ground. “Twisted an ankle a while back. I’m on the mend, but the doctor seems to think I need all the help I can get.”

“I’m glad it isn’t serious, then.”

“As serious as you are, Young Master. It is good to see you again. I am glad to see you are… healthy.” Her eyes flicked sceptically above his eye level.

Around her, the other maids gasped and hid smiles behind their free hands.

“You like it, ladies?” He took a pose, tossing his head back, letting them see from front and sides. “New month, new haircut.” He’d kept the green, of course he did, long and messy, but only on top. The sides were close-sheared to his skull, cut with ornate lines.

Rae couldn’t stop from giggling. “You look like a rooster!”

“Oh no!” Genji raked both hands over his head, rubbing the undercut’s shorter fuzz and ruffling the
lengths on his crown. “I’m supposed to be ‘Sparrow’! Do you think I’ll need a new nickname?” He swapped to English, grinning from ear to ear. “I guess they’ll have to call me Big Cock Genji.”

Kanna freed herself from Misa’s grip and hobbled forward. He laughed, and then howled as she whacked her cane hard against his leg. Then she smacked him again, harder, and then again and again across the arms he was raising protectively, until his laughter was replaced with yelps of pain.

“Young Master, how dare you speak so inappropriately!” She had a lot of energy for a woman who was supposed to be recovering. “In front of all these young ladies! Have you no shame?”

“No shame at all, Kanna!” He said cheerfully, and then howled again as she grabbed his earlobe and tugged him down to her level. Still hitting him with her cane until she was certain he was no longer laughing.

“You will apologise at once!”

“Ngaaaah…” She was holding his ear painfully as it was already, but the studs and earrings he was wearing were not supposed to be twisted like that. “I am sorry for my filthy mouth, ladies. I should not have been so disrespectful.”

The maids looked between Genji and Kanna, bewildered at this odd reversal of power. But the giggles were still unable to be repressed.

Kanna grunted, satisfied, and released him. “Just because you’re a grown man now doesn’t mean you’re above the niceties of normal people.”

He rubbed his ear. “I know. I’m sorry. I know better.”

“You certainly do!” Kanna tapped her cane heavily against the sod. “I certainly hope you’re better behaved than this, after all my efforts to teach you proper manners! It has been a long time since you were waddling around this place. Chubby little baby boy, never still, always loud, always leading us on a chase. You used to do everything you could to escape from wearing clothes. The number of times you’d slip away from us after your bathtime, Young Master, and cause such a scene…!” She paused, and her expression was entirely free of slyness. “So, I would imagine that your new nickname would be entirely accurate, should you choose it.”

Misa looked scandalised. “Mother!”

Genji found a bark of a laugh escaping him as he rubbed his ear. He pressed his lips together quickly, trying to hide his amusement, in case it earned him another beating.

The woman smiled serenely.

“Heh.” Genji checked his piercings were all in order, then offered his arm to Kanna. “It is good to see you again.”

“I thought I would come and see the state of this place,” Kanna said, her hand gripping tight to Genji’s arm, leaning heavily on him as they walked together. “Make sure my daughters were continuing to do our family name proud.”

“As they do the Shimada family proud with their service.” He threw a grin to Misa and Rae, who blushed and dipped their heads, greatly pleased. The maids hung back while Genji and his nursemaid strolled the gardens.

“And what of the Young Lord?”
Hanzo. He never really had time for the servants. He probably didn’t even know they had names. “He’s busy. Lots of work to do, to get ready for… you know.”

Kanna nodded, and sighed. “It is good that you brothers have each other to rely on. When your mother passed, your father struggled for quite some time.” She stopped walking, looking up at the cherry blossom tree, and Genji did the same.

“… no-one ever talks about my father struggling,” he said, softly. There was a scroll in the shrine. There were 12 pages in the annals. There was an empire. It seemed effortless.

“He did.” Kanna rubbed the bony knuckles of her hand. “He loved your mother so. When she passed, he was… disconsolate for quite some time. I think he kept hoping she was still out there, somewhere. That one day she’d come home.”

Genji turned his gaze from soft pinks of the blossoms overhead to the woman beside him. “They never found the body?”

She frowned slightly, searching his eyes. “Did no-one ever tell you?”

“… I was three years old, Kanna. I don’t think they wanted to upset me.” His shoulders hunched. “And I don’t suppose I ever really knew her, so…” He shook his head. “All I know is that she was lost at sea. What… what happened?”

His old nursemaid hesitated. “Young Master, I don’t know if I should speak of this…” She shook her head. “With your father so ill, it would not be right.”

“Please. Tell me.”

Kanna took a deep breath, her hand tightening around the cane and around Genji’s arm. “You’d finally come home from the hospital. You were better. You know you were sick? You were so frail. You weren’t supposed to live. It’s a miracle you did. Your mother and your father were exhausted with relief. They… took time off from the business. They spent time just being a family, with you and the Young Lord. Then one day, they left your brother and I with us - with me - and… they went sailing.” She rubbed her knuckles again, and started walking, leading Genji around the sakura tree and towards the pines. “It was a mild night, and it wasn’t unusual for the two of them. They used to sail a lot, on their honeymoon. Your mother was an excellent sailor. But a storm came out of nowhere. The Coast Guard found your father, concussed, and the yacht half-sunk in the bay. There was no sign of your mother anywhere. They searched, but… the current had swept her out to sea. She would have drowned.”

Genji’s throat felt tight.

“… Young Master, I am sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I’m…” He let one side of his mouth tug into a faint smile. “I am glad to know the truth. It’s… it’s better than only thinking I know.” He took a slow, deep breath. “… she’ll be waiting for Dad. It’ll be okay. It’ll all be okay.”

Kanna patted his arm, then made a small gesture, kochi kochi. Genji’s smile grew, and he dipped his head, letting her ruffle his hair. He closed his eyes, letting the woman’s kind touch soothe away the trembles. He did always like that feeling.

“Green.” She tutted. “You would think, Young Master, you would want to look cool. Not like a vegetable.”
“I have several witty replies to that, Kanna,” he said, beatifically, “But I wouldn’t want you to smack me again.”

“Hrmph.” She smiled. “Maybe you have learned something after all.”

He studied Kanna as they walked, as he guided her back to the gaggle of maids. She was still here, but for how much longer? While she still seemed spry, in the strands of white in her hair there was all too keenly here a reminder that life was fleeting. What if he never saw her again?

“… Kanna?”

“Yes, Young Master?”

“Thank you.” He bent double as he bowed. “For everything.”

“Stop that, Young Master!” The woman gave his shoulder a small shove. “A Shimada should not bow to a servant!”

“You can’t stop me doing what I want, Kanna!” He bowed even lower. “I’m doing it!”

She hit him with her cane. He laughed, rose, bowed a little more meekly, and smiled as he watched the women disappear back into the castle grounds.

Lost at sea. Drowned. Genji’s smile faded. All those little pieces of history that no-one really wanted to talk about, and finally he had a full picture.

But was it a full picture? Or was this just a piece of a story, like a name, like something told by a tour guide to those who didn’t need to know everything?

Something wasn’t right. Storms don’t come out of nowhere. Not for the Shimadas. Not for those who controlled the winds, the dragons.

Genji glanced over to the koi pond, where his dragon was bent double over the water, nosing at the koi and licking the snouts of any of the fish that surfaced. It snorted loudly at one of the fish that was splashing it, before looking over at Genji. A forked tongue flicked over lips and whiskers, before it grinned toothily, and leapt up into the air to twist into a mimickry of the pattern that was taking shape on Genji’s back. Then it paused, sensing unease, and came bounding through the air to nuzzle at its master’s cheek.

“My,” Genji said softly, as he raised a hand and patted its snout. “What big teeth you have.”

He rested his chin on his hands as he read, staring at the words on the page. Out the corner of his eye, he could see his fast food wrappers, balled up on the tray on the other side of the table, the empty tables, the bright advertisements on the walls, the people walking past outside. The restaurant was mostly empty, the lull between breakfast and lunch giving some semblance of privacy and quiet. He found it easier to think with people in the background, with music playing the latest hits and muffled conversation of other lives from behind the counter and at the other tables. His leg bounced under the table, and he read.

The last time Goro was able to sit up, he was angry. It was hard to tell who started it, or just which of them had set him off, but his shout silenced both sons. Genji and Hanzo stood side by side, at least a foot further apart than usual. Goro was tired. But his anger gave him strength. He had lectured them, those stubborn, angry boys, but it was not until he started to recite the story of the dragon brothers that both Hanzo and Genji had listened. Staring at the ground in shame.
Goro had breathed hard, the effort of speaking becoming difficult; the story ended with the dragons’ fight. "The reason I told you stories is so you learn from them! So that you do not make the same mistakes they did! Stories are lessons, lessons you need to learn from.”

Genji had scuffed the floor with his shoe. How many times had he heard this? The tale was as familiar as his own skin. But it felt different, now. Like the way Hanzo called him ‘fool’ in a tone of disdain rather than affection.

He couldn’t remember what he had said to Hanzo, or what Hanzo had said back. But Goro had called them out on their disagreement, had seen the rift. And the words he’d chosen next bothered Genji greatly.

“You must work together to rule my empire.”

Hanzo had gone off on his own direction, surrounded by his subordinates and guards. Genji had watched them go, waiting for an invitation that would never come, before he went back to the Block. He worked on his cosplay. He answered his fanmail. He took a shower. He grabbed a couple of books from the shelves, put them in his backpack, and went out for something to eat. Something fast and entirely unhealthy. Comfort food. Then he’d come back the next day. And the next. And the next. Good thing he worked out, or all that fried food was going to go to his waist rather than the muscles he was very carefully maintaining.

He was here again, today. The food was gone, sitting heavily in his stomach, his music a wall of sound that shut him away from the rest of the world, and on the page the lives of people long dead played out in his mind’s eye. Empires reduced to words in a book. Goro had twelve pages in the Shimada annals; how much of that would be remembered by history? Genji read over the names and events he had known since he was a child.

Goro had called it ‘his empire’. So had Nobunaga. Did those men have the same spark of madness in their eyes, as they watched what they had fought for slipping away?

Tenka Fubu.

What are you looking for? He didn’t know. Today? Maybe it was comfort. Understanding. Something to keep the unease at bay.

Stories. They were lessons to learn from. But what happened when people didn’t learn? Is that when it became history? Stories got retold; history repeated itself. Genji raked his painted nails through his hair and tried to think. Tried not to be caught in the same looping pattern of thought. The way he sought for answers where none would be found. Maybe Dad was right. These stories were going to his head.

But then, his name was ‘Genji’. How could they not?


Someone was standing right in front of him. Genji took his headphones out, putting the music - and his railroaded thoughts - on hold for a familiar face. “Yo, Tsukuda-san!”

“Good afternoon, Shimada-san. Are you busy?”

He smiled brightly, relieved for the distraction. “What are you doing out here? This isn’t your part of town.”

“This isn’t exactly your kind of place either,” Rin arched a brow, but smiled. “May I sit with you?”
“Sparrows fit in everywhere.” Genji swept his trash-covered tray to an empty table, motioning for the woman to sit down opposite him. “Wow, you look good. Like, a lot better than when I’ve seen you around before. I’m guessing you dressed yourself today.”

She blinked, startled, not quite sure if she should be offended. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Genji gave a crooked grin. “It means I can tell when you wear your own clothes, and when your family dresses you up to impress the Shimada clan. Today, I can see you’re wearing more natural makeup, earrings that don’t look like they’re dragging your ears, and a jacket that looks downright comfortable. Comfort is never a factor when it comes to an impressive night out, right? So these are obviously your clothes, and you haven’t had any relatives looming over you to tell you how to dress yourself. This is your style. I like it.” Between the chirpy patter, he slipped the history books back into his backpack, secreting them away before the covers could be read. “Look, I get what they were trying to do with that kimono you were wearing before, but it honestly didn’t do you any favours. You’re clearly an Autumn. Besides, not many people can wear green and look good.” He winked.

Rin blinked again, and for a moment she almost looked alarmed. “Are you… flirting, with me?”

He raised both hands. “Perish the thought! I’m not going to make a move on someone already spoken for. Especially not my future sister-in-law.” His nose wrinkled. “That would be all kinds of messed up.” He reached forward, and ran a hand over the tail end of her scarf. “What is this, cashmere? Nice touch.”

“Hanzo gave it to me.”

He leant back, understanding the tone and warning in her voice and body language. Giving her the space she needed, the respect she deserved. “He has good taste. He likes to pretend he doesn’t, you know, but he does. He has to have the nicest stuff; you’re going to be a very pampered wife.”

She looked sceptical. “Really? He seems so…”

“Awkward?” Genji laughed. “Well, yeah. But he knows how to give good presents.” He held up his phone, wiggling it to make the headphone cable swing. “Hanzo got me this. Apparently my old one was trash and I needed to represent the family better. He, like, buys me a new one every year.”

“He talks a lot about you,” Rin smiled.

“I wish he’d talk to me.” The words escaped him before he meant them to, the roll of snappy, chirpy patter unable to be stopped. Steered, but not stopped. “… but hey, he’s a busy guy, right? Got a business empire to run, all these people to tell what to do, has to stand up and prove he can take the burden Dad is gonna leave behind…” His throat locked up. “So. Yeah.”

Rin wove her fingers together, rubbing at her engagement ring.

“He has my number.” Genji fiddled with his phone, coiling the headphones, untangling them, coiling them again. “I mean, if his new friends let him call me, I guess. They seem to like forming a wall around my brother.” He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He was getting dangerously close to honesty with this woman. Women did have that effect on him. “… look, okay, I know I run off whenever we have a disagreement. But I never go too far, and I always come back. Hanzo knows that.”

“Mm.” She had such deep, knowing eyes. It was odd how they were still almost strangers, when it wouldn’t be long until they were family.

“… he didn’t send you to talk to me, did he?”
“No.” Rin lied badly. She dipped her gaze, flushing slightly, before looking back to Genji and admitting, “But he did say it was hard to find you.”

“Well, maybe if he got a little more social-media-savvy, that wouldn’t be an issue.” He grinned. “I check in everywhere I go.”

She smiled back, politely. “I think he prefers all his interactions to be face to face.”

Genji groaned, slumping back in his seat to stare at the ceiling, his body exaggeratedly limp. “Are you trying to guilt-trip me, Tsukuda-san? So cruel. That’s something you and Hanzo have in common.” He whined like she was pulling his teeth, and she hid a smile at his theatrics. Barely.

“Talk to him, Shimada-san.”

“… I will.” Genji sat forward again, dropping the dramatics. “But not when his friends are around. Especially that Houksai asshole. Who even is that guy?”

“Hokusai Masaru?” Rin’s eyes flicked left and right before settling back on Genji’s face. She stayed polite, but the whites of her eyes showed a little more distinctly. “He’s from the Yōzei branch.”

“Fuck me.” Genji blinked, and there was a taste of ozone on his tongue, an itch between his shoulderblades. “… I’ve never heard of him. Why have I never heard of him?”

“He joined the ranks fairly recently, about four years ago, and has been on the rise ever since. Rumour has it there’s some foreign money involved in his ascension.”

Ascension. The word sounded far too formal for such a little fish. But little fish can become big dragons, if they swim to the top of the mountain. Genji huffed, making a mental note to look into the man later. It unnerved him that there was this stranger so close, so high-placed, so eager, so ambitious. “Well, I don’t have to like him. And I don’t have to like how close he’s getting to Hanzo.”

“Shimada-san needs advisors from every branch, if he’s going to lead this family. You know that.”

“But I don’t have to like them.”

“You don’t have to like them,” she echoed, lips pursed to hide a smile at his stubbornness; she might have been on the verge of comparing the two brothers, if it weren’t so impolite to do so. If she and Genji hadn’t been such strangers.

Genji drummed his hands on the table, tapping out the song playing over the loudspeakers. “Hey. You want to go see a play or something sometime? I’m thinking about heading back to the Magatama. Really nice place, you know, and they do all the historic stuff.”

“I don’t think it’d be appropriate for me to be seen in public with you, Shimada-san,” she picked the words carefully, tactfully, as she rubbed her engagement ring.

“You’re here with me now.” He grinned. “’Mon. You’re gonna be my sister. And I’m gonna be the doting uncle for all the fat, happy babies you and Hanzo have.”

It was a split second, an expression that wasn’t an expression, a tension that was here-and-gone like the light from the clouds in a summer storm. But it struck hard, and true, and Genji blinked with sudden knowledge.

“Oh.” He said quietly. “Oh.”
Rin’s gaze was fierce, and frightened, as she realised what she had revealed, and the surprise of how he had comprehended so quickly. He’d seen that look before, the fear of being ruined, the fear of the secret that should not have been shared, the fear of what would happen next. But she did not look as afraid as others might have. She looked like a tree bracing for a storm. Her roots went deep. She was ready. She’d been ready for ruination for a very long time.

God. That poor woman. Genji’s hands stilled, and his gaze was serious. “… does Hanzo know?”

“He knows to do his duty,” she said quietly, as she rose to her feet. “As do I.”

“… well.” He smiled, eyes still serious, conveying his sincerity, his sympathy. “That’s something else you have in common.” He gave her a moment, wondering if she would hear what he was saying, not just what was said. If she could hear anything over the tumult of her own thoughts. He rose with her, speaking loud and cheerful once again. “How about you invite Hanzo? Like, all three of us going to the Magatama. And, heh, if the nakodo can find a woman who will have me, despite my picky reputation, we could make it like a sort of double-date. What do you think?”

She smiled politely, but her eyes weren’t in it. “I’ll see.”

“Yeah, just ask him.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, he’s getting all pissy about there being omnis there, but… maybe you could convince him of the cultural worth of it. Get him to ignore the furniture and look only at the stage. And!” He held up a finger on one hand, making a point, as he slung his backpack over one shoulder with the other, “And, if you do that, I promise to speak to him myself. Get some real brotherly bonding in. How about that? Deal?”

Rin eyed his extended hand. A little of the tension bled out of her, and she returned the gesture. “… deal.”

“Awesome.” He gave her delicate hand a tight squeeze, and smiled a little wider to feel her return the grip. “Alright, you take care, Tsukuda-san.”

She looked at him in uncertainty, as they bowed and parted ways, glancing again over her shoulder as she left the food court, as her discretely-observing chaperones caught up with her and escorted her away. He waved, and smiled, then put his music back in and made his way on foot back towards the Block.

Walking, being in motion, helped him think. He remembered the night Hanzo was going to meet her, how he’d fretted. Genji had tried to be supportive.

“You don’t have to fall in love with her. You don’t even have to like her. Just meet with her.” He’d patted his brother on the shoulder. “And if it doesn’t work out, then maybe the nakodo can find someone more suitable for you.”

“There is no-one more suitable. Her pedigree is impeccable.” Later, he’d called her ‘perfect’, though his eyes were distant. He’d deflected with a terrible joke, and Genji had forgotten. And now here he was, four failed fiancées in, and…

… Duty.

moving, even while sitting in the tattoo chair. Modern hits played over Genji’s phone, and he reached now and then for the bag of potato chips nearby. The dragon was possessive, however.

“Meeting a dragon loses its charm when you find out it’s the pampered pet of a rich boy.”

The dragon sat up, huffing, looking offended. The effect was lessened by the chip fragments caught in its whiskers, and the fact it was currently the size of a ferret.

Genji snorted a laugh. “Oh, it isn’t pampered. And it certainly isn’t a pet.” He reached for another chip, only to have his fingers nipped. “Share, you asshole.” He got another nip, then sighed and let his hand drop.

The tattoo artist snorted, less amused. “You’re not proving me wrong, kid.”

"Hey, you want to tell a storm-god to stop eating junk food? Be my guest. Maybe you'll have more success than me."

The dragon clicked its teeth defiantly, then climbed into the rustling bag, long tail looping and coiling around itself so that it could better defend its treasure. Genji laughed again.

Horishi shook her head and kept working. After a few moments in silence, she mopped down Genji’s back, considered her work, then leaned over her table to change needle and inks. “When are you going to tell him? Your brother, I mean.”

“When it’s done,” Genji lifted his head from the circular rest, rolling his neck and shoulders and rubbing his cheeks.

Horishi hummed, perhaps in disapproval. But she said nothing.

His feet and hands tapped, slowly, while the rest of him stayed perfectly still. He tried to envision what she was working on, and guessed from the jabs of the needle that it was the sakura, the falling blossoms. Or maybe the dragon’s claws. It would be tempting to look when he showered tonight. But no, it was going to be a surprise. For himself, as much for Hanzo, and the rest of the world.

He’d started spending more time in the Block. The private western-style bathroom was good for keeping this secret, even if it was cold and lonely. He missed the bathhouses and steamrooms, the community and openness in the castle and the town. He also missed the shirts and tanks he wouldn’t be able to wear because they showed off too much of his back and shoulders; his physique wasn’t something that should be hidden from the world, it was a gift. But it would all be worth it, in the end.

His phone dinged, and he reached over for it, thumbing the alert and reading before replying.

“So where are you this time?” Horishi asked. For someone who didn’t like talking, she’d certainly relaxed in the months he’d come to visit.

“Pink Lady,” he said. “Just bought ten drinks for the first at the bar; first in, first served. Then I’ll slip out back and head to the next place.” He posted a few pictures onto his various social media as proof, photographs taken previous evenings, the timestamps carefully edited.

She breathed out through her nose as she re-inked the needle. “You’re going to get caught one day.”

“Nah, I’m too good.” He smirked to see the responses rolling in, the excited promises of those who were rushing to the bar to see him. “I have this down to an art.”

“Someone will figure it out.”
“Naaaah.”

“You think your friends can keep covering for you?”

His friends. The Tanuki-ji were different, these days. Same bright colours and extravagance, but he knew it had changed. The good ones had grown up, moved on. Others had slid in to take their place. Ones who didn’t care to learn the dances, or attend the conventions, or stage flashmobs. He’d welcomed them, because of course he did; he needed the voices, the laughter, the jokes, the company. He needed people, and the more the merrier. But it’s hard to trust people when they’re being paid to keep an eye on you, to report back on where he went and how much he drank and anyone he slept with. The tabloids and blogs loved their insider scoops; the clan had learned more effective ways than sending men and women in suits to follow him around.

Friends. Were they really his friends anymore?

“… Yeah. They kind of have to.” There was a saying about mousetraps and mice.

Horishi reinked the needle, humming softly at the bitter tone to his voice. But she said nothing.

The music played, and Genji stared at his phone. His friends and fans would chase a ghost from bar to bar, until the end of the evening when he’d show up to dance and drink and reward the ones who stuck around the longest. Next weekend, he’d mix it up, be there at the beginning, slip out, leave a false trail, stay with Horishi until the pre-dawn hours. It was a game. It was an art.

His head was aching. So, he turned the music down, setting it aside, and reached for his e-reader. Carrying books around was heavy work, and didn’t lend itself to speed. But reading helped the headaches, so this was the next best thing. Carefully holding it, he tapped through the titles until he found what he was after.

Genji read while Horishi drove her needle again and again into his skin, sending his mind into the words, to the colourful life of his namesake. They liked their princes and generals and heroes, the Shimada clan. Give a boy a handsome name, a name of power, a name he could live up to.

His was a name that carried more weight in fiction. Should that bother him? There were lessons in stories. Names had power, stories had power. That’s what the Shimadas were after, power. That’s why they trained so hard, and reached so far.

The Shimada name was once known only from those who knew the black-and-white movie. Perhaps that should have been comfort enough. But Genji chewed his lip as he read.

“Hey. I want an artist’s opinion on something.”

“For someone who likes showing off, it’s strange you’re hiding the tattoo.”

“Not that. I wanted to ask about my name.”

She sighed heavily, the kind of sigh that sounded like it couldn’t be made without the roll of the eyes. “Names don’t magically turn you into

“He thumbed forward to an illustrated page, and stared at the calm-faced prince and his floral lady. When she didn’t answer, but the needle’s drive did not continue, he lifted his head, looking back at her. “You put stories on skin. You probably know better than anyone how stories stick.”

She looked back at him, her frown pulling the scar tissue tight. “Names don’t magically turn you into
something. Calling a kid Michaelangelo doesn’t make him an artist. Calling a girl Yuki won’t make it snow. Calling a kid Jesus doesn’t mean he’ll be good.”

“But names have power. Right?”

“… yeah.” She looked away. “I suppose.” She looked back at him, turning the bamboo needle in her hands. “You thinking of changing yours, rich kid?”

“No.” He laughed, but mirthlessly. "No! No. This was what my parents chose for me. This is who I am.”

“So why ask?”

“I don’t…” What are you looking for? “… I don’t know.” He set his e-reader aside, and stared at his hands, at the lines in his palms. At the scar, the white line that bisected his palm. "Do you think we would be who we were, if we had different names?"

“… Oh. I see.”

“What?”

“You’re looking for an excuse.” She rolled her eyes. “So it’s not your fault you’re a lazy, self-centred brat who likes to party. It’s because you’re named after an asshole from a story.”

The dragon growled softly, head snaking out of the potato chip bag. Genji swallowed down his own angry retort.

“You wanted an artist’s opinion.” Horishi tapped his tender back with the blunt end of the needle. “Names are like people. They don’t rule you, they only have power over you if you let them.”

Genji frowned to himself. A man doesn’t choose how he lives. “… that’s not an artist’s opinion.”

“Oh yeah?” Horishi scoffed softly.

He pointed to his back. “You said that this would change me. That it has power. What you do has power. You know that. Wouldn’t a name given at birth have that same kind of power? Greater? Please. Just… tell me what you really think.” I need to know I’m not just driving myself insane for no reason.

For a moment, she looked uneasy. She glanced to the dragon, to the wall of pinned-up patterns on the far wall. When she looked back, her face was stony. “What I think? I think I only have another half an hour, kid, so are you going to lie the fuck down and shut the fuck up?”

He lay back down, arms folded on the rest and his eyes closing as she jabbed his skin in repetitive lines. Saying nothing, not even when the dragon brought him an unbroken potato chip and nuzzled against his face.

He went to the castle, first. For old time’s sake he clambered the walls - a risky thing, in the dark, with the stones so slick - and swung himself up to the higher levels, to watch the city, and the looming shadow of the mountain in the dark. This was home. This castle was home. He was born here. He trained here. He grew up here. He learned how to read, how to walk, how to fight. Hot summer days in the shade, cold winter nights under a kotatsu, storms and winds and sunshine, the smell of the wood and the stone, the hum of electric lights and modern fixtures, all the secret crawlspace and the textures of the walls and… all of it. This was home.
Genji heard voices. He moved to investigate, the floodboards silent as he passed by. Like a shadow. Hanzo lay on the floor, on the blanket spread over the tatami, left arm crossed over his chest as Master Arakawa drove in the needle. And Uncle Ken was there, sitting, reading from a tablet. Facts and figures and foreign relations, making ‘suggestions’ that Hanzo merely nodded to, barely questioned. Genji lingered, out of sight, as he heard Ken quietly moving around Shimada resources, recommending families, bringing up names for promotion, providing options of new business opportunities that would arise when a fresh face would be the head of the family.

A fresh face. Not a withered old man dying in a hospital bed. Genji was tempted to kick down the door and slug his uncle in the face, for daring to say, to think, to act like this. And maybe an extra punch for Hanzo, who shouldn’t just lie there and let that poison be poured in his ear.

He will learn to be patient.

I’m done talking to you tonight, boke.

An odd little sing-song verse slipped into his mind. *Nigete, suzume; nigete*. He didn’t know where it had come from, but he didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t want to hear any of it.

Genji left. He went to the Block, to change, and hit the gym. He wrapped his hands with gauze and gave the punching bag a beating it didn’t deserve.

The weather outside was awful. Cold and windy and wet. Record lows for April, they hadn’t seen it this bad for a while. Nights with storms put a fire in his blood; but on nights like this, he couldn’t go running, couldn’t take to the streets to go hand-over-hand over pipes and powerlines and rooftops. He’d have to put the wind in his hair on a better night. He never used the treadmill; running in one place, going nowhere, was hardly his style. No matter how much he needed to run.

He dropped into some stretches, breathing through the yoga poses as he tried to calm down. But his skin hurt and he felt frustrated, without answers or direction. Ken was at the castle. Hanzo knew better than that. Why didn’t he just kick him out? Why did he let him stay?

Genji plugged his music into his ears, moving from yoga mat to the pullup bar, urged on by cheery pop songs and what his brother would call ‘noise’. It had a great beat, and Genji moved to it.

He watched his own face in the mirror, arms barely straining as he carried his own weight. Rising above, then dropping down again. And then up. And then down. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. It was through repetition that the body grew strong. That lessons were learned.

His thoughts kept coming back to names. To secrets he didn’t know if he knew the whole of them. To stories, myths and legends and those a little more real. It was hard to see the big picture, like this. Could you rewrite a story, if you were still in the middle of it? Or will it be as it was written, inescapable chains of ink and voice and history?

Things kept repeating. Making themselves stronger.

The tales were all wrong. The stories getting all muddled and twisted. He didn’t know what to think anymore. This wasn’t about the stories. The stories were everything. The names meant nothing. The names meant everything.

Genji. Caught somewhere between fairytale and history, a name never meant to rule but to always be there where power was the strongest, to guide and guard and keep things in check. Hanzo. The general, the tactician, the demon, the strong arm for the rightful ruler. Shimada, the rice fields, the fertile ground for all of Japan to thrive, the name of a hero in black and white. Their names carried
such weight, these two boys, the heirs to the clan. The weight of history. The weight of their father’s ambition. The weight of the dragons.

Genji hoisted himself up again, holding himself in the air as the rain pelted against the windows and the thunder rumbled outside. He stayed there, suspended, until the muscles in his arms started to burn, and then shake.

The door opened. Hanzo entered, a towel around his neck, a loose tank-top baring the sharp lines and black-and-blue of his still in-progress tattoo. He looked up, almost starting, to see Genji here; the music hadn’t been blasting, filling the room with sound as it usually had. There had been no warning of the room’s other occupant. Genji dropped down from the bar, and pulled one of his headphones out, putting the music on hold, lowering that wall of sound.

For a moment, the brothers stared at each other. The rain fell. The storm grumbled. Neither of them moved. Moments seemed to inch by, silently, as though not wanting to cause offence, or draw notice from either of the men in the room.

*Talk to him.*

Genji felt the words on his tongue, felt them filling his stomach, his throat, his mouth. *Why is Ken here? Why are you listening to him? Why are you acting like this? Don’t you care? What’s going on?* And across the room, he could see Hanzo’s throat bobbing, watched the press and shape of his brother’s lips that showed the same kind of struggle, the same desperation to find something, anything, to start a conversation. But would it be a conversation? Or would the wrong word cause a fight? A fight between strangers?

The moment passed. Hanzo turned his head. Genji put his music back into his ears. They kept to their respective corners of the room, shifting between exercises in utter silence, watching the infinite reflections but never looking at each other directly. Moving like wild beasts forced to share territory.

The void stretched wide. They had nothing to say to each other.

He braced himself against the window ledge, perched on his heels, watching the old man sleep. And he did look old, now. When had those age-spots appeared? When had his hands gotten so swollen and gnarled? When had he shrunken, and withered? It hurt Genji to see him.

It hurt his heart, not his head.

Thunder rumbled, a dark cloud building as the winds moved down the mountain slopes and into the valley. The old man’s eyes opened, slowly, fixed on the ceiling, before sliding to the window. A flash of distant lightning illuminated the silhouette for his eyes to focus on. And for a moment, there, there was a glimpse of the old dragon, the same man Goro had always been.

“Something more to say to me, boy?” His words were muffled by the oxygen mask, and the beeps of the machines that measured his passing heartbeats.

“It’s Genji, *tou-san.*”

“… sparrow.” The anger bled away, and he was old and tired and dying again, even if he could smile behind the plastic mask. “I am… happy to see… you.”

Genji climbed down from the window, and moved to stand at his father’s bedside, just another shadow in this dark, quiet room. His father’s hand felt so cold, so small, so fragile, so he held it gently.
Goro’s chest heaved, and the machines that replaced his lungs worked slowly to match the rhythm of his body. He didn’t deserve to live like this… but then, no man ever chose how he lived. Genji eyed the tubes protruding from under his father’s collarbones, then looked down at those gnarled old hands. His thumbs brushed over those huge protruding knuckles.

“What… time… is it?”

“It’s just on 3am.”

“Couldn’t… sleep?”

“I can never sleep when your dragon is busy.”

Goro’s eyes turned to the window. “I wish… it would listen… to me. But it hasn’t… listened to me… in years.” He looked more tired than usual. “A dragon… never obeys… a broken vessel.”

The son’s hands pressed warmly around the father’s fragile one, drawing him to another topic, distracting him from grief, from pain, from emptiness, from despair. “I just missed seeing Hanzo, huh?”

Goro huffed. “He was here… around eleven. Had some…” He paused, wincing in pain, then let his eyes on the green of his son’s hair. Fresh. Alive. Stark, in a room of black and white. “… things… to ask. To say… You… are not… engaged.” A small smirk. “When did… you… become so… picky… about girls?”

“When their families started shoving them at me,” Genji shrugged. “I’m not interested in anyone who only wants my money and my family name.”

“Maybe you should… marry one of… your many… fans.”

“Tou-san, what did I just say?”

Goro hacked, wheezed, rasped in agony, and that was all he could manage. Genji hung his head, ashamed for making his father laugh. Ashamed for doing what he had always done.

The night sky was dark without the stars above. The clouds built and gathered like mounds of raw silk, ready for the weavers. The Shimada patriarch’s dragon snapped its teeth, and lightning flashed. It growled, and thunder rolled. Father and son watched it, from the window.

“Sparrow. It’s time for… me to… go home.”

Genji looked over, suddenly, frightened, wide-eyed. A little boy caught in a storm.


In his mind’s eye, Genji picked out the room. On the lower levels, away from the tourists, away from the noise. The one that overlooked the garden and the koi pond. It would be quiet, it would be private, it would be a dignified place to pass on. He’d see to it, first thing in the morning. Get it ready, get it purified, get it secure. And then Father could come home to die.

… to die.

God.
“… You shouldn’t be dying.” His voice trembled like a boy’s.

“It is… what happens… when you get old, sparrow.”

*But you were so certain.* He rubbed his father’s knuckles again. *You were certain from the beginning that you were going to die. You didn’t want the chemo because it was a waste of time.* Maybe he was being paranoid. Maybe he was desperate to blame someone, anyone, for this misfortune. For this injustice. Secrets could kill you. He could blame them.

He could blame anything, anyone, but the man who chose to die.

The thunder snapped in the air as lightning struck a nearby building, before the sound of a landslide followed close behind it. But nothing fell; it was only the wounded air that gave voice to its pain.

The dragon swam past the window, and Genji could see the details in the white lines of its whiskers, the alert, feral, intelligent look in its eyes, in every scale as it rippled past. Goro watched too, his own eyes narrowed, the anger giving him a little youth, a little familiarity in his face.

Anger. Why anger?

“I’ll get you home, tou-san.” It was the least Genji could promise. “I’ll see if I can talk to Hanzo and…”

But Goro wheezed loud, a sigh of relief mirrored by the machines to his left and his right. “Thank you, sparrow. Thank… you.” His eyes closed, and his throat bobbed awkwardly as he swallowed.

The dragon roared, and the storm broke. The hospital room filled with the smell of the rain. ‘Petrichor’, they called it, in English. It would be richer, out in the hills - oh, yes, and the old shrines - and Genji felt the ache to run, to jump, to scream, to lose himself. To be anywhere but here.

Father was here. For now. For not much longer.

“I will get married,” he murmured. “I promise. I know my duty. I just… want it to be more than duty. Like you.” When Goro opened his eyes, Genji gave a wry smile. “Duty demanded you marry again, ne? But… you didn’t. You only had her. Man, you have a real problem with tradition, sometimes, Dad.”

Goro’s eyes flicked to the seascape on the wall, then back to his son. “I didn’t.” His hand squeezes. “And I… do. Heh.”

For a long moment there was silence. There was just the rain, and the dragon’s thunderous calls echoing across the hills. *This is my territory. These are my skies. This is my storm. This is my valley.*

Genji’s own dragon demurely remained cowed, acknowledging the pecking order. But his back itched. Succession was near.

*Stop. No. Enough.* He needed to run. But there was a frail hand clasped between his own.

“… you… will be graduating soon… yes?”

“Mm.” He smiled. “Not long to go.”

“And… Hanzo… will be there… to see you, won’t… he?”

Genji never intended to be there for his own graduation. All that fuss for a piece of paper. And oh,
the family would adore it if Genji stood up to accept a degree in English literature, proof of wasted
time, proof he was going nowhere. They would adore to see him celebrate his own inadequacy. No
thanks. “You know I hate those kind of things, all stiff and formal, all that time sitting still. And
Hanzo hates crowds.”

“The focus… will be… on you.”

“Hah. Yeah, I can see him really wanting to show up to that.” He didn’t mean to sound so bitter.

“Sparrow.” Goro’s bare brow furrowed. “Stop fighting with him.”

Genji dipped his head. “… I’m trying.” Trying, but it felt like he couldn’t open his mouth and say
anything without Hanzo taking offence. He couldn’t crack a joke or ease into conversation because
Hanzo was ready with some new fault to point out, some new criticism, some disappointment in the
way Genji didn’t measure up. Even the latest birthday present had prompted the baring of teeth, and
an incredulous, hostile glare.

Hanzo called his brother a ‘child’. Or he turned away and said nothing at all.

“I’m trying,” he murmured, again. The thunder rolled around the valley.

“Your mother… predicted great things for you.” Goro spoke softly, like a man dreaming. Like each
breath wasn’t a struggle. “I know she… is right. I know you… will make… her proud.”

Genji felt his throat lock up.

“… and I…” He breathed, slowly, fogging up the plastic mask, then focused his gaze on Genji’s
hair, then face, then eyes. “… it will be hard… to carry on… when I am… gone. But you…
are the youngest son of… the youngest son. You will surprise them. You will… surpass them. You
have… always… been passionate. That… is your power… your strength. You will be…”

Effort. It took so much effort for him to speak. Genji watched the rest of the sentence die on his
father’s lips, watched that face go slack. Gently, he guided Goro’s hand back under the sheets,
tucking the old man in, and kissed his forehead. “Sleep well, Dad. You’ll be home soon.”

The black dragon watched with a toothy grin as Genji clambered out of the window, then leapt back
into the clouds with a roar. Eager and energetic, twisting and diving through the clouds, setting the
air of Hanamura tense with its power.

Those teeth.

The three foreigners in fine suits shook his hand and motioned for him to take a seat. “Thank you for
coming today.”

Genji had to force his leg not to bounce under the table. He had to look professional, after all.
Professionals sat still. “Thank you for this opportunity.” He pronounced each word carefully,
mindful to do his best to hide his accent.

Two of them eyed Genji’s bright green hair with a raised eyebrow and sceptical expression. The
main interviewer opened the file before him, and didn’t look up.

“We will be conducting this interview in English. Will that be a problem?”
He smiled. “Not at all. I also speak French, if you wanted that option.”

“French?” The third interviewer wrote something down. “No, English will be fine.”

Genji nodded.

“We get hundreds of applications a year.” The man folded his hands on the table, staring intently into Genji’s eyes.

“Thousands, no doubt. But the fact I am here, having an opportunity to speak to you, is something I am very grateful for.” He was so fucking nervous. Six years of study and hard work, saving a portion of his wages to afford the application fee, the cost that would secure this meeting. This wasn’t his family’s money, it was his. His effort. His time. His everything.

The interviewer frowned slightly. “Yes.” He glanced to the paperwork. “You have significant grades. Your teachers have spoken highly of you. Lots of excellent customer service reviews.”

Genji smiled, a little fluttery feeling in his heart.

The second interviewer tapped a paper. “Certification to serve fugu. Very nice. You hardly see that anymore.” The third nodded, and wrote something down again.

The first interviewer raised an eyebrow, studying Genji closely. “You know we have a branch in Tokyo. You could have applied for that.”

"I know.” Genji laced his hands together, to keep from fidgeting. "And the same level of mastery and skill will be expected of those who work there, as much as there is in Paris. The same excellence is expected, and will be developed. But I feel like travel would broaden my horizons, and make me appreciate more of what waits back home." He took a slow breath.

"Interesting you should speak of appreciation."

The sudden dip in tone made Genji’s smile falter. The interviewer produced a second file, and Genji swallowed hard.

"No-one will question your grades. But it is your attendance which concerns me.” He set down pages, one by one. Genji recognised the logo of his university at the top corner of each. Then his chūgakkō. Then his shōgakkō. “But when you have been absent, it has been significant. It has been noted that you have skipped several important examinations. You have deliberately avoided every opportunity placed before you for competitions on a local and national scale.” He started to read aloud a list of dates, keeping track of all the times he wasn’t there. Kendo. Hockey. Mid-term exams.

Genji sat there, feeling something hard and cold rammed in his throat. The calendar of events was wrong, all wrong. These were not days that he had wasted. He had surprised his brother with a meal. He had made his father laugh. He had performed with his friends for kids in hospital, in costumes that took weeks to make. He had brought food to a hungry, desperate family. He had helped a broken man find work, and the self-respect to return to his family. He had stopped a woman from throwing herself in front of a train. He’d been in Hanamura. These were days filled with laughter and hope, and the smiles on people’s faces. He didn’t need a piece of paper to award him for succeeding at something other than that.

But these people looked at paper. And on paper, he was nothing.

“I have been in contact with others who know you, and I am noticing a pattern of behaviour. A certain lack in your character. Bad habits take a lifetime to form.” The interviewer shook his head.
"You wish to go international? I don't think so." He sighed, in pity, and neatly sorted the accusing documents back into the folder. The silence hung for a moment. "What this organisation prides itself on is discipline and dedication. You, sir, seem to have neither."

Genji said nothing. He took the wounds in silence.

"If you truly wish to further your education, to broaden your horizons, and if you are honestly willing to devote yourself to this particular school, I am recommending another 3 years at the Nakamura academy. After you complete this degree, then you may be considered for a place in the Tokyo branch, for a minimum of three years study there. After that, you shall have the option to be reassessed, and we shall see if you are as devoted as you claim, and Paris might be in the cards for you." His eyes are hard. "But I get the feeling that this will be beyond someone of your character."

And that was it.

Genji stood, bowed, shook their hands, and thanked them for their time.

At the door, he heard one of the secretaries rush over and hiss urgently. "Don't you know who that was? That was a Shimada!"

"I don't care if he's the Emperor’s best friend," the lead interviewer handed her the folder, his accent viciously rolling through the syllables of his native language, almost too fast for Genji to overhear. "If he comes to our country, he starts not with his family name, or his family’s wealth, or any kind of shortcut that he has used here so far to get ahead in life. He will be alone, and he will have to rely on his own strength of character. He will break in a day. I’ll not be allowing weak links and entitled brats to ruin the prestigious name of the organisation. Send in the next candidate."

Genji felt numb as he walked away. Numb and tired. He shoved his hands in his pocket and kept his head down. The elevator ride was silent. The building lobby echoed with his footsteps. The streets of Kyoto were filled with white noise. Faceless people walking past. He joined the crowd and walked. Just walked. Going nowhere in particular, barely lifting his head.

He knew he could do it, put his head down, and work, and do better than was expected of him. He knew that. But right now it just hurt, and he couldn’t make that sting lessen. He knew who he was, and they did not. He knew he was ready for this, but he had no proof. Only his word. But they looked at his actions, actions that made his word seem untrue. He looked like a liar. He remembered Hanzo’s words, you need to be present, and knew he was in for a lecture, or a disappointed look, or more chilly silence. Hanzo was right, and Genji wouldn’t be ashamed to admit that. Big brother knew best, but it would be the ‘I told you so’ that would wound Genji. There was already a sour taste in his mouth in anticipation. And worse than that? Genji would have to tell Dad.

I know you'll make your mother proud.

Fuck.

The past few months had been so hard. Goro had spent most of his time fading in and out of consciousness, buoyed up on a cocktail of painkillers and who-knows-what-else that kept him alive, the machines breathing for him. He barely spoke, and rarely moved, and every day that passed the nurses predicted it would be his last. But still he remained, staring up at the ceiling. Genji had sung and danced and chattered, had sat and read to him, had made the koi jump as he fed them, had spent whole afternoons or evenings just sitting there, in silence. Trying to reconcile the glassy-eyed and emaciated figure there in the bed with the tall, proud man who hugged his sons as they watched movies together, or coached them in the dojo, or… or any of it. All of it. Every moment. Genji had spent so much time just there, in that room. Watching Goro breathe.
If he did leave, and if it wasn’t for work or study, he never went far. He hadn’t spent so much time in the castle as this since he was a boy. When the nurses chased him out so Goro could rest undisturbed, Genji went to the arcade across the street and played until his eyes were bloodshot. And as soon as the nurses were gone, he shot back in there again.

This rare occasion he’d left early, to catch the train, bursting with excitement about this opportunity, and he’d seen a smile that managed to reach the dying man’s eyes. But now the sparrow would have to go home and tell his father that he hadn’t succeeded, that he hadn’t been wanted. That he was a disappointment to the living and the dead.

Genji hunched his shoulders. It should be raining. It should be storming and thundering to match his mood, but the sun was out and the city was alive with energy. Energy that he was unable to resist. Step by step into the crowd, amongst the noise and chaos and life of Kyoto, he found himself distracted. Billboards flickered and gleamed with animated promises. Music blared from shopfronts. A busker with a violin ripped out a dramatic take on a pop song. Someone called his name; he went to pose with fans and sign autographs, in a circle that grew ever larger as people recognised him, or at least recognised some kind of celebrity. The polite smile he wore got wider, got more real, with every passing moment. Soon he was juggling smartphones from the audience, palming coins out from behind kids’ ears, even getting a bunch of people to line up and learn a few dance moves to a well-known song. Laughter and joy and applause and smiles, all around him, on a beautiful afternoon.

Maybe it was a good thing, he rationalised, as the sunshine crept into his heart, as he laughed and posed and waved his farewells. He could stay in Japan for longer, where he belonged, where it was home. He could train for longer, get better. More practice would make him more skilled. He could start accruing certifications, and whatever. Be just as good on paper as he was in the flesh. There were a lot more benefits to this; this was an obstacle he could overcome. He just needed to focus on the positives.

This was a turning point. He promised himself that, as he bought his ticket and boarded the train. Things would get better. He would be better. He’d keep the promise he made to Dad, and keep fighting, keep training, keep getting better. The future would take care of itself as long as he just remembered who he was, and the promises he had made.

… but fuck, it still hurt. ‘Entitled brat’, really? The French were so fucking rude.

It was early evening when he stepped off the train. Between the setting sun and the long time to imagine his father’s disappointment and Hanzo’s chilly responses, Genji felt the tiredness creep back into his bones. The sky was still and cloudless, and he didn’t want to be here, under their light. His bed was calling his name… or maybe the floor by his father’s bed. Instead, he was forced to pin a smile in place, to pretend there wasn’t a pall over his thoughts. The Tanuki-ji were waiting for him, all vibrant colours and wild clothes. They cheered and showered him in confetti. It took some effort to laugh, to hold up his hands and shake his head in wry good humour. He almost believed their sympathy. Some of them would mean it. Maybe. They closed around him, arms around his shoulders and waist, hugs and kisses and a promise to make him feel better.

“Fine, fine. Just one drink. Then I just want to go home and sleep forever.”

When they called for another row of shots, he tried to slip away, his beer half-finished. They called him on that, on the technicality: ‘just one drink’ meant he had to finish it, and so he had to stay. Amongst the music and chatter, he drank, but stared around the dark and crowded room as he waited for his chance to leave, to slip out from the net these brightly-coloured friends had fastened around him. He was the only one in a suit, and he really didn’t feel like partying.
Then he spotted the white girls.

He tilted his head, curious, watching as they went to the bar. One of them had a name on her purse, and it must have been hers because her friend turned and called her name over the sound of the music. Ashleigh.

Holy shit.

It was a sign, it had to be. He was on his feet and making his way to the group before he knew what was happening. In a lull between songs, he introduced himself, eyes bright and his smile real. They told him his English was amazing, he told them they deserved a better place to party than this little dive bar. Had they ever done karaoke? Real karaoke? They had not, but they liked the sound of it. He knew a good spot a few streets over, definitely worth it. A joke about the legal drinking age in Japan and their IDs had them flashing them for his inspection. And he almost howled with laughter. She wasn’t American.

“I thought Canada was a myth! You’re real? Really real?”

Laughter followed them into the street, the bright-haired locals and the eager, curious visitors. Genji kept up a snappy tour-guide patter through the streets, almost unable to take his eyes off of the woman with the significant name. And like anyone who had his attention, she was happy to return it.

They took the biggest room that was still available, crowded on in there, and chose old powerballads and theme songs from old anime. They chose belt them out well, or bad, or just terribly. It was all for fun. The table was littered with snack bowls and shot glasses. The energy was electric. Hyper, almost, the lot of them blowing off steam and just tearing holes in the night. Forget. Sing. Celebrate. Live. So he did. He drank. He danced. He howled into the mic, and he grinned as Ashleigh guided his arm around her waist. She smelled really nice.

Then Hanzo opened the door, his face blank and stony. The music and singing continued, though most of the Tanuki-ji were startled into silence.

“Fuck.” Genji gave Ashleigh an apologetic wince. “… Give me a minute.” He eased her off him, rolled to his feet, and moved to the door. For a second, it was hard to find the words. They’d been silent for so long, kept apart by business partners and people who were related by kinship but not kindness. Hanzo could have been here as a brother, but… there was anger and resentment in his eyes. So Genji bared his teeth - to the brother who always succeeded, always was praised, never let anyone down, who was the pride of the clan - and his own resentment just boiled out of him. “… do you have to do this now? Right now? You wanna lecture me? I’m just having a little fun. You’re not my babysitter.”

“Father is dead.”

Genji gave a puff of breath, the beginning of an incredulous laugh. A sound he regretted making, from the way Hanzo’s brows pinched, from the way the coldness sank in claws quickly, past denial, past the haze of the evening’s pleasure.

“… what…?” The word trembled. He felt like he was teetering on the edge of some vast precipice.

“He’s dead.”

Everything faded to white noise. No more music, or laughter, or anything. Just a dull ringing in his ears, a cold stone in the pit of his stomach. He felt like a boy. This was a storm, and he was a boy. He tried to speak, but his mouth was dry. His hands curled into fists, and his next breath shuddered...
on the exhale.

Hanzo was unmoved.

The younger brother turned back to the room, and made a small bow to the party. “I have to go. I’m sorry.” His eyes flicked to Ashleigh, and it was on the tip of his tongue to apologise for not taking her to dinner. He felt too numb. Felt hollow and dizzy and…

He felt Hanzo turning away, heard the harsh strike of his feet against the floor. Genji turned, and ran after him.

The little boy running through the castle, calling for his big brother. Frightened of the storm.

The big brother didn’t even look over his shoulder.

The limousine ride was silent. Still, stifled. The streets flicked past, lights and buildings and indistinct faces on the other side of the tinted glass. Genji balled his fists in his lap and stared at the middle distance, at his brother, at the memories, at the afternoon he’d filled with laughter and the evening that should not have unfolded. There was still a chance this was a nightmare. This whole day was due to end the moment he woke up. Surely. Please, god. Please.

Hanzo crossed his arms, and stared out the window. Refusing to look. Refusing to acknowledge him.

When they arrived at the castle, the maids hurried Genji into another room, so he could change out of his rumpled suit into something that tradition demanded. Black, and patterned with the crest and mon of the family. Hanzo strode ahead into the castle, leaving the younger brother to fumble with his shoes, his earrings, his trembling hands and painful heartbeat, all alone. The whole castle was still and silent. The air must have been gasped away by something large and unkind. Genji could barely breathe, himself.

The nightingale floor sang in agony as Genji ran to catch up, to take the stairs, to follow the scent of lilies and incense down to a room that felt far, far too silent.

Hanzo was there, his back to the door, staring forward. He did not look back as Genji entered the room.

The hospital’s machines were gone, replaced by vases and incense burners. No more laboured breathing or machines beeping. The room was silent. There was a small table piled with a small collection of offerings: the coins, the candy, the candle, the folded white kimono, the daishō. A nōkansha had already been, had seen to a tradition most had forgotten, an honour few could afford. Goro was in a north-pointed coffin, now, not the bed, and was wearing his most authoritative black kimono, patterned with the rising storm dragon. But it was crossed right over left. It looked wrong. He was sleeping, he was only sleeping. His eyes would open any moment, and he would smile and call Genji ‘sparrow’, and he…

“He never stopped asking for you.”

Genji looked up. Everything felt so slow. His neck ached. There was something painful in his throat. Every breath was treason.

“I stayed by his side all night.” Hanzo’s face was cold. But his eyes were colder. “But he never stopped asking for you.”

The doors were closed to cut off the sight of the outside, but the night - no, early morning, by now -
sky was calm and the stars said nothing. The koi pond was still, not a splash, not a ripple. No crickets in the grass. The city far, far beyond the walls, down in the valley, slept. Not a whisper, not a word, not an echo. Goro’s heavy, laboured breaths did not come, would never come again.

So the sound Genji made was loud indeed.

Hanzo knelt down, sitting in perfect seiza, hands on his knees as he faced the coffin.

Genji did not kneel. He fell.

Side by side, like brothers.

With both nothing, and everything, between them.

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Notes:

- The Honnô-ji Incident, where Oda Nobunaga - daimyō of Japan in the 16th century, one of the country's Great Unifiers - was attacked by one of his own generals, and is a staple story within Japanese history. The incident has been immortalised in countless works of fiction, including performance art and music. Nobunaga committed suicide (with his aide/lover Ranmaru following not long after) rather than allow himself to be captured by his general.
- The magatama is a comma-shaped treasure that has significant cultural and religious significance. Given how prominent the theatres are in Overwatch - particularly the King's Row movie theatre and the Hollywood map - and the serious focus on yamato-damashii within this story, it seemed appropriate that a place where classical works of cultural and religious significance would be performed to have a jewel of a name.
- Cake Shop is, in Japanese, a verbal homonym. Kasuya may mean ‘Chestnut Valley’ in Japanese, and is a completely normal name, but it is also a perfect verbal pun for the sweet-toothed sugar-daddy chaser.
- It was confirmed in canon that Genji took on a playboy lifestyle. However, I imagine Genji to use this reputation for partying by immersing himself in pop culture, given his love of movie heroes and fiction (especially given the reputation in Japan of those who attend conventions). To this end, he would have taken great pains to buy and/or create the most elaborate costumes, for which the Sentai skin seems to confirm (once again, I need to write faster, because Blizzard keeps releasing confirmations for my ideas before I can claim first dibs). When Genji gets into a role, he really gets into a role. In addition, the recent dance emote for Genji features a number of moves from performances from the dance troupe Kinjaz, which was actually my inspiration for the Tanuki-ji to begin with (I do like it when things come full circle). These facts both tie together to really make him something of a rich boy nerd king, someone who loved participating in pop culture events as well as performing.
- Kuzumochi is a sweet candy/cake made from the root of the kudzu (arrowroot).
- Occam’s Razor - basically, when there are multiple possibilities, choose the simplest one. Chekov’s Gun - nothing must be wasted if it is used as a symbol in a story. Cogito, ergo sum - 'I think, therefore I am': there must be a thinking person behind every thought. A famous theory from French philosopher René Descartes.
- I did have some questions about whether or not the dragons would be visible to anyone and everyone who sees the Shimadas who can control them. I would argue they are only seen when they want to be, or when they are ordered by the one who commands them. Hence why Horishi can see the dragon, but the maids only are buffeted by the wind.
- Further significance of Akane's death will be explained in the next chapters. Linked, inextricably (of course) to Goro.
- Tenka Fubu - ‘all the world by force of arms’ or 'Rule the Empire with force' - was Oda
Nobunaga’s personal seal. As I was writing the Shimada family, I noticed an unavoidable and increasingly-significant literary parallel between them and the 'rice cake trio' (Nobunaga, Toyotomi, and Tokugawa). History repeats itself.

- I intended to ground Genji’s culinary education in real-world places. First, the Nakamura Culinary Academy is under high demand, but even more prestigious than that is the internationally-renowned Le Cordon Bleu. While it was more likely that an interview for a placement in Le Cordon Bleu would take place in Tokyo, where the Japanese branch was located, I thought that it would be poetic to have it held in Kyoto instead. The two cities have been historically rivals: the difference between the power of the emperor and the power of the shogun; the proper line of succession versus the right of arms. I hope I can be forgiven this bit of poetic license, for the sake of symbolism. As a side note, 'discipline' and 'dedication' are two of the main values of Le Cordon Bleu. The recent update to their website removed the list of values I was planning on making a direct reference to, so you’ll have to take my word for it.

- The *nōkansha* is someone who performs traditional funeral rites, such as dressing the corpse and preparing it for all the viewing and mourning rituals. It is rarely performed today, and there is a heavy stigma for those who touch dead bodies, but - again - the resurgence of yamato-damashii within this world would see that this art would still be practiced. And the Shimada family would certainly expect, and have access to, such an expensive and traditional service.
It felt surreal. Like he wasn’t there, entirely. Or this was just a dream. That odd, lucid numbness, that strange taste on his tongue, the scene that played out before him, it all stood as proof. This wasn’t real. This couldn’t be real.

Silence, utter silence. Heavy and cold. His breath should be fogging in the room. But there was none of it. No proof that the tsuya wasn’t for sons as well as father. But there was pain, plenty of pain. God, god, every breath hurt, his stomach a heavy stone. He wanted to scream, but he was paralysed; he couldn’t move. He could breathe, but he wished he couldn’t.

The torture continued.

Morning came too soon. The servants pushed back the sliding screen and prepared the welcoming area. And further beyond, they whispered and moved to make the whole castle clean and ready for the guests that would soon arrive, to prepare the meals that would be served, to welcome in the proper authorities as they came. Carrying out the orders that Hanzo had made, in detail, before he had left to fetch his brother.

The priest sat and watched the sons, counting prayer beads through finger and thumb. Then the room echoed with that sonorous voice, the prayer that would guide the soul on to peace and rest. Every syllable felt like an accusation.

You weren’t there.

He was asking for you with his dying breath.

He needed you.

And you weren’t there.

First came the elders. Hatsusebe, with his sly piety and his basket of lillies. Sadaakira, the scar across his face that every expression into a grimace somehow making his sympathy look merry today. Oka, his suit impeccable and his eyes cool and calculating. Men in dark suits, dark ties, sombre and appropriately mournful. They came with their offerings for the table, and to kneel in seiza and join the watch over their dearly-departed brother. They, with flecks of white showing in their dark hair, the same noses, the same bones beneath the skin as the dead man. They looked at the gaunt, bald corpse in black, but kept their opinions to themselves. They watched, in silence, knelt behind Goro’s sons.

No. They knelt behind Hanzo.

The priest finished his sutra, bowed, and departed. As the sun rose higher, the cousins came. The sons and daughters of the elders, all in black, suits and kimono all, for the observation of a ritual which all knew without acknowledging how or why. They took their seats in the garden and hall beyond, watching in silence, or setting their whispers to rise with the incense that coiled its gentle way to the ceiling.

Genji felt all of this playing out around him, behind him, before him. He did not feel present. His body was a weight, useless dead weight. He was watching this from another angle, from another part of the room. He could see the despair on his own face. The tears. He could see Hanzo, fixed and rigid, fighting to keep his hands from trembling. Genji could leave. He could, he felt so ephemeral.
He could leave his body kneeling there and find somewhere else to grieve. He could. But he couldn’t move. If he did, he’d never come back to his body. He’d be lost.

Genji bent double, forehead to the floor as he wept again. Awash in grief. Even the blurring of his sight couldn’t stop him from seeing -from feeling - Hanzo glance over in anger, disbelief, anger, derision, anger. Sitting side by side, a thousand leagues apart.

Sons and brothers all knelt, then. Low and respectful, before they moved, before they rose and left the room. Hanzo walked tall, leading the way as he went to greet the Family. There were black-and-white packets of condolence money to accept, and gratitude payments to make to every attendant. There were officials to talk to, for a death certificate to be drawn, for the purification ceremony of attendants and guests, for the cremation to be arranged. There was food to eat, sake to drink, and sympathies to accept from every member of the family. The sons of Goro were expected to play their part in the rites.

Genji stayed on the floor. Forehead to the tatami, until the doors were closed and he was shut in with the silence, and the body of his father. Still ‘passing the night’, though the sun had risen high and the sparrows chirped in the castle courtyard above him.

He couldn’t move.

The picture on his shrine was a good one. Goro was in his prime, there. He must have been in his thirties. It was before the sickness had taken hold, with his hair swept back, his smile confident, his eyes sharp and alert. Looking out at the mourners with self-confidence. The incense smoke made his eyes seem to flicker, to look around, to watch those who came to kneel. There was wall of flowers placed between Goro and the world of the living. His body was in the furnace, but he still smiled knowingly, and watched.

Genji bowed his head and stared at the incense he had lit only a moment ago. Had it been a moment? It was burned down, an hour’s worth gone while people moved and knelt and spoke around him, behind him. The smoke lingered in his hair, his fine Italian suit, his lungs. The smoke lingered; time drifted, coiled, floated away and vanished.

He should stand. He should move. There were people to greet, people to thank, people who had come from all over the world for this funeral. He had his part to play. But he felt so numb.

He looked up at the portrait of his father again, then his eyes slid to the kamiyo. On the stark white paper, the fluid lines spelled out the name Shimada Goro would be known for in eternity, the name that would be recorded in the annals amongst his legacy and all he had done for the clan. No longer ‘fifth son’. But who had chosen this name? His brothers, those schemers, those liars, those who sought revenge? Had the priests chosen it, some gentle joke or irony to make his passing easier? Or harder? Had Goro himself chosen it, before he died?

Sojiro.

‘Prosperity through Two Sons’.

Genji tried to swallow, but his throat was locked tight. He stared into the looping characters, the black on white. More than twelve pages in the Shimada records, all those secrets and lies and everything he had done, yet Goro would be remembered through this name, through the sons he had raised. His legacy immortalised by these two characters… by his boys.
Sojiro.

_He needed you and you weren’t there._

_He died without ever hearing you say goodbye._

_You didn’t say goodbye._

Genji bowed his head, fists clenching in his lap. The trees rippled with a passing breeze.

He heard Ken’s voice in the background, amongst the murmur of mourners and the soft sound of music being played. ‘Sojiro’ could not have come from him, or from his brothers. It would not have. There was too much respect in it. Ken would have chosen ‘Takeru’, that insult spoken over tea and sashimi, over a discussion of the failures of his sons.


Ken was talking to Hanzo. They - the uncle and the brother - both turned, sensing eyes on them, and stared at Genji. Both of Hanzo’s fists were clenched.

Genji hunched as he rose from the shrine, shying away like a kicked dog.

It was crowded here, at the shrine. The mood was low, and everyone spoke in whispers. Even the foreigners, who watched the proceedings unfolding, played their parts in careful, watchful silence. Tiptoeing, almost, to avoid offending their Japanese business partners with a _faux pas._

He’d made it halfway into the crowd before something broke the quiet.

“Genji.”

He felt a woman’s arms wrap around him, and he went rigid for a moment. Not wanting to be touched, not wanting anyone to offer him comfort he didn’t deserve. But she murmured so sweetly that he just bowed his head, and returned the embrace. She was asking if he was alright, and he just nodded on automatic. _I’m fine, I’m fine, my father’s dead and it’s my fault, I’m fine._ It took him a moment to recognise Sofia, even when she let go and looked into her eyes. She looked so different when she wasn’t smiling.

Her father was there, too. Alexander’s grey eyes were grave, and his handshake was firm. He murmured something about family, something that Genji vaguely recalled saying over the second, or third, bottle of wine. He bowed, Alexander bowed, and then like his daughter he hugged Genji tightly. Offering some kind of comfort. He made some trite phrase about not needing to fill anyone’s shoes, before he planted a kiss on each of Genji’s cheeks.

The Italians showing their sympathy in person seemed to be a signal for the rest of the foreigners to move in, to speak. Genji stood in place as they came up, shook his hand, expressed condolences, handed him a business card. He was the gateway for them, apparently. Where the foreigners feared to speak to Hanzo or his uncles, to break that tight inner circle of tradition and culture that the Shimadas had erected over decades and centuries, they did not fear to speak to Genji.

He barely heard them. White noise, all of them.

Foreign accents, handshakes, business cards. They all blended into one, after a while. He stopped paying attention to faces. Dark suit, red tie with a stripe pattern. Dark suit, navy tie. Dark suit, purple tie with a _fleur-de-lis_ pin. Dark suit, brown tie. Dark suit, woman’s cut, red tie. Some of them tried to murmur their condolences in Japanese, in a stilted, fumbling way. Some were more eloquent. But
while they blurred together, he could see their eyes clearly. The way they looked at him. They spoke condolence, but most of them did not keep that in their eyes. They looked at him shrewdly, measuring him.

*This is one of Goro’s sons. How will he take his old man’s place?*

Genji put the business cards into his suit pocket, one after the other, bowing, nodding, thanking them for coming. He felt awkward. He shouldn’t be here. Out of nowhere, a craving for a cigarette clawed at him, and would it be so impossible to slip off to take one from a guard, to light up, to have a break from all this grief and pain? He hadn’t smoked in years, but maybe he could choose to die like his father did. Maybe that would be a good way to apologise. To make amends. To do penance for that day.

That one day, the one *fucking* day, he *should* have been home.

He should have been at his father’s side.

*He never stopped asking for you.*

Genji turned to go, and saw the priest beckoning him. It was time.

So he did not leave. He followed.

There should have been more. The pages of the annals were full, and the funeral was crowded with people. But there were only two of them here now. The sons, sitting side by side as they kept watch. The uncles stayed outside to speak to the guests and mourn and scheme and whatever. Whatever. Whatever it was that they wanted. They certainly hadn’t wanted to come and be a part of this.

Some brothers they were.

Goro’s sons sat side by side. The air smelled like ash. The air was so still. The tent patterned with the Shimada crest muffled the world outside.

Genji choked around the lump in his throat, head hung low, staring at the ground between his knees. Shoulders and back hunched in penitent curves. Every breath was loud through his nose or open mouth, and he ground the heels of his hands against his damp face, blinding his eyes to try and prevent the tears.

Hanzo was utterly silent. His hands rested on his thighs, elbows tucked close, his posture rigid, his jaw set. A shadow in human form, no sound of breath or motion whatsoever. Tense as a coiled spring.

It took effort for the younger to pull himself together. A deep, shuddering inhale, an attempt to sit straighter in his chair. The elder took it as a signal, standing, rising, striding forward. Genji stumbled after him, choking, trying to compose himself. He almost tripped over his own feet, almost reached out to Hanzo for support. Like he would have done as a child, running through the halls after *anija*. A trip, a stumble, a cry that would be answered. Always. But it was different now. They weren’t boys any longer. They were men. Hanzo glared over his shoulder, and Genji’s arm dropped.

The brothers picked up their chopsticks, and started collecting the fragments of their father’s bones. The tent was silent but for the soft plink of bone in porcelain, as the toes, then feet, then ankles were gathered into the porcelain urn, piece by piece. On the urn, trapped in the glaze, a great black dragon curled starkly over white, fangs bared, claws raised. A symbol of might and strength and power.
But just a symbol. Goro’s dragon was gone, now. Freed from the broken, dying vessel that controlled it for so long. Who knew where it had gone. Genji might have known, might have felt it, if he wasn’t so drunk, so excited, so distracted. He should have just gone home. He should have just gone straight home.

He’d let tou-san down.

And now Dad was gone.

Genji rested a hand against the edge of the table, to keep him from falling as his knees buckled. He sobbed, head bowed and turned aside so his tears wouldn’t mix with the ashes. He could feel the grief shaking him, squeezing the air from his lungs and making him gasp and shudder. It made his cries sound more like an animal’s howling. He tried to silence himself, but he had always been loud, always had more noise and energy than his own body could restrain. There was a void within him that echoed, and overflowed.

Goro. The movie nights where he wrapped his arms around his boys. The playful stealing of food. The gifts he’d leave. The smell of his cigarettes. His warm jackets. His jokes. The way he ruffled his son’s messy hair. The dollhouse he’d made for the pet beetles. His sturdy stance in the dojo, and the way he always lost the bouts when his sons worked together to knock him down. The shadow puppetry. The way he laughed. His smile, wide and genuine and the way his eyes creased at the corners. The stories he told, the way his voice could hypnotise and make fiction seem real. The way he called Genji ‘sparrow’.

It was all gone, now. Goro no longer existed. Now all that was left was ‘Sojiro’, the name painted on white ricepaper, and an urn of ash and bone fragments.

I didn’t even get to say goodbye. I’m such a fucking... fool.

Genji hiccupped and groaned, wiping his face. He had no idea how long he’d been weeping. Sobbing, like a child, a baby. He expected to find the table clear of bone and ash, and Hanzo waiting to seal the urn. But the table was still covered in Goro’s ash, and the older brother was weeping too, head turned away and his eyes closed. He wept like a soldier, unbowed, his chopsticks clenched in a fist, his shoulders back and his back ramrod-straight.

“… anija…”

Hanzo opened his eyes, grieving, hurting, struggling. But as he looked at his brother, that expression turned to disdain, revulsion, fury, in an instant. And then it was lost behind a stony visage, where though the eyes betrayed nothing, the anger was radiating off him in waves.

“I’m sorry,” Genji croaked. To the both of them, to the father in ashes and the brother that had built a wall. “I’m sorry.”

Hanzo resumed picking at the bones, his hands steady as each piece was collected and stored in the urn. Genji wiped his face again, forced the grief and pain down, and joined his brother in their duty. Forcing himself to keep his own hands just as steady as Hanzo’s, for their father’s sake.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

Copper dragons seemed to squirm or sniff, as the flames flickered and changed the shapes of the shadows lying over them. The stone braziers were ornate, and ancient, and placed around the main garden. The illumination was scarce; the braziers glowed red, forming pockets of light that made the shadows deeper.
“Goro.”

Hanzo led the march, carrying a smaller brazier in both hands. The flames made his eyes dark, turned his complexion ruddy. His uncles followed, each with their own flame, as they moved through the garden, through the open rooms, up and down stairs, and round and around the castle.

“Goro. Goro. Goro.”

He’d died here. He’d wanted to die here, and he had. He wouldn’t go far.

“Goro.”

The man had been irreverent. What can you believe in, what kind of religion can you hold to, when you have a god that answers your beck and call? But death was something else entirely. Not even a Shimada could come back from the dead. It didn’t matter what kind of a man you were in life, in death you were the same as everyone else. Maybe you faded to nothing. Maybe you went to judgement. Maybe you were tried and tested before you were allowed to move on, and rituals like these would save you.

“Goro.”

Genji raised his own bowl of flames. The room was empty, but the shadows shivered and withdrew from the fire. Reluctantly. There was nothing here - not tonight, and not anymore - but Genji remembered the hiss of the machines, and the cold white sheets, and all those nights he’d slept on the floor like a dog. In case he needed him. Waiting loyally for his father.

The voices upstairs intoned the name, over and over. Echoing down to Genji.


“Completely unacceptable!”

Genji lifted his head. He lowered his ōdachi, head cocked to listen. Nothing further. But Hanzo never raised his voice, not without cause. He sounded furious. Distressed. Genji sheathed the long blade, setting it back to rest on its stand in the shrine - next to Storm Bow and the daishō - and moved to leave the shrine.

Oka, Hatsusebe and Sadaakira were in the threshold, the doorway between the rock garden and the inner court. Hanzo stood before them, one foot on solid ground and one on the steps. Shoulders tensed. The elders, the uncles, looked down at him.

Genji lowered his chin. He ducked back into the shrine, taking the side exit, feet silent on the wooden floors, leaping up to the railing to avoid the singing floors. He clambered his swift way up the wall to the second level, so he could look down and hear just what was going on.

“… entirely necessary,” Ken was saying, calmly. “As head of the clan, you surely understand this.”

And Hanzo wavered, struggling, but still standing his ground. “There is still another week of mourning. It is required.”

“You know how impatient the Russians are,” Hatsusebe said, in a tone to demonstrate exactly the same shortness. “You’re the head of the clan now, Hanzo. You need to be seen making sure, strong decisions. If you do not act now, then they will perceive it as hesitation. Weakness.”
“I cannot leave. Not now.” But his words were faltering.

Ken sighed. “You put your father’s empire at risk.”

Genji felt bile rise up at the back of his throat. *Enough.* He leant down over the balcony, and let his voice carry loud and clear. “Are you so eager to be rid of your brother that you cannot wait forty nine days for your nephews to mourn?”

They all looked up at him, then, their expressions shocked, outraged, angry. Genji jumped down, stone-faced, and moved to stand next to his brother. Hanzo shifted, bringing both feet together, standing in the garden, no longer poised to climb the steps to join the elders. He looked at Genji - there was anger there, yes, like there had been for weeks. But something more, now. The elder brother was wordless, expectant. Maybe a little relieved.

“Genji,” Saadakira growled. “This is none of your concern.”

“It is *all* my concern,” Genji rested an elbow on Hanzo’s shoulder, a casual brotherly gesture that Hanzo tensed under. A gesture that even Genji felt like he was forcing, but he had a point to make. A point that the elders couldn’t afford to miss. “Because this is about my father. Our father. And *our* empire.”

The stress on the word had Ken very deliberately setting his jaw.

“We are the Shimada clan. We have survived wars and genocides and foreign interference, and we have done so without forsaking the traditions of our ancestors, and our people.” Genji took his arm off Hanzo’s shoulder, stepping forward, rising two steps higher to jab a finger in Ken’s face. “What does it say about the state of the clan when its own elders are willing to forget tradition for the sake of business with foreigners?”

Ken stared back, hard and unblinking.

Hatsusebe pressed his palms together, leaning forward to deliver something ingratiating. Genji swiped a hand sideways, cutting him off before he’d even began.

“I certainly hope,” he said, coolly, “That my brother and I will not forget to follow all the due traditions when you three pass on. It would be a shame if you were dishonoured, wouldn’t it?”

“The shame would be on your head, whelp,” Saadakira snapped.

“Oh.” Genji smiled. “So when you are asking my brother - the head of the Shimada clan - to leave the country, before we have interred our father, on whom does the shame rest?”

Ken dropped into a bow, and turned to leave without a word. Hatsusebe dipped hurriedly, and scurried away, and Saadakira glowered a moment longer behind his scar before he did the same. The bad grace followed them like a cloud. There would be repercussions, of course there would be. Everyone in this family answered a wound with a wound.

*Fuck them.*

Genji watched them leave, those salt-and-pepper carrion crows, before he turned and sat down on the stairs, running both hands through his hair. “… sorry,” he murmured, looking up at his brother.

It took a moment for Hanzo to answer. His fists were still clenched, and he watched the elder’s backs even after they were lost to sight. “… for what?”
“Stepping in like that.” Genji raked his hair back, then rested his cheek on his hand, elbow on his knee. “You’re the head of the clan now. You don’t need me to fight your battles for you.”

“… No.”

That single word could have meant any number of things.

Hanzo let the silence hang, hands clenching and unclenching. Looking at Genji, looking away, staring at the shrine, staring at the mossy stones beneath his feet, then up at his brother again. When next he spoke, his voice was softer. Bewildered. Relieved. Familiar, brotherly, no longer a stranger. “No, you did not fight for me. You fought at my side.”

“I’m your brother, anija.” Genji smiled, tired, sad, merry, grieving. “Where else would I be?”

And Hanzo looked away again.

Genji sighed, and slowly rolled up to stand on his own two feet. “… look. You don’t have to listen to me. I wish you did, more often. I miss talking to you, but… you have the choice not to. That’s fine.” Hide the ache with a smile, a shrug. He flung a hand over his shoulder, gesturing to the castle gates. “But you should not be listening to them.”

“They’re the elders of the clan.” He sounded listless. Struggling, again, with something he did not let Genji see. Something behind the wall. “I need their wisdom, if I am to rule here.”

“You can have their wisdom without needing them to be around.” A gentle, playful slap to his brother’s arm, something that might have been a stronger blow if he did not feel so tentative. “You’re pretty smart already. You can handle it.”

“Can I?” His gaze met Genji’s, for a moment, the same coppery-gold eyes their father had. But his were troubled. It wasn’t just the little brother lost in a storm.

“Yeah. I’m the boke, you’re the hime-san.”

Hanzo huffed, and looked away. But there was a curve to his lips. Faint.

How long had it been since he’d seen Hanzo smile? The thought frightened Genji.

He hooked his thumbs into his belt and rocked from heel to toe. “Look. I know things are going to be hard. I know you’re going to have to make difficult decisions. But if you keep listening to them, you won’t make the right ones. They’re manipulative bastards, and you know it.” He huffed, rolling his tongue in his mouth. “They seemed pretty willing to cast off tradition for the sake of a business deal.”

The change came as swift as a thunderbolt. “You want to talk to me about tradition?” Hanzo’s lip had curled in a sneer. “You?”

Whatever bridge had been made was gone again, lost in shadow. Genji stared at his brother, noting for the first time the new haori, the new haircut, the shadow on Hanzo’s chin from the beginnings of a beard. And what did Hanzo see, in return? The piercings, the green hair, the slack posture, the childishness that had never gone away, even after their father had died?

The fact he was here, now, and their father was not?

When Hanzo looked aside again, Genji folded his arms and scuffed his feet. Nothing else was said, and the silence grew solid, tangible. Repellent. They drifted away, Hanzo to the halls and Genji to
The day they took the ashes to the cemetery was overcast. The clouds were grey, and soft, rippled and textured like the surface of the ocean.

The air in cemeteries always had an odd weight. Not oppressive, per se, but laden with meaning. When walking through a line of graves, it felt the same as those abandoned shrines in the forest, that strange feeling of introspection in the air. Of tangible thought, awareness of one’s place in the world, care and consideration for what would happen hereafter.

That feeling was heavy, today. Low, like the clouds overhead. Genji put his hands in his pockets and walked through the rows of stones, following Hanzo, followed by his uncles, until they reached the plot where Akane was memorialised. Attendants in ritual garb moved the slab.

Hanzo leant forward to place the urn securely in place, taking the time to place it carefully in the shadows beneath the grave. Genji leaned forward as well, pulling something plasticised from his sleeve and sliding it next to the urn. Carefully, so the uncles waiting a few paces behind wouldn’t see, nor the attendants who had their faces turned away in respect. The quick, furtive gesture earned a scowl from Hanzo.

“Mum’s not here,” Genji said, quietly. “But Dad wouldn’t want to be alone.”

Hanzo looked down, and saw the laminated photograph of their mother, dressed in pink, at the way she held her two sons so proudly, smiling. At her serious-faced eldest and her chubby, waving youngest. It wasn’t a portrait full of life, by any means, taken so squarely, the three figures seemingly posed. But she was alive, then, when it was taken.

Did Hanzo remember that day? Did he remember sitting for that photograph? He had the same expression now, as a man as he did when he was a child.

There were thousands of photographs of Akane on Dad’s private server. Any one of them could have suited. But this was the last of them. That would have meant more to Goro. A farewell in this life, a welcome in the next.

And maybe it would be enough to have a reminder of his whole family with him, as Goro rested. Perhaps it would make amends between the father who had waited and the son who had not come back in time.

Hanzo stepped back, letting the attendants lower the slab back down again, before they retreated and left the brothers to their ritual. The red ink was washed from Goro’s name, making the carving match that of Akane’s. Incense was lit. Bows and prayers and offerings made. Everything tradition demanded, every ritual acted on in accordance to love and duty. It was hard to read his brother’s face, but for a moment Genji felt like forgiveness might have been within reach. But after all the rites and respects had been made and paid, and all the family and close friends had come to play their part, the brothers bowed together to the names of their parents, and straightened up, and they were back to being strangers again.

More bricks in the wall.

The sky rumbled. Genji looked up, and the clouds disturbed by a ripple of wind, like a splash of something diving upwards, out of sight beyond the low-hanging grey. A dragon? Or just the wind?
Hanzo inhaled deeply, eyes closed, steeling himself. Then he turned away from the grave and walked back through the rows. He was gone so quickly, it was too late for Genji to call out after him. Impossible, now, to disturb the silence of this still and sacred place. So Genji didn’t say a word. He just watched his brother leave, watched his uncles and cousins and their bodyguards and all the curious onlookers peel away and leave. No-one stayed. No-one waited.

The feeling in the air grew more intense. *What are you looking for?*

*I don’t know. … Should I know?*

Genji knelt by the grave, losing himself in the pattern of the stone, of the flakes of ash, of the shapes of the names of his mother and his father. Carved on the stone, the dragons of the Shimada mon chased each others’ tails, immortalised forever in an honour that most these days could neither afford nor claim to require.

The storm broke, but there was no thunder, no lightning. No dragon playing or demonstrating his power. There was just rain, and even then it was light, and warm. It lasted maybe ten minutes, before the sun came out, warming the stones, making the air a little balmy, a little humid.

Genji lit another stick of incense, shook the water from his hair, and left the cemetery.

The metal thudded hollow under his fist. He waited, head bowed, the hoodie hiding his face, shoulders hunched. One foot shifted, and tapped behind him impatiently. A few moments more - he counted them out - before he slammed his fist against the door again. Twice as many, this time.

The panel on the door opened, and familiar eyes widened when they saw him. Genji’s foot kept tapping, as the locks thunked back, and as the metal door slid open. Not all the way, but wide enough to let him slip inside.

“Do you know what time it is, rich kid? I was asleep.”

She wasn’t, judging by the state of her home. Lots of cardboard boxes. A meal half-eaten on the table. An old laptop open, one she crossed the room and pressed shut with a careful palm.

He said nothing, just unzipped his hoodie and threw it over the back of a chair.

Horishi picked a pile of laundry off the tattoo chair, tossing it onto her bunk. “Two months. I haven’t seen you in two months. You had me thinking you were done and didn’t want to come back.” Her words were a deliberate needle, trying to goad him into sassing back at her. He was supposed to start the conversation, not her. He was never quiet. He never shut up, and it vexed her greatly.

Genji set his shoes by the door, and placed a wad of bills onto the table. There was enough there for tonight’s session, and the next two to follow. He pulled his shirt over his head, then tucked his fingers around the hem of the figure-hugging bodyshirt.

“… hey. Rich kid?”

He looked over at her.

She chewed her lip, brows furrowed. The tray she was holding tipped back and forth, just enough to set the bamboo needles to rolling without the bottles of ink being too far displaced. A soft clatter, to fill the silence. It took her a moment, but even then she did not speak too loud, too familiarly.

“… I’m sorry about your father.”
He peeled the bodyshirt off over his head, baring his lines, his face turned to the door as he tugged his arms free, as he shook the cloth out, folded it outside-in. He said nothing, and let her get about her business of setting up the inks. Trousers, next, and underwear; he tugged them down, kicked them off, hung them over his arm, underwear tucked into the pocket. He held his arm before him for modesty’s sake, before crossing the room. He took his seat, dropped the trousers on the floor, and closed his eyes.

No music. No talking. Just the sound of bamboo driving into flesh.

His back stung, throbbing and itching in the patterns he could feel but had not yet seen. It had been late when he went to see Horishi. It was later still, now he was coming home. All of Hanamura felt asleep, and the few people and cars on the street seemed furtive. Even the stars were scarce overhead.

Now that he was back in the city proper, he felt no need to sneak or scurry. He hid his path to and from the tattoo artist, but this? This was home. He didn’t need to hide here. He walked the main streets, head down, alone but confident in his path. He didn’t even need to think about where his feet needed to go.

The last two months had been a blur. Dark clothes for countless ceremonies. The smell of incense. Shrines. Handshakes. And when there wasn’t any of that, it was long days in bed, no reason to get up, no reason to eat the meals the maids brought him, no reason to answer his phone or check his emails or social media. The weight of the ‘should’ve would’ve could’ve’ too much to bear on his own. He only rose when he was needed for ceremonies. He had no other reason to exist. He didn’t deserve one.

But the tattoo hadn’t been finished in time.

He didn’t mind losing his job, or missing his graduation. Cakes and fairytales didn’t mean anything anymore. But the tattoo had been different. The tattoo was important.

He was Goro’s son. He was going to have this finished, no matter how long it took. He was Goro’s son, and the inks would prove it. Would confirm it. Would make things right.

I am the son of a dragon. Genji hunched, hands in his pockets, as he climbed the sloping streets up to the castle. I am Shimada Genji, son of Shimada Goro - Sojiro - and I bear the dragon of the north wind. I am his son. I am Shimada. And I am so, so fucking sorry that I let him down.

A car rounded the corner, far too fast, far too erratic. No headlights, no over-compensating hum of the hover-rims. Only the exulting whoop of the passengers leaning out of the windows gave him warning of what was to come.

Genji jumped aside as the car careened off the road. Time seemed to slow, but not enough, not enough to give his reaction time to get him clear. A shock of pain spasmed through his left arm - wrist, elbow, shoulder - before his back hit the car roof and he rolled, fell, landed, all in awkwardness.

“What the fuck?!”

The passengers jeered at him, ugly silhouettes between the white lights ahead and the red behind. Two of them flipped him off.

He tried to flip them off in return, but his left hand was killing him. One bird alone would have to fly. “You fucking assholes! Where the motherfuck did you learn how to drive, shit-for-brains?”
“Fuck you,” one of the passengers shouted cheerfully, and the driver leaned out the window and threw a beer bottle at him.

Genji ducked, but the bottle shattered on the wall behind him, spraying him with glass shards and shitty beer. He stood up, his hood falling back as he regained his balance, and the most sober of the passenger screeched in sudden panic.

“It’s a Shimada! You fucking hit fucking Shimada Genji!”

“Oh shit!”

“Drive! Drive! Drive!”

The car skidded and bobbed, the tires glowing, the passengers hurriedly sliding back into their seats as the car sped off down the road. Genji stopped chasing them, a few streets later, learning of a new injury - he must have clipped his knee on the hood of the car, hobbling him. It didn’t occur until they were out of sight that he didn’t pay attention to the plate number, or the car model. No way of knowing who had done it.

Knowing they’d pissed themselves in fear when they realised who he was wasn’t much of a consolation. It would have to do.

“Fuck,” he muttered, carefully dusting off his shoulders, before he checked his hand. Gently massaging with his thumb. It didn’t feel like anything was broken, but he was high on his own adrenaline for the moment, making it hard to tell. He’d get it checked out in the morning. He needed to wait until morning, too. There weren’t any showers at the castle, just the traditional baths. Maybe he could splash his face in the kitchen sink, rinse some of that beer smell off him, just to make it easier to sleep. It was really, really shitty beer.

A few more streets, this time at a slight limp, favouring his sore knee. It wasn’t too bad, just enough to make him stagger every few steps. Walk it off, sleep it off, I’ll be fine. He’d had training exercises with the Shimada-gumi that left him in worse of a state. He’d probably have a few bruises, but he healed fast. Genki Genji. Nothing ever slowed him down for long.

You used to be sick, you know. You were so frail.

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He could feel the beer seeped through his hoodie, his shirt, his bodyshirt. Fuck.

The castle gates were closed when he arrived. No surprise, there, but a wall was not a wall to a Shimada. Genji paused under the glow of Rikimaru’s alien fish mascot, bracing himself. Then he darted forward, throwing himself at the gate, hands and toes finding every handhold of the sheer wooden surface, against the bar and the grain of the timber, and then, the dragon mon.

There was an explosion of pain from where his left hand met the dragon’s scales, enough to make him cry out and lose all traction on the wall entirely. Something was broken or dislocated, one or maybe two of his fingers. It was an odd thought to have, as he fell. He twisted in the air, trying to make it so he didn’t land on his head, or his spine. He still landed badly, tasting blood as his teeth clamped down too hard on his tongue, and his sore knee throbbed in new agony. His back, too, was pulsing with fire from the new layer of ink, which did not take kindly to their bearer moving so much.

“Fuck,” Genji lay there for a moment, wheezing. He’d fallen before. Plenty of times. But when he
was a boy, when he was learning how to climb like this. He’d fallen on stone. On the road. This was fine. He could walk this off. Sleep it off. It was fine. Genki Genji was fine.

A little shiver passed through him, and he looked up. Hanzo was there, on the overhang, still and silent and almost invisible in the dark. From the way he stood, it might have been that he had been there for hours. Watching and waiting for his little brother. For the little brother who had come staggering home - at an hour closer to sunrise than it was to midnight - reeking of beer, too drunk to even get halfway up the gate before toppling back. The little brother who had waited until their father was buried before spending all night getting utterly wasted, and proving he was the disappointment everyone said he was.

Genji opened his mouth, to explain, to ask for help, to just say something. But Hanzo’s face, already sour with anger, darkened further. He moved; he was gone. Genji heard his brother’s footfalls land on the other side of the gate, on the other side of the wall. Then there was silence. The kind of silence that came from Hanzo slowly walking away, returning to his room in the castle.

The younger brother was left to pick himself up, alone in the dark. Genji stared at the gates, and felt the weight of them there, before him. They were closed. Closed to him. He wasn’t welcome here anymore.

His muscles shook, bleeding out the adrenaline, leaving him feeling tired and sore and hollow. This wasn’t an injury he could just walk off. He bowed his head, and stood there for a long moment, rubbing his thumb over the scar on his palm.

The wind rustled the trees on the other side of the wall. On his side, neon lights hummed and shadows dimmed as the sky started turning grey. Hanamura woke, slowly, the life and sounds of the city heralding a new day.

But the sunlight didn’t eliminate every shadow. Some were too deep to reach.

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**Chapter notes:**

- The release of Masquerade has some rather interesting parallels to a future chapter I already have written, as well as what I have previously mentioned about the Shimada’s interactions with the various European factions. Once again, I need to write faster; I will not need to change much to fit in with Blizzard’s hints compared to the established in-fiction world I have crafted here, due to either stunning coincidence or an understanding of literary direction.
- A traditional Japanese funeral has a number of stages, rituals, and traditions that are observed over a 49 day period. I have mentioned the most significant of these here. The *tsuya*, the ‘passing of the night’, or wake, where the closest family members will stay with the body, the payment of ‘condolence money’ and the payment given in return, the cremation, the collection of the bones, and the final day of mourning, *shijūkunichi*, when the urn is interred. The ritual of calling for the dead is obsolete in most places in Japan. I beg artistic license on behalf of the Shimada’s focus on tradition and the resurgence of *yamato-damashii*.
- The symbolic choice of ‘Sojiro’ as the *kamiyo* of Genji and Hanzo’s father, intentionally or otherwise, was impossible not to enjoy and explore. Granted, other characters could have been used and a different meaning implied for the Shimada patriarch, but ‘Prosperity through Two Sons’ was perfect.
- I did receive a comment that ‘Alexander’ was more of a traditionally Greek name than an Italian one. However, it is currently one of the top baby names in Italy in the past few years. Given the timeline and the in-game ages of Ana and Reinhardt (who would have been born in 2016 and 2017 respectively), it seemed appropriate to have a contemporary name popular in
Italy being the one used here.

- I had the scene where Genji got hit by a car written before the HotS cinematic came out. But now with the release of Doomfist, it has been noted that Genji gets thrown across the map in every scene he’s in - thrown by Hanzo in Dragons, thrown by Diablo in HotS, and thrown by Akande in the Doomfist trailer. Rest assured, he will continue to be thrown in later scenes in this story, in keeping with Blizzard’s grand literary tradition. Some such scenes have already been written.
The Block felt empty now that Hanzo had moved out. The brothers had had an entire floor to themselves, but now half of it was empty. Genji did not spread out to fill the place his brother vacated. In fact, he withdrew. Bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and part of the living room. He went no further; he felt he had no right to claim more territory than that.

One day, Hanzo would come back. One day, they’d be brothers again. Or so the boke hoped.

He could stand on the balcony and look out at the castle. Hanzo would not have time to look at the view, Genji supposed, but even if he did, he would not look at the city, or pick out that massive apartment building where his younger brother lived. He would look to the mountain.

And the mountain would look down at them all.

A man and a woman, with matching cinched waists, eyeliner and lipstick, danced and mocked a man who would never be king. In turn the man cursed the matching woman - the legitimate wife, who should have been his, like all the empire should have been his - and the matching man, who he named emperor’s son. And with that name, away went the wife to feed a god, to send her husband to righteousness and power. In vengeance the emperor’s son cursed the man who would be king, and he cursed the mountain. And the mountain cursed him in return, and the emperor’s son withered, and he died. And the man who would be king resolved to wait just a little longer. Just a little. Old gods’ vengeances take a while to bear fruit, but the vines were budding.

It was at the Matagama. But Genji realised he was not watching a play only when he saw all the audience was a seething mass of scales and claws, colours of bronze and sepia and stone-grey. His own dragon - beside him, looped around and below and above him - seemed far too vibrant for a place like this. Vivd, like a beacon. They would be seen, and Genji, made of simple flesh - no scales, no teeth, no talons - would be torn apart.

He pleaded in a whisper. Help me. Tell me what to do.

The dragon said nothing, circling in the air around him, covering the scene with its gleaming scales, carrying him high into the air. But just before the vivid green faded, Genji was left with an impression. It was not a voice, but the dragon spoke, and spoke to him. Fill my bowl.

He woke uneasy, forgetting the dream, as all dreams are forgotten. But he remembered the dragon’s words. He ran a hand through his hair, and gave a tired laugh. Most dragons fed on fear or worship, or ate poppyseed cakes, daifuku, venison hunted from the sacred forests laid still steaming and bloody on the altar stones. He knew of one, for certain, that had eaten a woman. She might have still been alive.

But his dragon ate potato chips.

Genji laughed again, then rested his head in both hands, and choked back a sob.

He was in a bar, aware he had all eyes on him. He drank his beer, and focused on the dartboard. Intently, intensely. He threw, a deft flick of the wrist, and one of the people watching him gave a small smirk.

The dart landed on a narrow green segment, not even close to the bullseye.
Genji focused now on the outer black and white segments. There, black. Thirteen points. He threw, and hit the black segment dead-on. He heard a tsk behind him, of one of the old-timers mocking how the green-haired Shimada hadn’t hit a bullseye once. Kids these days had no discipline.

Red, seven. Genji turned aside to reach for his beer, not even looking as he threw, and the dart hit right on the edge of the board. Buried in red, right at the seven point mark. The scoff he heard was its own reward.

If Genji wanted to hit a bullseye, he would do so. He never missed.

His shots got progressively ‘worse’ as the night wore on. He flicked one bullseye, just so the old-timer could grumble about luck, then shrugged on his hoodie, paid his tab, and left. Keeping a slow, weaving pace, so the guards and reporters could follow him easily.

And only the guards and reporters. None of the Tanuki-Ji were here. Busy, all of them. If they knew what day it was, they might not be so absent. But he’d changed a certain detail on every single one of his social media accounts, just to test, just to see. It had been disappointing, but not surprising, to see they’d all fallen for it.

That everyone had fallen for it.

So here he was, alone. Hanzo was at the castle tonight. Rin would be there, and her family. Representatives of each branch. The Shimada elders. Plenty of bodyguards, servants, and all the hired help. The weather was chill and unpleasant but the halls of the castle would be warm and loud and filled with people, all of them celebrating. Hanzo would be in the middle of it. Surrounded by them.

It was a far cry from how things were, how they used to be. It had always been the younger brother, in the middle of a crowd, utterly encircled, while the older brother hung back in solitude. Waiting. Watching. Reading. Genji would leave the crowd to take his brother’s hand, to walk with him to the gates. Now that the brothers were grown…

Genji checked his phone. No new messages. Well, it was late. People were either busy, or asleep. Why would they message him, today of all days?

He tugged his hoodie down. The wind whipped up, making the trees hiss, shoving along the low, heavy clouds through the dark sky. Damp autumn leaves clung to the bottom of Genji’s shoes. The streets were lit up, in neon and the starkness of streetlight, but they were empty.

Empty, like the elevator he rode up to his level. Empty, like the floor he used to share with Hanzo. Every room was empty.

He found his eyes tracing over the countertops, the table, even peeking through into his room to see if anything had been left on the bed. Nothing. Nothing had changed from the morning. There had been nothing left for him. Hanzo hadn’t been here, hadn’t even sent someone on his behalf.

Genji took a slow breath, then stepped out onto the balcony. The curtains billowed behind him, stirred by the winds outside. There was no reason, otherwise, for them to reach for him.

From here, he could see the lights of the city. All dimmed, all muted. But in the distance, the castle was alive and gleaming. Braziers were lit on every corner, sheltered from the intermittent rain, and electric lights shone from every room, every hall, casting extra shadows to compete with those thrown by the fires, by the dai-dōrō and lanterns. From this distance, the castle was lit up like a birthday cake.
Had there ever been a party Genji wasn’t invited to?

He checked his phone. One new message. He swallowed down the disappointment to see it was just a fan from Portugal telling him his recent cosplay was amazing. Old news, wrong country, not what he was waiting for. And the time was 23:58.

He licked his lips, closing his eyes to sigh, to rub his face and try to keep himself together. To just take a little moment to breathe. But when he looked again, a minute had ticked over. There was no time. No time left at all.

“Tanjoubi omedetou.” His voice was low. In tune, melodious, because of course it was. But there was no joy in it tonight. “Tanjoubi omedetou. Tanjoubi, Gen-otouto, tanjoubi ome--” The clock ticked over. Four zeroes. It was midnight. A new day had come, and the old one was gone.

Genji’s throat locked up, and he went silent. Too late to finish, now. He looked up from his phone, across to where the castle glowed.

For the first time in Genji’s lifetime, Hanzo had forgotten.

Or, worse…

Hanzo hadn’t forgotten at all.

Among the books on Genji’s shelves was a dictionary. Sturdy, plain, unremarkable. It was also hollow, and required a key to open. This dictionary didn’t contain words, but rather an empty space where things could be stored. He kept data in here: a hard drive backup of his father’s files, a tracker for the ever-changing passwords of the Shimada family network, and a couple of remote cameras the size of shirt buttons, with a watch-sized screen connected to them.

But to a casual glance, it was just a dictionary on a bookshelf.

Another late night, his back aching in places where ink formed petals and scales, Genji sat and flicked through the family network, the light of his laptop filling the room with a sleepless blue light. He hadn’t meant to find what he had. He’d just been looking through employee files, so he could know he faces and names of the people following him. But the network was bigger than that. It had been like lifting a rock and seeing the scurry of hundreds of insects beneath. Or, worse, and yet more fitting: like kicking over some animal killed by the roadside to find the ticks and maggots crawling through the flesh and blood.

Goro - Sojiro - had not intended his empire to belong to anyone but his sons. Every other elder - and every other rising star - had plans for their own possession and retention of the family. They hadn’t even waited for him to die before making changes.

That’s the thing about empire: everyone wanted more than just a fair-sized piece of it.

It might have been that Genji could hear his father’s ghost whispering at his shoulder, reminding him of his responsibility to the clan, to the family, to the name. Or, maybe, that was a decent excuse for what he was doing. Maybe Genji was just angry at what he’d found. Maybe he wanted his empire left like his father had meant it. Maybe he just wanted it.

His brother’s name was everywhere, on every document, every agreement, every meeting where minutes were taken and every meeting where they weren’t. But something wasn’t right. Resources were moved, personnel deployed and hired, contacts made, sales and purchases logged, and all of it equitable for the sustained wellbeing of each branch of the family as well as the clan as a whole. But
Genji had his father’s data, too, and what he saw did not match up. Things were missing, he could see that quite plainly. Things were being hidden. Stolen. But the details of how things were being moved and mismanaged weren’t kept out here, in the open. He’d need to look closer. He’d need to examine his uncles’ private servers.

Fortunately, it was well-known that sparrows could be found even in palaces.

Sleep wasn’t a necessity anymore. Those periods of slowness and stillness that his spirit had always rebelled against were now food that it craved. His body could easily settle into survival with the rhythm of short naps. He would move, and move, and move, until he stopped, took a moment in stillness, eyes closed, head bowed, and that was enough. Half an hour, or a few hours, and then he was good to go. Sometimes, he didn’t even have to close his eyes.

He hadn’t slept in weeks. Months.

He didn’t need to tousle the sheets on his bed to hide his absence from the servants; everyone though he was at the hotels that charged hourly rates. Not an unfair assessment. But sometimes he was out in the forest, in the old shrines, or curled up under the fallen omnis outside those shrines. Sometimes he was in the eaves of temples, or the maintenance rooms of apartments or businesses. He’d spent a lot of time in the ventilation ducts and attics of the branch compounds. Eavesdropping, sometimes literally.

Tonight, he was in no mood to be still, or to rest. The sky was rumbling and broiling, and he felt the answering jolts within his veins. Restless and antsy.

His teeth felt sharp in his mouth.

He brought the Tanuki-Ji and all their hangers-on to a warehouse on the far side of town, a building that had doubled in the past as a dance studio, with mirrored walls and high ceilings. It was empty, at this time of night, and so the perfect place to cut loose. Under the plastic-white glow of halogens, Genji laughed and joked and wound them all up, hyping them to match his enthusiasm. The music pulsed like a heartbeat, and in the mirrors facing each other, the celebrants numbered in the hundreds, the thousands.

Puppets and parasites.

Genji danced, every motion smooth and precise, every sway, every roll, every flick and pivot, every pop and lock as a perfect stance and transition, a form that he had perfected on the back of hundreds of years of tradition. He moved to the words of the rappers and the beat of the instruments and to the discipline of his own body. The Tanuki-Ji cheered, and drank, and smoked and did lines from dusty furniture and off each other. A few joined him, attempting their own moves or to match their fearless leader, but no-one could keep up. No-one ever could. He was leagues beyond them.

They were only slowing him down.

When was the last time they’d cosplayed and visited kids in hospital? How many conventions had they not been ready to perform as a group? How much of Genji’s money had they spent on their drinks and their hobbies? How many times had they used his name and their association with him to get what they wanted, to have their girlfriends dropped off at clinics discretely and their families bribed into silence, for drugs from the out-of-town shipments to be parcelled up in their favour, to have people paying terrified protection money? Genji was fucking glad his reputation was slipping, so it didn’t carry as much weight, but these scavengers still profited off him, off the tabloids who loved the stories and pictures they could sell, off the Shimada-gumi who needed reliable spies, off
the people who would pay to avoid the lingering fear of the family name. He had formed the Tanuki-Ji to be something other than this. Now, all they were was parasites and puppets.

It was time to cut them loose.

Genji waited until they were all drunk and high and distracted. He slipped into the bathroom around the back, the one marked with an out-of-order sign, and locked himself in. He splashed water on his face, wiped the sweat from his neck and arms, and got changed. And he watched, from his phone. The live feed from the rafters showed the party still going on. It wouldn’t be long now.

Sure enough, merriment turned suddenly to panic as the police swarmed the building. Some of the rowdier of the Tanuki had to be tackled to the ground, while the rest scattered like cockroaches in the light. There was a lot of screaming, and plenty of tears.

Genji bundled up his old clothes and hid them in the air vent, the same place he’d stashed what he was currently wearing. He’d be back for them later. Or not at all, he didn’t care. He didn’t care anymore.

The police had turned a lot of high-powered lights on the warehouse. Well and good, to illuminate the place, to pin the Tanuki-Ji inside and give them nowhere to run. But the brighter the lights, the deeper the shadows. The bathroom door opened into a dark hall; light streamed from the upper windows, but there was an acute-triangle pyramid of darkness along the wall beneath them. Genji pulled his hoodie down, hiding his distinctive hair, masking his shape and shadow, and made a casual crouching way through that space. He’d propped the back door open earlier in the evening, and he paused for a moment, assessing the gap, before he ducked low and ran past a trio of officers. He was a shadow; he was the wind. They didn’t even see him. They didn’t even stop joking about how this was going to be a waste of time but they could expect a good set of bribes to let the Shimada punk’s friends go.

Genji practically danced his way out of there, feet tapping silently against the concrete as he ducked and weaved through and under the ring of cars that circled the building and filled the lot. The cops didn’t see him, as they focused on escape points and the howling, screaming, struggling coterie of bright-haireded young men and women. Genji was invisible. He left no trace of himself, and did not stop until he clambered up - hand over hand - to the building on the other side of the lot. Once there, he propped himself back against the wall, feet up, and breathed out through his nose. Looking down at them all.

He hadn’t even broken a sweat.

He checked his phone, watching the live feed. Things were quieting down inside the warehouse, now. Photographs were being taken, evidence gathered. At least there were some police officers taking this seriously. Genji bent one leg, bracing his arm over the knee, and sat in complete stillness, splitting his focus between his phone and down to the lot below. Watching until the last of the lights were turned off, and the last of the police cars drove away.

He dialled a code on his phone, and held out his arm. From the rafters of the warehouse, the selfie-drone detached from where it had been set to watch, and whirred through an open window. Lights off, painted black, it moved unseen as it disengaged and soared overhead. Genji watched with grim satisfaction as it returned to him like a hawk to its gauntlet.

Soon enough, his phone would start buzzing. The Tanuki-Ji might try to call him directly, to ask him to bail them out. Or their parents would approach him, or - if they were bold enough - they would call the Goro branch to call in a favour with the Shimada-gumi. But whether or not these men and women with coloured hair escaped prosecution, fines, jail-time, their names were tainted now.
They’d been caught. They’d been shamed. They would not be welcome in the Shimada-gumi anymore. They probably wouldn’t even be welcome in public. They would never again be able to use the power of Genji’s name to their advantage.

Genji told himself it would be easier, now, without all that dead weight holding him back. He would not have thought of them like that, he told himself, if they had ever been his friends.

Shimada.

The green dragon coiled, in and around and over itself. Its head stayed still, mouth agape to show its fangs, panting with crackles of St Elmo’s fire and the chill breath of autumn, but its body never stopped moving, a vast, impossibly-long and ever-roiling coil of scales and mane.

*Fill my bowl.*

The mountain watched, and was silent.

There was one particular day where Hiroshi had been unreasonably rough, working faster and far less forgiving with the jabs of the needles. It was a day of rumbling thunder, where trees tossed their limbs about, and people hurried to shelter with bowed heads and bent umbrellas. Horishi hated the rain. She hated Genji’s ass, too, apparently. It was sore as hell, where the lines were inked dark and vivid. Sitting down would be tricky for the next few days. He’d asked how he was supposed to do that, adding as a joke that she should have bought him dinner first. She’d glowered at him until he left.

The glower was still there when he came back, but the surprise Halloween gift of alcohol soothed her temper. He learned a lot about her, that night, amidst the inks and the ticking of the overclocked refrigerator.

The next time he visited, she actually took the time to meet his gaze before telling him to get undressed. He pretended to be coy, just to watch the woman roll her eyes in fond exasperation.

The new hires were persistent. One of them had somehow figured out the social media game of catch-me-if-you-can, and Genji had been forced to actually show up at the clubs his online presence claimed that he was in. Drink. Dance. Mingle. Flirt with his fans. Waste time. Do all that they expected of him.

But it wasn’t enough. They hounded him. Demanded answers for his missing time, all those nights, mornings, afternoons he just vanished from Hanamura. Someone had to keep him accountable. But the guards were only human. He’d be able to shake them, find a new way to get to the tattoo artist without being seen. But it would take careful planning.

So Genji let them see. Or, at the very least, he let them look.

His sleek silver sportscar prowled the streets, circling the blocks of rub-and-tugs, tattoo parlours, drug dens, places no prince should be seen. But he was an arrogant Shimada boy, wasn’t he? Who cared if he was seen? There was no law he was subject to, and no opinion that could sway him to righteousness. His friends may have fallen but there was nothing that could touch him. The outskirts of Hanamura were filthy and wild and there was plenty there for a young man to distract himself with.

Genji took advantage of the distraction.
And of the way they tried to catch him in return.

It was raining when he met her, when he leaned over and threw open the passenger door for her. She slid into the passenger seat, shivering and soaked to the bone, her clothes clinging to her skin.

“Hey, are you alright?”

“It’s five hundred…”

“Shh.” He shrugged off his hoodie and draped it around her shoulders. “Warm up, first. God, how long were you just standing there?” He grinned, and offered his hand to shake. “Suman, this is really bad manners for me to just start talking. I’m Shimada Genji. What’s your name?”

She shifted in the passenger seat. He could see all the lines she had prepared, everything she’d been told to entice him with, unravelling. “Miyu,” she shook his hand, and shivered.

Was it her name, really? Or a pun on the weather? He laughed regardless, as the rain beat down on the windshield. “Nice to meet you. Are you hungry?”

She saw the opportunity for innuendo, and lunged for it.

But he spoke before she could. “Because I could really go for some fried chicken. I am super hungry!”

He reached over her, feeling her tense as their bodies grew closer, and had to fight a smile from the way her expression as he pulled back from her. “Safety first,” he said, grinning to her baffled expression, as he helped her with her seatbelt.

She tried, now and then, to offer her prices, her range of services. When he wouldn’t take the bait, she tried to offer others. She had friends, a lot of friends, he might like one of those. Or more than one. They could all be very reasonable, very accommodating. She was sure they had something he would like. Genji nodded as he drove, looking thoughtful. As the traffic lights turned from yellow to red, he stopped drumming his hands on the wheel, and looked at her.

“How do you want a six piece meal, or an eight piece?”

He pulled up outside the restaurant, and did an enthusiastic countdown before the two of them dashed through the rain to get inside. He ate, and he talked - by god, did he talk, about everything and nothing - until their meals were done and the weather had let up enough for them to dash back to the car. She was laughing along with him, by then. Grinning as she buckled up.

“Wanna hit the arcade, next?”

“What are you, a child?”

He laughed. “Absolutely.”

He caught her a couple of pachimari, showed off his record-breaking high scores, cheered her on when she took to the dancepads. It was midnight by the time they stopped, and she seemed disappointed that they had to leave. She stared up at the night sky - only clouds now, no rain - and all the joy just bled out of her. It had been fun, but now they were back in reality. Now it was back to business.

He slipped an arm around her shoulders, and gave a small squeeze. “Let me drive you home.”
She gave an address in the lower ward, a few blocks from where he’d found her. The streets were empty, as the rain beat down. Eyes and fingers peeked through shutters and blinds of a low, hodgepodge building as the sportscar pulled up out front.

“Not bad for a first date, huh?” He smiled. His gaze flicked to the front door, then back to the tired, tense woman in the passenger seat.

“A date.” She looked out through the smoked glass, then back at him. One of the pachimari in her arms squeaked as she hugged them. “This… this wasn’t…”

“A girl like you shouldn’t be caught up in yakuza business.” His voice was soft, and grave, but only for a moment. He smiled, and rested his hand over hers. “But I would like to see you again.”

She was immune to being flustered, staring him down. “You should at least have let me blow you.”

He snorted a laugh, and it took longer than he’d expected to stop. “Maybe next time, Mi-mi.”

Miyu left with his hoodie, an armful of claw-machine prizes, and a wad of cash clenched in her hand. She paused on the steps, and looked back, puzzled. He smiled, and waved, and waited until she was safely inside.

A pair of suited men on the corner, barely sheltered by the eaves, stubbed out their cigarettes, and slunk away to deeper shadows. It took a few weeks before they stopped waiting all night, and they simply stayed long enough to see Genji paying, laughing, chatting with the girls and the boys who worked the streets. He took them on dates, sometimes to harmless like a restaurant or a play, to the arcades or the clubs. Other times, he took them to the underground betting circuits, cheering on races and fights with his arm around his latest prize, catch, or purchase - whatever it was that these men and women were to him. The Shimada-gumi saw what they needed to see. Or, at least, they saw what looked like what they needed to see.

Their reports would remain as honest as any lie could be.

Shimada. Fill my bowl.

Genji looked at the mountain, then at the dragon. The dragon stared back, its coils sliding and coiling, looping around into infinity. The head was the beginning and the tail was the end, but it was impossible to follow one to the other.

Shimada.

There was an insistence to the word.

At the cherry-blossom viewing, Genji let himself be cornered. Hanzo grabbed him by the arm and dragged him downstairs, into the shade of the castle walls. The koi darted away from their approach, startled, then started to crowd the edge of the pond to wait to be fed.

“What are you doing here?”

“This is my home too, Hanzo. Remember?”

He dropped his brother’s arm, lips pursing and brows furrowing. For a moment, both young men were silent.
“… nice hairstyle. Looks good.”

“You are embarrassing yourself.”

The phrases were spoken simultaneously. Genji laughed, Hanzo did not.

“I am?” The younger brother flicked out his arms, catching falling cherry blossoms and palming them away, making them reappear and disappear with a wave of his hands and the billow of his yukata sleeves.

Hanzo watched the motions, the little sleight-of-hand tricks. Distracted, his eyes going distant from the memories of childhood. Then he grunted, and forced himself to look up. “Well, I suppose in order to feel embarrassed, you must first possess a sense of shame.”

Genji bit back the retort. Father’s voice was stronger here, near the room where he’d died. Don’t fight with your brother.

Said brother must have taken Genji’s silence as a sign of meekness, so his voice softened. Still stern, still authoritative, but softer. “You need to stop spending time in the floating city.”

“The what?” Genji snorted a laugh, brushing a handful of petals to the ground, and catching another with fish-quick darts of his fingers. “This isn’t Edo, anija.”

“You know what I mean.” A shade of pink darker than the petals rose over the tips of Hanzo’s ears, but from anger, not embarrassment. “You waste your time and money and you drag our family’s name through the mud every night you run off to those whores.” A finger jabbed into Genji’s face at the word, fierce and sharp. “You are not your namesake. You are a Shimada. And what is more, you are my brother.”

Genji stared at the accusing finger, then at his brother. Hanzo would never raise a hand against him. Not even like this.

The elder brother’s anger continued to boil. “If you want to make amends for your failure to our family, then do your duty. You are a dragon!” He dropped his arm. “Act like one. I shouldn’t have to speak to you about this.”

The younger brother swallowed down an ember, restraining the whip-crack retort. Don’t fight with your brother. But it was so hard, when it was Ken’s voice and phrase being spoken, wielded like a blade. Genji would fight that, and gladly. Eagerly. But he would never shoot the messenger. “So speak to me like a brother, Hanzo,” he murmured instead. “So use your own words, not the words of someone else. You know who I am.”

Hanzo snorted, folding his arms. “Do I? I have known you all your life, Genji. I watched you grow up, and I have watched you squander all your potential.” His eyes were flinty. “Like you never grew up at all.”

Then you were not watching! Or you stopped, when they told you to! The words were on the tip of his tongue, but his father’s command was gruff and accusing.

In the silence, the noise and music from upstairs in the courtyard was loud and merry. The air was warm and scented. Pink. Ephemeral. A celebration of things passing. Mono no aware.

Genji took a breath, and the confession sat on his tongue like a pearl. He opened his mouth to speak, to explain.
But it was Hanzo who spoke first, for once. “You once told me you didn’t care about what others thought of you, that you only cared what I thought of you. Well, I think you are letting me down. I think you are an embarrassment.”

Genji swallowed the confession back down, hunched his shoulders, and turned away.

Hanzo’s voice rose loud enough to disrupt the music, to make it feel like he was rearing up like a snake - a dragon - about to strike. “Do not turn your back on me, Genji!” He took a step forward. “Or do you intend to treat me like you treated Father? After all he did for you...”

A low blow like that deserved to be answered in kind.

But how could he? Against his own brother?

So instead, he ran. He bolted away from Hanzo and made for the wall, palm over palm racing up the sheer stone surface, hooking an arm over the ceramic tiles. Hanzo’s shouts followed him, snapping like wolves at his heels. But he didn’t look back as he raced along the wall, as he flung himself over the edge and downwards, rebounding off rooftops and walls until he hit street level, and then kept running.

He was exhausted long before he stopped.

The dragon’s coils filled his dreams.

*Fill my bowl.*

It bared its teeth.

*Shimada. Shimada. Shimada.*

His nephews and nieces were getting too old to be entertained by coin tricks and juggling, handstands or smuggled candy. They were getting smarter, too, not so guileless and wide-eyed. They didn’t seem to like him as much. When they spoke to him, they repeated the same things that their parents had spoken in privacy. That Genji, they said, he’s a disappointment to the family name. He’s squandering his father’s blessing. Genji learned a lot from them.

But some of them were in that stage of their training that they were self-confident, champing at the bit for a new challenge. A challenge he was glad to provide, because he was cooler than any tutor or teacher could ever be.

It got him in the door, where he could do more than just learn.

“Okay, now aim for my eye.”

“… your eye?”

“Fuck yeah, little man.” Genji grinned, then looked furtively around. “… don’t tell your mother I said ‘fuck’. She’ll be so mad.”

“Fuck yeah,” Hibiko grinned, exultant, adjusting his earmuffs and raising the gun before he called out, “Ready?”

“Ready!” Genji shouted back, hand tight around the wakizashi. He watched, and waited, and, sure enough, the boy’s shot pulled a little to the right. After all, guns were heavy, and Hibiko wasn’t used
to them yet. Genji spun on the spot, blade flashing, then dropped into a pose seen on the television. If only he had a scarf, and a wind machine to make it billow out behind him… that would have been sweet. Neither would be appropriate for the gun range, so he hoped he looked cool half-crouched with the wakizashi held just so.

He stood up, sheathing the blade, and darted left and right to grab the pieces, before returning to Hibiko. “Here you go, kiddo.” Genji dropped the halves of the bullet into the boy’s palm. “How cool is that?”

“So cool!” He had seemed a little disappointed that his Big Cousin wasn’t bleeding, but utterly amazed to see the bullet sheered straight through. “How did you do that?”

“Lots of practice,” he grinned, and ruffled the kid’s hair. “I heard your dad wants you to do kendo. That’s how I got so good at this, you know? Top of my class.”

“I heard you quit.” The six year old looked slyly up at him.

Genji made the smirk stay on his face. “Of course I did. I couldn’t find anyone good enough to beat me.”

“I could get that good.”

He shrugged. “I dunno, kid. You seem to like guns more than swords.”

“I can do both!”

“Yeah? I’ll buy you a car for your 18th birthday if you can kick my ass in a swordfight.” He offered his hand, to shake on it like a man would do.

Hibiko eagerly clasped palms, puffed up proudly and excitedly to be treated like a person, not a child. “You’re fuckin’ dead, old man.”

“Hey! I’m not old, I’m only twenty two. And don’t say ‘fuck’, you’ll get me in trouble.”

They climbed the stairs, together, back into the compound proper. As they passed the office of Hatsusebe’s head of security, Genji flicked a USB drive into the room, watching out the corner of his eye as it bounced off the wall and landed on his desk. Just an innocuous piece of hardware, nothing suspicious about it, no reason at all not to plug it in and use it when needed. Perfect. And Hibiko hadn’t seen a thing.

He was chattering already about grandfather, and kendo, and school, and Genji responded and interacted. How were his friends? What did he want for his birthday? Did he want to be driven down to the beach one day, before the summer tourists clogged up the roads?

Kasumi was fuming at the end of the hall. Her son meekly scurried past her, heading for his lessons, but he raised a hand to farewell Big Cousin Genji before vanishing.

Genji waved back. “Study hard, kiddo!”

“What are you doing here?” Kasumi hissed, drawing closer.

“I came to see my nephew.”

“He’s not your nephew.”
He raised both hands. “Yeah, yeah, I know, ‘first cousin once removed’, but you know what? It’s easier to just say ‘nephew’. It’s the same deal, really. And hey, I’m proud of him, and of you. You got yourself a smart kid, Kasu-chan.”

She slapped him.

He blinked, then raised a hand and touched his cheek. “… I really hope that was for the cameras, cousin.” He rolled his jaw, and heard the click at the joint. His cousin had hit him hard.

“You stay away from him,” Kasumi hissed, eyes alight with fury, her finger raising to point at his face. “You stay away from my son.”

He rubbed his cheek, looking at the pointing, accusing finger, then back at her. Blinking. “… why? What’s wrong?”

A sneer. “You always did play the fool.” She glowered a moment longer, then turned and stalked away, her feet pounding out an angry beat on the wooden floorboards. The door slid closed with a snap behind her, just as loud as her hand against his face.

The dream was changing.

Fill my bowl.

The sky was overcast, cloudy, lightning flickering in the coming storm. The wind made the trees bow, avenues and forests of penitents bracing themselves for the power that would soon make itself known.

The dragon keened, ears pressed flat against its skull. Its serpentine body twisted, scales rasping against each other.

Lightning struck the mountain. Nigete, suzume.

Before Genji had time to think about where he had heard that song before, the dragon clicked its teeth, and lunged. Claws outstretched. Jaws wide.

Shimada!

A report was filed about the incident at the Sure Thing nightclub. Genji had been caught in one of the bathrooms, snorting cocaine. Genji read the report with satisfaction, quite pleased that the incident had been blown out of proportion, exactly as he predicted. After all, if a yakuza boy had white powder on his nose and upper lip, it was clearly cocaine. It wouldn’t be flour, carefully applied at just the right moment for the guards to walk in and find him, to assume he was doing drugs and was thus not only incapacitated but also reckless, wasteful, and a terrible example of the family. Why would it be flour? What possible reason would there be to be so circuitous?

Occam’s Razor was proving useful.

Genji was getting to be a very good actor. Keren was starting to be second nature. It wasn’t just about being seen, about being the actor centre-stage. Sometimes, he needed to be unseen. Just part of the scenery.

He’d spied on family dealings with little more than a high-vis vest and a hard-hat (why would anyone look up at an electrician at work on the powerlines? Nothing was duller than a tradesman at
work), or dressed up like a tourist, or gone full *kuroko* and eavesdropped and been in places he had no right to be. Sparrows could be found everywhere. He’d learned a lot.

Just last week he’d shown up in one of the Shimada clan meetings. They hadn’t even realised he was there until he pulled a chair up next to Hanzo’s, and loudly plopped himself down in the middle of a financial report. “That’s different to the figures you gave out last month. What happened, Uncle Ken? How do you lose 50 million yen in four weeks?” He’d spread his hands and grinned. “I mean, I blow through cash like no-one’s business. But that’s my money. You’re losing *clan funds*. Which is something everyone at this table needs to be worried about.”

Hanzo had been more furious at the interruption than to question how Genji had come by this information. Genji followed his father’s orders, and did not fight. He just left; *hime-san* could figure it out in his own time. It was a hint of what he was doing behind the scenes, and if Hanzo was half the genius Genji knew he was, Hanzo would realise that.

Like when he threw darts in the bar, everything Genji did was with straight, certain purpose, for a target no-one else was able to see the point of, or at all. Maybe if they knew him, they’d know he was doing this for his family.

The Shimadas, not the Shimada-gumi. Hanzo, really.

Just for Hanzo.

They were brothers. Nothing was going to change that, no matter how wide the chasm yawned. The clan belonged to them, to the heirs, didn’t it? The Shimada-gumi weren’t going to take it from them. Genji wasn’t going to let them.

At certain times, Genji felt like he was motivated more by spite than by righteousness. He heard the warnings that they gave Hanzo, a poison so easy to swallow because it was so close to the truth. "If he has no loyalty to his own father, what makes you think he’ll be loyal to the clan? What makes you think he'll follow you?" And it made him so angry to think Hanzo was being swayed. If it took spite to get things done, then Genji would endure the bitter, ashen taste. It would all be worth it, in the end, when his tattoo would be complete and the brothers could stand together and rule the clan like their father intended.

He just needed a little more time, a little more information. Let the elders do their worst; he was better than them, and he’d turn it all back on their heads.

Like he planned to, tonight. Just a taste of what he had the power to do.

He’d rented a limousine. The driver was turning bright red, his gloved hands tensing around the steering wheel, as Genji shouted and catcalled and ushered the pretty girls and prettier boys inside. They were a tangle of limbs and laughter as they all scooted over to make room for each other, giving cries of delight as they discovered the mini-bar.

The last one out of the house moved so gracefully, but she did not leave the doorway. She remained there, eyes closed, lips pursed. Her yukata was shiny from overuse, ragged and worn, but the body beneath was voluptuous. Her hair was immaculate, too, pinned with sprigs of flowers, and her face was painted the white of porcelain.

Genji waved at the woman. “You coming, darling?”

Miyu tittered, and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “That’s an omnic. You don’t want it.”

“An omnic?” Genji stared. “Really?”
And now that he knew, he could see the porcelain-painted face was literally porcelain, that the immaculate hair was a wig, that even the flowers were fake. They had skin, it seemed, but silicone; a domestic-model omnic in realdoll flesh. It covered them up, hiding almost everything that made them mechanical, filling them out to be desirable beneath the tight-bound clothes, but parts of them were left bare of softness, showing off the joints and the metal beneath. They were dressed up to look human, but not too human. Just enough to be fuckable so one’s conscience wouldn’t be troubled.

Miyu tittered. “Some real perverts out there love the idea of ploughing a robot.”

“What’s their name?”

“… we call it ‘Three’.”

Genji waved again. “Come on, San-san! There’s room in here for you, too!”

The masked omnic hesitated, then swayed slowly as they walked towards the limo. There was an odd stuttering grace to their movement.

The driver hastily closed the glass partition between himself and the passengers. Genji opened the champagne.

They crowded into the hour-rate hotel lobby, the clerk discretely avoiding eye-contact as he handed over the keycard, but staring after them in hollow, hungry amazement when the lot of them walked away. Genji ushered his posse of prostitutes into the elevator, each of them carrying a suit bag, an outfit they’d been gifted. They chattered and squirmed in the narrow space, teasing and laughing, and he laughed along with them.

In the penthouse suite, they tossed aside their clothes, posing and primping and flirting. Genji obliged them with smiles and whistles as he unpacked the heavy bag he’d brought. They put on their suits and dresses, then came to him. He helped them with the sashes and cuffs and ties, with brush and mousse and hairpins, and with careful application of foundation and liner and colour and shade, he transformed them. One by one, these cheeky, playful boys and girls vanished, replaced by men and women who looked like they were headed to a dinner with a head of state.

It felt like magic, to watch them change into something different. They crowded around the mirrors, disbelieving their own eyes. They knew who they were, but tonight they looked like something else. Something better, something other. They barely recognised each other.

“The clothes make the man,” Genji smiled, helping one of them with a suit jacket.

Three stood and watched, unmoving. When Genji approached them with a kimono, they did not move, did not shake their head, did not recoil, did not reach for the garment. Nothing. Genji felt supremely awkward.

“C’mon, San-san, we’re all dressing up for the big night.”

“I am not a doll,” they said, quietly. Their cadence might have been programmed, but there was intensity to it.

“I know.” He offered them the kimono again. “But we’re all dressing up tonight.”

They looked over the others, ‘seeing’ though her mask’s eyes were closed. Again, they said nothing, then they turned and walked into the bathroom. “I am shy.”

He snorted a laugh. He went to follow, but Three held out their arm, stopping him. He saw their
wrist, saw the places where flesh did not cover metal, at the wires and pistons and parts he did not have a word for. He flushed, looked aside, handed them the kimono, and stepped back. The omnic closed the door. When they emerged, she looked stunning. A geisha fresh from the history books. Genji made certain not to look at their wrists again; he needed to look cool and collected tonight.

When they were all dressed, when their makeup was perfect and their hair salon-styled, Genji clapped his hands. “Come on, ducklings.” They gathered up their things, and headed back downstairs, where a second limousine was waiting for them.

Showtime.

The Matagama had secured a prodigious collection of actors, who would be performing Kanadehon Chūshingura. The whole theatre had been booked solid for months. Uncle Oda had tickets; it had taken great expense to secure them for himself, his wife, his son, and his daughter, and he’d kept quiet about it. He had no idea Genji had found a way to access his financial records. They were there early, drinking and talking amongst themselves. Inoue, that snake in the lotus, saw Genji first, and breathed a word of warning to her father. The look on Ken’s face when Genji walked in, trailed by men and women in clothes the Shimada-gumi had outgrown or discarded, was priceless. Even better was the way Noburu had walked out of the theatre the moment he saw the omnic. He had that stoic ‘I don’t know her’ look to his incredibly-red face.

Genji and the ducklings took up the first two rows, the VIP seats. He relaxed, as he felt the eyes of the Shimada elder on the back of his head, sharp as knives. He enjoyed the performance immensely, and even more so knowing he’d utterly ruined it for that asshole Ken.

Genji couldn’t wait to read how they reported this.

The shrine was dusty. He cleaned it, and lit incense, and for a moment he just sat and watched it burn. He half imagined he could hear Haru outside, cropping the grass and snorting, like she’d always done. She’d loved this place, loved the ride through the forest and up the slopes, even as she got too old to make the journey easily.

But Genji was alone now.

His heart beat steadily, but it provided the rhythm to a song that had been far too present lately. The song was in the background while he showed off recipes and makeup techniques and cosplay tips for the livestreams his fans adored. The song had been present on the nights when he drove from one end of Hanamura to the other. The song was present in The Block, in the shadows, on the rooftops, in the arcade, in the compounds of the Shimada-gumi. The song was here, too, in the forests, in the silent sanctity of the abandoned shrine. The song was everywhere he went, in everything he did. The song was following him.

Nigete, suzume, nigete.

Genji grit his teeth and breathed, trying to turn the song to something else. But still his heart told him to run. To leave it all behind, to stop lying, to stop trying to change what could never be changed. Run, sparrow, get away.

“No,” he hissed, thinking of Hanzo, of the clan, of the unfinished tattoo. Things could still turn around. Besides, he might be Sparrow, but he was a dragon still. Dragons did not run. Dragons fought. He was not a coward.

But coward or no, the song continued, making his unease grow day by day, hour by hour.
There was no shame to be prepared for the worst.

He climbed under the temple, on his belly and arm-over-arm, and found a secure corner, under a part of the floor that hadn’t crumbled yet, where the weather hadn’t yet caused the supports to weaken or buckle. Here, he placed a box that contained a change of clothes, a portable cooking stove, a first aid kit, a handful of sharpened blades, a scarf, some energy bars, a hollow dictionary that contained more than just words. He latched the chest, and rubbed handfuls of dust over it, until it looked as dark and abandoned as the rest of the shrine. Perfectly hidden.

“I am not a coward,” he told the hidden box. “I will fight for my birthright. For the birthright my brother and I share. You are just in case things go wrong.” Just in case things go wrong, and he needed to run.

But not to run away, to run, find a safe place, to bide his time and gather his strength, and attack back. If he had to be forced away, he would not be idle. He would never be idle. He would not stop fighting for what belonged to himself and Hanzo. They were the true heirs.

For a little while, the song was quieter. But it whispered in his pulse, constantly.

“Yo!”

He slid through the crowd towards them, a grin on his face, one hand holding a bottle by the neck, a wrapped present tucked in the crook of his elbow, and the other hand splayed to balance a pastry. Bride and groom cried out in unified delight to see him, and he leaned in to peck at their cheeks.

The Shimada-gumi bodyguards looked professionally distressed. Most of the Shimada-gumi hid their sour looks.

“You made it, Shimada-san!”

“I’m so glad.”

Genji laughed. He was in a suit, like every other man in here, but his shirt was a vivid crimson, and he wore no tie; his hair, still green, was slicked back and neated like a rolling wave. He was a splash of vibrancy in an otherwise sombre room; the conflict of green-for-go and red-for-stop. “You think I would miss this? Not for the world.” He juggled the present onto the already-crowded table, then carefully placed the bottle down beside it. Now his arm was free, and he could half-hug both of them.

He saw Hanzo across the room, frozen mid-discussion with the Secretary of Defence. His hair was up, his suit was immaculate, and his eyes were steel. To Hanzo’s right, Masaru whispered urgently. To his left, Rin looked at Genji with an inscrutable expression.

“When’s your next video coming out, chef?”

Genji refocused on the bride and groom, his smile quick to broaden. “Funny you should ask! See, I have here the very thing I was making.” He opened the pastry box with the air of someone unveiling a million-dollar pearl from a clam. He beamed to hear their gasps. “Now, I’m only going to post the video if you like them, so… try them! Tell me if they’re good!”

The Prime Minister’s son laughed as his new wife fed him one of the tiny, delicate pastries, and she laughed when he fed her one in return. Licking chocolate and sugar from their fingers, they declared them delicious.
“And they’re all for you.” He leaned in conspiratorially, setting down the pastry box with the present and the bottle of wine. “Don’t share them with anyone else. It’s your special day, and these are your special cakes!”

Hanzo’s conversation had resumed, but it was obvious he was politely disengaging. Masaru had already slipped away, and Rin was taking over, laughing and twining the Secretary’s attention with movements of her hands. The bodyguards were shifting. Genji didn’t have a lot of time.

“So,” Genji nudged the new bride, playfully grinning. “I was wondering if I could ask for a dance…”

“I would love to dance with you, Shimada-san.”

“I was actually asking if it would be alright to dance with your husband.”

She laughed, merrily, and batted at Genji’s arm. The Prime Minister’s son looked started, then laughed along with her. “I thought you’d never ask!”

“Genji.” Hanzo was there, taller than Genji remembered. He bowed politely to the bride and groom, but his eyes did not leave his brother’s. “May I speak to you for a moment?”

“Yes, sure!” The cheer for bride and groom - good friends, he made friends so easily, and so well - was genuine, and he didn’t even need to fake the smile. The tension between brothers would not spoil the happiness of the day. “Remember, I want that dance. No backing out on me!”

“Sure thing, chef!”

He flicked a wink and a grin. Hanzo gave another bow and a polite smile. Then the two of them turned and crossed the room. It had been a while since the brothers walked side by side, but with so many unfriendly faces turned his way, or watching sidelong between sips of champagne or pleasant discussion, it almost felt to Genji like Hanzo was walking him to his execution.

Hanzo’s polite smile dropped the moment the glass door swung shut behind them, once they had some measure of privacy on the balcony. His eyes remained anywhere but his brother’s, staring furiously out to the soft sea of lights that illuminated the branches of trees in the palatial gardens. “You were not invited, Genji.” His throat bobbed, as he swallowed, choking on barely-repressed fury. “I am here to represent the clan beneath the scrutiny of the state.” Another pause, not so much for effect but because his head was clearly pounding, aching from the agony of being surrounded and watched by so many people. “It would be better for you to leave.”

Genji was tempted to run a hand through his hair, a gesture familiar between the two of them. But there was too much wax in his hair, trying to tame the wildness for the sake of this fancy evening. Though he was wild, still, with his Shimada brows and fine eyes and cheeky smile (now hidden behind pressed lips) in a sharp suit, he was far from the mess he was normally so proud of being. He couldn’t look directly at Hanzo either, but out the corner of his eye he watched his older brother’s jaw tense, watched him struggle.

He drummed his hands on the balcony rail, unable to keep still. As ever, as always. “I was invited by the bride and groom, seeing as my official invitation seemed to have been ‘lost in the mail’. It would be disrespectful of them if I were to leave now. And,” he made a slight tilt of the head, a brief warning of the strike he was about to make, “Disrespectful to the clan.”

Even with the warning, Hanzo wasn’t ready for it. A strike, sure and true. Above all things, true. True, compared to the half-truths and palatable lies the Shimada-gumi used. Frustration clearly
thrummed just beneath the elder brother’s skin, and his poorly-contained emotion radiated off him as he picked at his own sleeves. He turned, agitated, and met his brother’s gaze. Genji was struck at how Hanzo had grown up and filled out. He looked more like Dad used to, the same angles to the cheeks. The same beard. The same copper eyes that Genji had, though the look in them was dark and unfamiliar.

“I want you gone by midnight,” Hanzo said, his voice a hushed growl to keep from making a scene obvious to the people inside. “Make an excuse. Do not speak of disrespect when you should have done better to obey my wishes, Genji.”

‘Genji’. It sounded more like ‘fool’. Or ‘child’.

The younger brother felt something hard and painful in his throat. He turned around, his back to the balcony rails; his elbows rest on it, he slouched, casual, relaxed, a vision of calm for anyone watching. And he saw them. The ones that quickly turned away to pretend they weren't spying were the ones he took note of, while the ones still looking in mere curiosity got a wave, a smile.

Still smiling, he looked up. “I want to speak to my brother. Is he here?”

Hanzo blinked, startled, mouth opening but no words coming out.

Genji glanced back to the crowd inside, one foot tapping. He straightened up, adjusted his collar, turned to rest one hand on the rail and the other on his hip. It was so hard to talk. Time and distance and this lump in his throat. And everything got turned into a fight. They couldn’t talk anymore.

“I don't think he would have wanted to explain to everyone just why I wasn't here. To have people draw their own conclusions. ... and he knows he hates parties. And talking to people. So...” A leg swung, and with the momentum, Genji straightened up. "Is he here? Or are you all that is left of him?"

Another strike. God, he hadn’t meant to, but that last sentence slipped out. Careless. You got sloppy. Don’t fight with your brother.

Hanzo looked away. His knuckles were white as he gripped the rail, shoulders hunched. He forced calm into his voice, dragging it over gravel. Forcing it, for duty’s sake, with a stoic iciness saved only for audiences. “You might find him with our father.”

Nuki-waza. Genji took the wound unflinching; he deserved it. “Hanzo…”

“This is who I must be now,” Hanzo cut him off, sharply. He straightened up, and adjusted his cufflinks. “Do not make me repeat myself. I will not have you make a mockery of our clan in front of so many potential partners.” His tone is clipped. The words are his, but only from practice and training. The wind blew oddly cold on such a balmy summer night. “I am certain you are not short of... alternative venues where you will find your amusements.”

Genji turned his face from the glass doors so that only Hanzo and the night sky had a view of the flash of anger than turns to pain, before he shut his eyes and composed himself. ‘‘Mockery’’. He spoke the word like it caused him pain, and snorted a breath from his nose.

It hadn’t been more than two years since they'd sprawled on the grass, when he'd said ‘trust me’ and Hanzo had promised to do so. Two years, two centuries, what was the difference? He came here in his nicest suit and on his best behaviour, but the night hadn't even begun before Hanzo had swooped in to disparage him. To defend the clan instead of his own flesh and blood.

But what reason had his own flesh and blood given to make trust warranted?
The tattoo wasn’t finished. But maybe he shouldn’t wait. Maybe he should just tell him. Genji closed his eyes, sifting through words, phrases.

He heard a door to the balcony open, further down from where the brothers stood, and it was too late. No chance for the truth, when there was someone else to hear.

Another missed chance to reach out across the abyss.

So he just straightened up, and grinned. A fake, fake smile, with the pain clear in his eyes, if Hanzo should only care to pay attention. If Hanzo would care to believe it. “You got it all wrong, anija. It’s the princess that leaves at midnight.”

He turned to go, pausing only to wink and wave at Rin as she approached from the far end of the balcony, though he did not stay to hear what she might have said to him. To either of them. He flung the door open, and strode back into the crowd. He wove his way through famous faces, making his way straight to a table full of dour-faced politicians all pretending they enjoyed having been seated with each other, far from the place of honour.

“Minister Sakamoto!” He slid into an empty chair. “Have you had a change to use those new golf clubs yet? I hear you soundly beat the Opposition Leader the last time you and he sparred off.”

He had a natural talent to remember faces and names and ingratiating himself into conversations, a talent he did not waste. He steered the conversation, from that particular golf course, to the course in Hanamura that was now an orchard, thick with peach trees. From his jacket pocket, he surreptitiously produced a silver flask, and as he poured little samples for each of the politicians he sang the praise of the Hanamura-made liquor. Weaving a tale of wonder and intrigue, as gifted with storytelling as his father had been, his words making the sweet drink sweeter. They only made fifty bottles a year of this particular liquor, and only eight bottles of the gold-leaf dessert liqueur. Had these fine men considered how prestigious it would be to have one or two such bottles in their private collections, or on their shelves at the country clubs? And oh, had they considered the glory they would gain if they were seen to be personal sponsors of the orchards?

But, ah, he was not pushing anything, of course not. Genji was not here to do business, no, not at a party. But still, he poured them more, until the flask was empty, before he shook hands, slapped shoulders, and departed the table with in such a way to make them all regret losing the company of such a good friend. Such a departure would make his ideas have far more merit, and take root far firmer in their minds.

At the next table, he greeted the ambassador and his wife in French, then switched to English to introduce himself to the table, leaving no-one out. And for one diplomat’s wife he smiled and greeted her like he knew her husband well, and asked about how their children were doing. Their daughter was soon to enter high school, wasn’t she? Had she decided on violin or piano yet, or was she to take up both?

And so on. He never ran out of things to say, nor people to talk to. He paid no mind to the glares of the Shimada-gumi, as he ingratiated himself into the conversations of one diplomat or politician after another, chatting about friends and hobbies and mutual acquaintances. He paid no attention to Hanzo, except to glance now and then, to see the sunny-faced Rin staying loyally at her fiancé’s side, keeping him stoic rather than miserable throughout the transactional small talk. He saw them slip away with the Police Secretary-General, to a private room reserved for more serious discussions. He saw, briefly, Hanzo look over his shoulder.

Dark, resentful eyes. If there was a dragon there, it was black, not blue. They were a long way apart, and the lights were so low. Genji must have imagined it.
Genji danced with the bride and groom, like he promised. Something stately, of course, before he asked the DJ to play something iconic, and coaxed a small crowd to join him in the familiar choreography of a pop-culture classic.

He was loud, and everywhere, grinning, laughing, making everyone he spoke to thought fondly of him. He moved, never stopped moving, took his fair share of the drinks, and kept going, kept weaving and bobbing and socialising.

Two minutes before midnight, he left. No keren, here, to mask his departure, he just walked out when everyone was distracted. No farewells, no apologies. He was just gone. He would have liked to stay. But he was tired of butting heads with Hanzo.

He wished they could just talk.

…it wouldn’t be long now. Just a few more sessions, and the tattoo would be done. Then they could talk. Then the truth would be made clear. Then they could mend, could heal, could be brothers again.

Genji paused on the edge of the gardens. On the drive, there was a car waiting for him. Hanzo must have arranged it, dutiful as he was. But that Masaru asshole was standing nearby, champing impatiently through a cigarette, watching the exits for Genji, looking like he had something to say.

Genji wasn’t about to find out what. He eased unseen into the shadows, and walked briskly down the drive without being spotted. Past the security checkpoints. Back down into the city. He pulled out his phone, and tapped his details into the app, calling a personal taxi to take him back to the outskirts of Hanamura.

There were people waiting for him, watching as he climbed out of the cab. Dark suits and earpieces. Genji silently wished them luck, as he straightened his jacket and strode off ahead of them. These were his streets. He took a left, then a right, then rejoined the main road. Out the corner of his eye and in the reflections of glass, he saw them still following. Another left, a casual saunter down an unmarked alleyway, two rights, another left…

There was an old man drinking from a paper bag on the street corner. When he saw Genji, he lifted his face to call for loose change. Both men recognised each other at the same time, and grinned.

“Tell them I went that way,” Genji pointed right, flourished his hand, and presented the man with a 10000 yen bill.

The old man smiled slyly, and he tucked the money down the front of his shirt. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Shimada.”

“Tell Akeuchi I said hi.” Genji saluted, then dashed off down to the left.

This was Hanamura. These were his streets. These were his people. This was his territory. He was heir to this place. Did they really think they could herd and capture a dragon?

He went home. To the castle, to the place he had not been as the heir, but as a tourist, as an interloper, as an unwanted guest. It wasn’t right. This was his home. This would be his home again, soon. Soon. He swore it. For Hanzo’s sake, and for his own.

He would not stay. He would only linger long enough to remember why he was fighting, and what he was fighting for.

The song thrummed softly, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.
This is my home, he insisted, as he clambered the wall, glancing at the mountain, then back over his shoulder at the courtyard, the lanterns, the singing floor, the paper screens. This is my home.

Nigete, suzume, nigete.

His dreams were silent.

The moon hung low over the mountain, peeking through the clouds that all but blocked its light.

The dragon hung inches from his face, staring him down.

Genji didn’t dare look away, not even to find the bowl, or what he should fill it with.

And when he woke, his heart was pounding.

The weather had been inclement. The season of storms, they called it, when the winds from the New Year and the approaching spring jostled and rumbled, tousling with each other for control. This afternoon, the air almost hummed from the rhythm of the driving rain, though within this meeting room, all were warm and dry, and had better things to think on or talk about than the weather. Today, they spoke on Shimada business, on the mundane branch interactions that governed the day-to-day life in the city. Taxes, shipments, bribes for the local law enforcement, civic festivals and donations to keep public opinion firmly in their favour. And when they had run out of things to say, they suggested things to discuss in the next meeting, for things to pass on to the elders, for a query if there was anything more urgent they should be doing or if it was to be business as usual here in Hanamura.

The clerk closed the notepad with a soft click, rising and bowing respectfully to the men in the room, before he made a quiet and dignified exit. Most men also departed, until all that remained were representatives of the Goro and Oka branches.

After a few moments in silence, Hokusai Masaru rose from his chair, and moved to the door. He waited, listening, before cautiously turning the handle. He peered out, then leaned further out of the room, looking left, and right, and up, before locking the door and returning to his seat.

One of the women chuckled. “Just making sure, eh?”

“The carrot has a bad habit of eavesdropping and lingering in doorways. Let’s make this quick.” He drummed his fingertips on the glass tabletop. “What do we do about the boy?”

Faces turned, left and right, meeting each other’s’ gazes grimly. For a moment, there was silence. A heavy one, one no-one dared break.

“He’s still useful,” said one of the members of the Goro branch. “He has a sharp mind, for all his stubbornness. I say we keep trying to rein him in. The family would have much to gain from his loyal service.”

“He’s too ‘wild’,” the representative of the Oka branch checked her nails. This wasn’t the castle, she could use English here.

“He’s still of Shimada blood,” another interposed, clearing his throat, glancing at the framed picture set in the display case at the end of the room. “And so few of the sons are able to call dragons these days. It would… not be wise to… interfere.” He picked the word so tentatively, and bowed his head, ashamed.
Masaru played with his lighter. Click, click-click, click, click-click. “He has a lot of… sympathy, from the locals, as well. Something to consider. But it is difficult to play that to anyone’s advantage while he is so distracted.” He sat forward, gripping the lighter tight in his palm. “But once the distractions have been removed…”

A third crossed his arms. “And if they can’t be removed?”

“Then certain changes will be made.” The woman tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and smiled unpleasantly. “Plans are already in motion for our last resort. Shimada Oka has been preparing for quite some time.”

Masaru inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Shimada-sama’s work has been admirable. Not just in this matter, but in all things. The clan will be in good hands.”

The Goro representative looked uneasy. “But Shimada-san is still…”

Masaru waved a hand. “Everything that happens will happen as it should. We are mere mortals. We’re not here to claim the right to be a dragonslayer; we do not have that right. But we are all agreed that something must be done, yes? For the good of the family? For the good of the clan?”

Around the room, there were nods. Some were quick, brisk. Some were slower, uneasy. But there was no abstaining, no denial. They were all unified when it came to the clan.

“Then,” Masaru stood, adjusting his tie, “Something will be done. For now, we continue as we always have. But we need to corral that ‘dragon’. Keep it under control. Either it learns to accept the way that things are, or…” He let the sentence hang, then flicked his hand. This off-the-record meeting was over. Dismissed.

Everyone departed. The door hung wide, letting in that rich, loamy scent - that petrichor - and the soft hiss of rain on the rooftops inside the meeting room. Their voices carried down the hall, laughter and murmurs that faded, along with the sound of their feet. A moment passed, then another. A door at the other end of the building was opened, and the door to the meeting room chased the flow of air, closing on its own power. The automatic lights shut off. There was a moment. A moment longer. Another one, still.

Opposite the door to the meeting room, on the wall behind the long glass table, there were two display cabinets. One held an array of fine porcelain, heirloom ornaments to display the history and wealth of the clan behind glass. The other was open-faced, and held a framed picture, a woodcut of the two dragons chasing their tails, the Shimada mon.

The first cabinet was cherrywood. The second one was only painted to look so, but a lot of care and attention had gone into making sure the grain matched almost identically to the first. It would look something like a backpack, when it was folded up.

Behind the canvas panels, hemmed in by PVC tubing and crouched on a small camp stool, Genji watched his hands. Finally, they’d stopped shaking. The hours of discomfort from having to sit, and be still, and not be able to take a piss, was secondary now. Was nothing.

He tried to breathe.

They wanted him dead.

_Nigete, suzume._

They’d been planning it for a while.
Hanzo needed to know. Hanzo deserved to know. The brothers needed to stand together.

The tattoo wasn’t finished. Genji was running out of time.

April bowed to give way to May. The branches were heavy with flowers, and the air of the whole valley sweetly perfumed. So many did not notice, rushing to and fro for the necessity of their lives. *Mono no aware* was for those who had the leisure to sit back and appreciate that time was fleeting, that beauty was so transient. That all that was loved could be lost with a simple breeze passing by.

Genji used to be at leisure.

Arata’s *yatai* was near one of the parks, taking advantage of the tourists’ and the locals’ hunger alike, and he was constantly brushing light pink petals from his workstation and the counter. Tonight, he had only one last customer. “Another bowl, Shimada-san?”

“One more, Chef Arata. Thank you.”

Genji scrolled through his phone as he ate. News from around the world. A tragedy in Paris, a terrorist attack. Photographs of sheet-wrapped bodies on the grassy slopes and stairs in front of the Sacré-Cœur were feeding through on every major news network. He watched the shaky first-hand footage taken by survivors, muted, so he would not hear the sobbing or screaming or gunfire. There was urgency from the city, messages from world leaders, a hashtag trending for open doors, safe places, prayers for victims and survivors.

*You fools, it’s just a distraction*, Genji thought, tired and angry at the same time. While the police chased leads and blocked streets in Montmartre, down the hill and over the river in Sèvres a Shimada delivery was made without incident.

People died. It was a shame, but these foreign countries were always fighting each other, and terrorists always chose to strike viciously to make their statements. It was a shame, a shame, a shame. If only there was a way to prevent things like that happening in the future. If only.

Luckily, Shimada weapons were on the market just in time for an unexpected increase in demand.

*How much did the Shimada-gumi pay those gunmen*, Genji wondered, putting down his phone, picking up his chopsticks. He had little appetite. *How much did we pay?*

He flicked out of private browsing, opening a new window, and leaned over the tiny screen as he forced himself to eat. His latest video was nearly at 5000 views. The highest rated comment had a tag to the second that he bit into a whole green pepper with ‘god I wish that was me’; most people agreed with the appropriate emojis. He had fanmail, he had suggestion from a stylist, he had a request for a photoshoot for a new line of clothes, he had one of the fan artists he’d commissioned thanking him for the tip that he’d sent. It was all so mundane. Little flower petals. He tried to appreciate them, tried to appreciate his life, to appreciate that he was wanted and loved, but he felt too cold.

On the other side of the world, people were dead because of his family.

In Hanamura, koinobori fluttered in the breeze from most rooftops and from the balconies of apartments. Black, for the fathers. Red, for the firstborn sons. Blue and green respectively for the sons after that. Not many blue carp flew, and even less green.
There had never been a red carp over Shimada Castle. At least, not as long as Genji could remember. There had been a black koinobori for Goro, yes. But blue for Hanzo and green for Genji. There was no red. Perhaps because the red dragon had not been seen for generations.

Or perhaps because Goro was a thief. An usurper. Someone who took the proper line of succession, something he didn’t deserve, the youngest claiming the head of the household. He’d taken pride in it, hadn’t he? He flaunted tradition wherever he could, as long as it benefitted him. They hated him for that, his brothers, but they had no freedom to act until he died.

Genji tapped into the article again, re-reading about Takeru. There were so many, but there was only one that Oka had meant as an insult. A curse. That prince among men, his glorious rise and anticlimactic fall from grace. Goro had laughed at curses - hadn’t he hung the scroll in the shrine? - but there was a power in names, even names that didn’t belong, that were given in anger or mockery, rather than birth or affection. Takeru. A man who had everything, even a gift from the gods (not a sword now, but sons. Two sons, at a time when succession was a race to see who could have male heirs the fastest). His wife sacrificed herself to appease a storm god (dragons are always hungry, always… and the sea, too, the sea is wide and deep and never satisfied). A man who travelled far and accomplished much, but blasphemed against a mountain spirit (every night standing on the balcony, blowing plumes of smoke towards Fuji-yama), fell ill, and died (he took a long time to die, wheezing his every breath through a machine).

Names had power. Akane and Goro had called Oka ‘Ken’, as they took the clan away from them. He named his brother in return. And now the Takeru, the usurper son, was reduced to ‘Sojiro’, the name painted on white and carved in stone, and Oka was reclaiming what had been taken from him… even his name. Names had power.

And the Shimada clan had generation after generation of powerful names. Of power, wielded like a weapon, to strike down strangers in a faraway land. Wielded here, too, as a threat against their own town, to keep the order that they demanded, and even against their own kin, to keep them reined in. Obedient. Corralled.

The night air was getting cooler. Petals still fell, and were brushed from the yatai countertop and into the street.

Genji set his chopsticks down, and stared at his left hand. The scar was still there, faded after all these years. But whiter skin cut his palm, edge to edge. He remembered the little boy who had memorised the tenets of kendo and swore to uphold them. The little boy who had been frightened to realise he was a yakuza’s son. The little boy who had wanted to be a warrior like on TV, no matter what.

But warriors did not hide, did not lie, did not bide their time. One of the tenants of kendo was sincerity, but Genji had been an actor this whole time. Pretending. What had happened to the ideals of that little boy? Why would be forget them? What had he become?

“Oishi,” Genji murmured, feeling ill.

“What did you say, Shimada-san?”

“I said ‘delicious’,“ Genji smiled, and it came far too easily to his face. He was so good at acting. Lying.

“One more?”

Genji hesitated, then shook his head. “No, thank you.” He reached for his wallet, counting out twice
the usual fee. “That news about Paris… I don’t think I can eat anymore.”

“What happened in Paris?”

“Terrorist attack.”

Arata looked sympathetic. “A terrible shame. You have such a good heart, Shimada-san, to be so worried about something that is so far away.”

Genji put the money down, notes folded to hide the extra payment. *So far away, and close as family.*

“Goodnight, Chef Arata.”

“Goodnight, Shimada-san.”

He walked through the park. He loved Hanamura. He loved the cherry blossom trees, and the summer heat, and the sloping hills. He loved the peach trees, he loved the overgrown shrines, he loved the narrow alleyways and neon lights, and he loved the traditional tiles and sliding paper screens. He loved the people, the ones desperate to survive and the ones who flourished, the young and the old, the rich and the poor. All of them. He loved Hanamura.

But did he deserve it?

He opened his palm and stared at it as he walked. Scars were memorials. *Tou-san* had told him that. ‘They will remember’. The Shimada-gumi left scars wherever they went, with whoever they dealt with. But Genji had inflicted this wound on himself, drawn his own blood rather than wet his blade with a stranger’s blood. The scar lingered, a reminder of his belief that life was sacred, a reminder of the responsibility he had chosen.

… Or of the failure. He was the son of a very ambitious man. Genji was half of Goro’s *kamiyo*, for fuck’s sake. He had a responsibility to the clan, to live up to the example and expectation his father had set. He had been raised to take his place. Goro had made sure of it. He’d trained them. He fed them stories. He pushed them to work, to strive, to be better than everyone around them. But then he had also told them ‘you must work together’. Why? Because they weren’t capable of doing anything on their own? Had they been raised broken, half-raised instead of made to be their own men? Or had they just been raised as any yakuza should, with no purpose but to continue the work of the ones that came before?

*Did you want a son?* Genji wondered, dropping his hand to his side. *Or did you want an heir?*

There would be no answer.

There was no more time to ask.

He was beginning to understand just how much of an idiot he was. How much he’d wasted. He didn’t know what he was. He didn’t know who he was supposed to be.

All he knew for certain was he shouldn’t have run off on his fucking own.

He hurried through the dark, avoiding everyone, using the darkness of night to keep from being spotted or recognised. He banged on the heavy metal door until Horishi answered.

Most of her boxes were gone, and the empty space left by the familiar pile of cardboard was jarring. The place was nearly empty. Stripped bare, but for the tattoo chair, a towel, a ragged futon, a laptop resting near the kitchen sink, the fridge, and a backpack open and half-packed by the wall.
But she’d brought in mirrors, those tall plastic ones from houseware stores, ones to be stuck to the inside of wardrobe cupboards. There must have been eight of them, all standing in a circle together.

“What’s going on?”

She shut the laptop, and gestured to the tattoo chair. “Undress and sit.”

“… Horishi?”

She sighed, pushing hair back from her face. “We’re going to finish this tonight, aren’t we? Undress and sit.”

“Tonight.” Genji felt his heart stop for a moment. “It’ll be really finished tonight?” Thank god, thank all the kami, thank whoever or whatever was out there to be thanked. Tonight, it would be fixed. Everything would be made right again.

“Well, not until you sit.” Horishi was tense. Tenser than usual.

He hurried to do as he was told. For her, for Hanzo, for him, for the family name.

For everything to be right again.

It did not take long. Twenty needles with twenty different inks, Horishi went over the lines in various places. The word ‘binding’ came to Genji’s mind, though he didn’t know why. His entire back had been inked, but tonight it felt different. Perhaps it was a desperate need to feel that things were different. The turning point. That pivotal day when everything changed.

He needed it to be so. He believed it to be so. It would be so.

The artist wiped his back down with oil, then rose and took her needles to the sink. Genji heard the hiss of water from the tap. He didn’t move.

She noticed, after a moment. “It’s done. You can look at yourself.” She didn’t leave the sink. Didn’t lift her head.

Genji pushed away from the chair, both hands covering his crotch for modesty’s sake. He stepped between the mirrors, and turned. Looking into every reflection, unable to keep from gasping in amazement.

The colours were so vibrant, impossibly fresh and lively, shaded and shadowed, no detail overlooked. Every line captured movement: the flow of the petals, the slither of the dragon’s coils, the flutter of the sparrow’s wings, the billowing of the clouds. It was more than a tattoo. It was a landscape. It was a story. A story frozen in a single image.

“Horishi! This is… this is amazing!”

The dragon’s eyes arrested him, filling the majority of his back in shades of green so lively that it seemed impossible to think it was merely a tattoo. Surely, the dragon was curled up on his back to tease him. But no, as he rolled his shoulders, Genji knew for certain it was just ink on skin. Just? Ha! Coiled and looped in mid-air, talons raised, tail flicking in the breeze, the dragon looked so true to life, buoyed up by the clouds, and the wind, and the rain. Its mane billowed, vivid as fire, burning bright in sunset shades.

“Holy shit, woman, you really outdid yourself!”
Around the dragon, flower petals floated, fell. The wind was strong, and cold; goosebumps prickled over Genji’s skin as he watched the swirling motion of those frozen flowers, as though he could feel the wind captured under his skin. There, swooping amongst them, the little sparrow, wings flared and every feather immaculately rendered. A song was frozen in its beak, and a little sprig of sakura caught in its feet. It must have been heavy, for so small a bird, but it flew and sang without a care.

“… Horishi, you…”

Behind the bird, behind the dragon, the mountain stood tall, and watched.

**Nigete. Suzume. Nigete.**

Genji’s heart pounded in his ears, and his amazement curdled, cooling, plunging to cold terror. For behind the mountain were clouds as dark as night, broiling and growing. A streak of lightning, pale but unmissable, struck down at the valley below. A single warning shot. The storm was about to break. It was about to break, and crush the world beneath it. Wash everything away.

There had been signs. The wind, so wild, so cold, sent the flowers to billowing, tearing them from the trees, no matter how hard the sparrow tried to hold on to his little sprig. The flowers were dying, and the storm was coming. And where was the sparrow’s flock? Why was it alone? Sparrows were never alone, they surrounded themselves, always, with others. But this one had no-one. The dragon’s claws hovered defensively, protectively, it’s back to the coming storm, but the sparrow did not notice. Its eyes were closed, and it sang of the spring it kept close. It did not notice the cold, or the claws, or the wind. It was lost in the scent of sakura flowers.

The mountain watched over it, but its warning was clearer now. Impossible to miss, impossible to ignore. **Run, Sparrow. Get away.**

But even if the little bird heard it now, it was too late.

The storm was breaking.

Genji’s vision swam, and he fell to his knees, the weight of the story bearing down on him, crushing the air from his lungs. He hadn’t looked, he hadn’t even so much as glanced at it, hadn’t seen anything at all around him. He could have changed it, could have changed everything, if he’d only stopped and realised exactly what he was in the middle of. But now the story was written and sealed, an inescapable chain of ink and history, binding him.

He’d been bound long ago. But now he could see his chains. They were beautiful; he’d never noticed them, because they were beautiful.

“I warned you.”

Horishi’s voice was soft, over the sound of his weeping. She moved, quietly, packing up the last of her things, turning off all the lights but the ones over and around the mirrors. With her backpack full to bursting slung over her shoulders, she stood behind him, face impassive.

He could see her in the reflections, unable to turn to look at her directly.

“I warned you,” she said, again, but there was no pity in her expression. She adjusted her pack, and looked aside, scanning the nearly-empty room. Her scars and implants were stark in the shadows.

He reached out a hand, for the mirror. Behind him, she stepped back, as though fearing if he touched her reflection he might touch her.
“I’m leaving Hanamura,” she said, looking down at him, staring at the result of five years of her work. Ignoring the sobbing canvas it was on. “Your money helped me get out of here, rich kid, so… thanks for that.” She lifted her gaze, meeting his eyes in the mirror. “But don’t try and find me. Don’t try and look for me. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

He tried to ask ‘why’. After all that had happened, after all they had come to know each other, after five years of stolen evenings and jokes and stories…

But it was as clear as the ink on his skin.

The heavy steel door swung open, then closed again, and Genji was left alone, naked and sobbing on the cold concrete floor.

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**Chapter notes:**

- Genji’s dance in the warehouse was inspired by Kinjaz routines, mostly Ben Chung’s ‘Eung Freestyle’, but also the 2017 Arena ‘Fear None’ performance, featuring Kendrick Lamar’s ‘Humble’ and Problem’s ‘Betta Watch Yo Self’. To compound the ironic relation of these songs to Genji, the clip opens with a quote from the *Sunzibingfa*, Sun Tsu’s Art of War. I was also tempted to slip in certain lyrics from Left Boy’s ‘Dangerous’, thanks to a playlist I found of Genji-esque songs, but I didn’t want the chapter to hang on them.
- *Keren*: ‘outside party’, playing the gallery, the tricks used in kabuki theatre for dramatic effect (eg wire-assisted flight, trapdoors that raise and lower actors from the stage, quick changes of costume).
- I had intended for a longer segment to describe all the times Genji prepared to be caught with ‘cocaine’, with further examples of his use of *keren*, using further sleight of hand tricks (as well as his training as a chef) but it all condensed down to one single paragraph. This entire chapter encompassed a passage of 3 years, but there was much that had to be condensed or even removed entirely for the sake of narrative flow.
- *Kuroko*: the stagehands of kabuki plays that wear black, the source of the modern visualisation of ninjas.
- Miyu: another pun of a name. ‘Lovely Evening’, or two different characters for ‘water’.
- The underground betting circuits came about as a half-joking discussion with Dragonsgeometry about some of the aspects of the Shimada street business, especially linking to the recent Yakuza game. Whether or not the Shimada clan holds underground chicken-racing is up for you to decide.
- *Kanadehon Chūshingura*: a kabuki play about 47 ronin who avenged their lord a year and a half after his death, based on the historical Akō Incident in 18th-century Japan.
- Genji wearing a high-visibility vest and pretending to be an electrician was a reference to a scene within a novel that featured a ‘modern day ninja’ who joined a police investigation into a yakuza civil war. I unfortunately cannot recall the title of the book, but the ‘ninja’ in question often chose to wear uniforms of the working-class, dressed as a homeless man, or even stood on corners handing out fliers for restaurants: effective disguises, as no-one pays any attention to these.
- TempestOfArrows helped me to write out the wedding reception scene, and I sincerely appreciate the assistance in characterising Hanzo in that particular instance.
- *Nuki-waza*: a kendo technique of striking quickly after avoiding your opponent’s attack. The equivalent of the fencing *riposte*.
- The hollow display cabinet was something Genji was working on back in Chapter 9, three years ago.
- The tenets of kendo include - most prominently in regards to Genji - ‘to hold in esteem human courtesy and honor, to associate with others with sincerity, and to forever pursue the
cultivation of oneself’, in order ‘to love one's country and society’ and ‘to promote peace and prosperity among all peoples’.

- *Koinobori*: carp kites, that are flown during Golden Week, but most significantly for Children's Day, on May 5th. Seeing as Children’s Day is no longer strictly-speaking simply for the male children, kites are flown for the female members of the family as well, with the red or pink carp flying after the black carp to represent the mother. However, in the original tradition, it was black for the father, and red for the eldest son, then blue and green afterwards for any following sons. Which of these traditions had Goro been bucking? It will be discussed in a later chapter. (The colour symbolism was irresistible).

- Yamato Takeru was a semi-legendary figure in Japanese history, similar to King Arthur (very similarly, as scholars have noted certain literary parallels between the figures); the summary of his life and his adventures was too interesting to avoid writing Goro’s characterisation. When I was first developing this story, I came across Takeru and was fascinated by him. It may have been here that the link between history and story became the most prominent, a recurring theme that would be passed from father to sons, from generation to generation within not only the Shimada clan, but through the lives of characters within the Overwatch universe.

- Ōishi: the name of the historical leader of the 47 ronin. He frequented brothels and taverns, drank copiously, and ate on days when fasting was required, in order to throw off suspicion about his plans for avenging his lord, but all the while he continued in secret to plan such a thing. A story I only discovered well after I had formulated Genji’s course of action within the story, but another delightful literary parallel. ‘Delicious’ is ‘oiishi’, a hurried and useful pun to cover up what Genji had been caught saying.

Update: based on feedback, I have changed the omnic's pronouns from 'she' to 'they'.

The next chapter will be shorter, and take place half an hour after Horishi made her exit.
Chapter 12

Research notes and explanations for this chapter will be added at the end of the next. Please be aware that this chapter as resulted in a change of rating, for graphic description of violence. - MK

He didn’t remember how he got home. Only that he was there, in the shower, staring up at the tiles above him, as water cascaded down his body. Flattening his hair. Steam fogged the air.

He was done weeping. He didn’t feel any better.

For a moment, he turned off the water, pressing his palms and forehead against the wall. Breathing. His skin pricked all over with goosebumps. Each water droplet left a trail he could feel, and take note of. He’d always been able to feel so strongly. He could feel the shape of the bathroom, and his room beyond, and the whole apartment. He could feel clouds gathering outside, the approach of another springtime storm.

Ame ga shitashiru satsukikana.

Genji heaved a low sigh, voice trembling as though he were about to be ill, or perhaps to start crying again. He left the shower, towelling himself off and staring at his reflection. The mirrors showed him several faces, and glimpses of the vibrant colour inked into his back. Fuji-yama at his left shoulder. The dragon coiled over his shoulderblades and spine and lower back and ass. The sparrow and its flowers on his hip. Genji stared, letting his eyes unfocus, until green and orange and pink and black all blurred together, indistinct. He couldn’t see it.

Even if he didn’t see it, it was still there. It had been there for years.

But you can never see the story you are in, until it is told.

Genji blinked, and met his own gaze in the mirror. He did not ask himself what he needed to do. He knew, already. He would leave. It was time to heed song the mountain had sung; fly, sparrow. He’d leave the valley, climb the forested slopes. Hunt and fish and forage. A simple life, in penance for being born the son of a yakuza. For being a liar. For being a fool.

You’re the furthest thing from a monk.

Genji’s back straightened at the memory of his brother’s voice. “Sou,” he murmured. Not a monk. But he wasn’t a warrior, either. Not anymore. Maybe he’d never been, with his shadows and his lies. He was an actor, who got so good at pretending that he forgot who he was. Who he really was.

Maybe he wasn’t anything at all. Maybe all he was, was lies.

God.

Fuck.

Genji braced his hands either side of the sink and stared downward, sightless. For a moment he just breathed. It all came back, now, louder, now that he was not fighting the truth of it. He was everything that they said he was. He may have kept up his training in ways that no-one saw, but to what purpose? He’d abandoned his friends. He’d abandoned his brother. He’d dragged what good there was of the family name through the mud with him. He’d been a selfish, reckless mess of a man. They were right to hate him. They were right to want him gone, wiped from the annals and brushed
from the face of the earth.

Again, Hanzo’s voice whispered. *I think you are an embarrassment.*

Genji laughed bitterly. “*Sou.*” An embarrassment, a disappointment, a blight on the family name.

…it had come to this. It had come to this.

He straightened up. So be it. It was time to start over. To clean the slate, to atone. To clear his mind for an uphill battle. Oishi had something to avenge; Genji did not. The two of them had pretended, but there was no purpose anymore to what Genji was doing. He’d been a fool. And now here he was, in the wake of all his mistakes, and all these consequences.

He couldn’t deny all of these things, not anymore.

The clan was planning to kill him; if he turned his back and ran, that would only legitimise their decision. But so be it. He had no desire for this heavy crown, for an empire of death and lies and suffering. He’d never wanted it, not for himself. And now, now he could see clearly, he didn’t want it for his father, either.

All this time, all these secrets, all this effort to please a dead man. God, Genji loved his father. But now he was realising how twisted and broken the legacy had made the sons of the dragon. Goro was a liar and a thief; he was just as bad as his brothers, just more *successful* than them. And now he was dead, he’d left his burden of expectations to weigh down on his sons.

No, not his sons. His *heirs*. The ones to inherit his empire. They were not people, they had never been allowed to be people. They were pawns in a game that spanned centuries, pawns that were to grow up and become players themselves, would raise pawns of their own in the years to come. A cycle unbroken. Dragons eating their own tails.

The thought made Genji sick, made his head start to pound. But he pulled himself together, as best he could.

*This is how it will always be, for the sake of the family!*

He would not be a part of this anymore. It was time to clean the slate.

He reached into the cupboard, sifting between different bottles until he found the colour he needed. Leaning over the sink, he massaged the dye into his hair, eyes closed as the chemical smell filled the bathroom. His nails raked over his scalp, making sure not to leave a single strand unattended. And while he waited for it to set, he plucked out his piercings, one by one, setting them down and rubbing the holes in his ears. He could live with a few holes in him; they’d heal over eventually.

“All things heal in time,” he murmured. The water ran lukewarm through his hair, and the dye turned the sink dark as he rinsed it out.

When he faced his reflection again, he didn’t recognise himself. Not at all. Gone was the vivid green that he’d carried for nearly half his lifetime. No more looking like a carrot (or, *like a, heh, strawberry*). Now his hair was dark, the hair he’d been born with. No frills, no embellishments. The mess of it all was plastered down over his head. Long, far too long. He ruffled his head dry with a towel, pushing it all up and back. It wouldn’t stay, it all flopped damply back into his eyes.

A mess. He was a mess.

“As if there was ever any doubt.”
His closet was full of t-shirts and ripped jeans and bright jackets, street fashion and neon and Italian suits and cosplay from a hundred different fandoms. So much of it was bright. So much of it reminded him so sharply of the friends he’d lost - cast aside - of the traditions he’d spurned, of all he’d turned his back on. He was going to start new. He wouldn’t take the brightness, the cheerful shades of a careless sparrow. He could not take Shimada colours either, or their mon and crest. He wouldn’t need them where he was going, anyway.

He sifted through the bright colours and the crisp whites, and pulled out everything that wasn’t either. A mish-mash of realities, and all of it fiction. Semi-historic warrior meets cartoon or video-game protagonist. Dark green against his skin, for the pines and moss, and black for the shadows and the night. No mons. No crest. No sign of to whom he belonged.

When he looked up, he saw the photograph of his father. There they were, Goro and Sparrow, cheek to cheek in the sunshine, with matching cheesy grins and winged eyeliner and peace signs. It had been taken years ago, before Goro’s death, before his sickness, before any shadow of doubt crossed into Genji’s heart or mind. Happier days. When ignorance was bliss.

Genji’s hair fell into his eyes again. He turned away, brushing it back out of his face. He needed something to keep it back.

Here. Something from a cosplay, a headband in lightweight material that looked close enough to steel. The only armour he needed, or wanted. He slid it into place. It made his hair spike backwards. He smiled at his reflection, and fought the urge to pose. No time for sentai, or saiyan, or any kind of hero.

He wasn’t a hero. He was a yakuza boy.

Shimada.

Shimada was a byword, now. It might have been the name of a hero who took a stand for those who could not fight for themselves, once. A name from a story. A name from the television. A hero in black and white, yes. But one shouldn’t believe everything one sees on television. It was just fiction, all of it. All just stories to tell to children.

“And for fools to believe in.”

He packed light. He didn’t need much. He’d left enough out in the woods already, hidden under the old shrine. He threw some spare clothes into the pack, a handful of kunai, some snacks. He packed light; he had room for a memory or two.

He reached for the photograph of himself and Goro, and stopped, his hand hovering inches from the frame. He loved that man, the man who had been his father, who laughed and taught and watched over him. But could Genji take him with him? He was supposed to travel light. Goro had left such a burden on his sons. The Shimada name was crushing the breath out of Genji.

He was leaving. Father would not be proud of that.

…but then, Father had never been proud of him.

Genji let his hand drop, staring at the photograph a while longer, before he had to turn away again. Busying himself with his wardrobe, putting things right, tidying it all up so there would be no clue that he’d dressed with the intent to vanish. He paused, his eye caught. Whenever he dressed in Shimada colours, he made sure to have a scarf. And there was a box of them now, and among the blue and tiger-striped and red and pink-feathered, there was one in stark contrast to his usual choice
of Shimada orange that caught his eye. He pulled it out, and ran his hands over the fabric. Green. Rich, and healthy, like a vegetable from good soil. His smile hitched briefly. Then it dropped.

A scarf made for a heroic silhouette.

He wasn’t a hero.

“… I wanted to be. But I’m not.”

As he draped the green around his neck, his eyes were dragged to the next in line of framed photographs. There was himself and his brother, in Shimada cream-and-orange, posed and grinning in the castle, the mountain watching over them. The first photo Goro had taken since Akane died. The last photo he’d taken. The photo of his sons, his pride and his joy.

Hanzo, his pride. Genji, his joy.

His heirs had very specific roles to fill. Hanzo would rule the clan; Genji would only make Goro laugh.

Genji took a deep breath, letting it fill his lungs, swell down to his stomach. When he breathed out, everything else left him, too. He breathed it all out, and centred himself, the same way he would before a bout or a run through the forest. Leaving everything behind that wasn’t important.

There was a photograph of himself and his brother. Side by side in the sunshine. Back when they were brothers. Back when they could fight and laugh about it afterwards.

What the fuck, Genji?! Your hair is green!

A smile picked his lips up at one corner of his mouth, but not for long. His back itched. Outside, the thunder rolled.

On his desk, in a box of pens and loose cables and pins and badges and figurines that fit nowhere else, there was a thumb drive. Unmarked, innocuous. He plucked it up now, turning it over and over between his palm and his thumb. It was the backup. Father’s harddrive and the Shimada files were saved in the fake dictionary out in the woods, but it was here, too. Irons in the fire.

Just in case.

Genji looked up at the photograph of himself and Hanzo, then reached for the frame. He took it with him.

The dragon was waiting outside, perched on the balcony railing, staring out at the night. Its ears were flat against its skull, and its lip curled uneasily with every distant rumble of thunder.

Genji stared at the photograph, and at the thumb drive. “… I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

The dragon flicked an ear at him, but did not take its eyes from the oncoming storm.

“I’m doing it again,” he said, listlessly. “I’m making my own plans. Alone. I’m not even thinking about Hanzo.” Hanzo’s voice had been echoing through the room, and Genji had still dressed like a kuroko and thought of life out there in the wilderness. On his own, just as it had been for the past five years. Hanzo’s voice was following his every memory and motion, and Genji hadn’t even stopped. “That’s what got me into his fucking mess to begin with. And I’m doing it again.”

The dragon said nothing, but its claws tensed around the railing.
Genji looked at the photograph. Taken on a day of triumph. When they had made their mark in front of all the clan. A day of sunshine. And here they were together, side by side, in their home. Under their mountain. He remembered how Hanzo had been so relaxed to be in public, for the first time in years. He remembered the way his brother couldn’t fight a smile as Genji whooped and cheered. He remembered the vicious noogie he got on the car-ride home. He remembered posing for the photo, and lunging into an impromptu wrestling match afterwards. He remembered his brother.

“Fuck me,” Genji laughed, bitterly. “I’m such an idiot.”

He put the photograph, frame and all, in his bag, then leaned on the railing with the thumb drive held between finger and thumb. He focused his eyes, then let his focus drift, so that in the distance the castle sharpened into view.

The dragon rumbled. Whined.

“Hanzo deserves to know,” Genji said, quietly, focusing his eyes again. “I swore, years ago, that when the tattoo was finished I would go to him. I’d tell him everything. I’d show him…” But back then, the tattoo was supposed to be a symbol of the clan. A symbol like the one on his back when he’d rode for yabusame, when it had felt right to wear the clan mon, when the family had his back. It was supposed to be proof he was his father’s son, that he would be Shimada until the day he died. He would be tattooed with a dragon’s strength, just like his brother, together with his brother. And brothers they would be.

Brothers they still were, despite all this. Despite all the mistakes he had made.

He would not make the same mistake again. He would not.

The dragon looked intently at Genji, now. Chest rising and falling, whiskers twitching.

Genji reached up and stroked its chin. “He deserves to know the truth. I don’t know if he will believe me, but he deserves to know.” And if Hanzo didn’t believe what Genji had to say, then he would have all the information Genji had borrowed and collected and stolen from the clan. Hanzo would see the Shimada-gumi had been lying to him, using him. Hanzo was smart; he was the smartest man Genji knew. Hanzo would make the right decision.

The dragon rumbled, ears flat, and looked again towards the hills. There was still time. Time to run, and be lost. Time to be safe. Time was running out, but there was still some left. Just enough.

Genji frowned, and straightened up. “He’s my brother. He deserves to know the truth. I can’t just leave him. I can’t make the same mistake I’ve been making for the past five years. This is a clean slate. This is a fresh start. I can fix this.”

He’d go. He’d speak the truth. He’d confess. He’d beg forgiveness for being such a fool of a brother. Whether it was given or not, he would leave Hanzo with the information. He’d tell his brother where he could be found. Time would heal their wounds, and the truth would cast all his deeds in a different light. Then they could work together to bring the clan back to order, from the land and from the castle.

The dragon dipped its head, and nuzzled at his back, breathing cool autumn breath onto him. Genji’s skin tingled, and he felt the rippling of the dragon’s scales under his skin.

It was not the clan who had his back. It was the dragon. It had always been the dragon. The family never had his back but the dragon always had.

It cast that day at the yabusame tournament in a new light.
There wasn’t much time left.

“He’s my brother,” Genji insisted.

The dragon bared its teeth.

Genji remembered the story. The story of two brothers, dragon of the north wind and dragon of the south wind. How could he forget? And he saw the unease in the tense coils and buckled claws and curling lip, and he remembered again.

“That’s not my story anymore,” he said, stroking the dragon’s chin, running his fingers through the effervescent, ephemeral mane and down the smooth plane of scales. “Is it? That’s not what’s etched into my skin. I’m not part of that story anymore. I walked away from that.” Because he was a fool. He took a breath, centring himself. “The two dragon brothers fought over who best should rule. But I don’t want to rule.” He clenched the thumb drive in his fist. “… I’m not fit for it. I don’t have the stomach for it. I just want Hanzo to know the truth. Even if he never speaks to me again, even if he calls me a liar… He needs to know what I’ve done, and why.” Another pause. “It’s not my story anymore. I have something new on my back. Your story isn’t mine.”

The dragon looked steadily at him. Its ears remained flat. The clouds grew darker in the skyline.

“… He’s my brother.”

Genji jumped up onto the railing, palming the thumb drive away with a sleight of hand. He jumped, leaping out into the open air, and the dragon followed, leaping down after him. Diving into him, through him, sinking into the inks on his back, settling inside of his spine, invigorating him with the power of the northern winds.

The storm roared, and moved closer.

Genji wasted no time. His feet barely touched the ground.

The old stone walls provided plenty of handholds, and he barely even glanced around before leaping over the walls and into the garden. This was a camera blindspot, especially at this hour of the night… morning, really. He waited, chest heaving, listening to the approaching footsteps. Two guards on patrol, identical in suits and glasses and haircuts. Genji stayed very still, careful to not look directly at them. He didn’t want them to feel like they were being watched.

They passed by, and Genji crept forward, leaving no footprints in the grass. He hooked his hand against the bottom of the railing, crawling upside-down under the walkway, until he reached the point where he could safely throw himself from one shadow to the next, all while avoiding the gaze of the cameras. He knew where all of them were. This was his home, after all.

Now, where was Hanzo?

Genji flattened himself along the wall, and listened. Most electrical lights had been turned off, but there was still a low-frequency hum in the air, reverberating up the hill from the city far below. That was the kind of ambient noise Hanzo hated, gave him headaches. He’d be in the lower level of the castle, then. Behind stone, amongst the paper and wood and straw of the traditional rooms, down near the koi pond and the pine garden.

Like the room where Goro died.

Genji took a deep breath, and focused. He remembered the guard’s schedules, and the habits of their
patrols. They had just passed by. That meant Genji had forty minutes to get to Hanzo and speak to him.

The storm rumbled.

Genji slipped into another blindspot, shimmying his way along the wall until he could clamber up to the ceiling, braced there as he made his way carefully downstairs.

The hall was dark. Empty. Still. Genji waited a moment, arms straining, letting his eyes adjust. There. Behind the paper-screen walls of the central room, a candle flickered. A very dim light, the whisper of the flame barely heard at all.

Genji lowered himself down to the floor, took a breath, and started to walk forward. He let his feet press into the mats, heel-and-toe, heel-and-toe, making no secret of his approach.

There was a stirring, and a familiar voice. “Dare?” Tired, but imperious.

Genji tried to smile, but it felt desperate on his face. Hanzo hadn’t recognised the sound of his brother’s own footsteps. “It’s me.”

There was no answer, but the air felt different, suddenly. It felt… more. On the other side of the wall and door, that flimsy barrier of wood and paper, there was a vast force, a sensation, a man’s presence too great to be contained or limited or understood. And he was angry.

“Hanzo.” Genji knelt down, so he would be face-to-face with the man on the other side. He took a breath, slow in, quick out; jo-ha-kyū. “I need to talk to you.”

The intensity on the other side of the door remained. Hanzo did not move. Didn’t speak. Didn’t even seem to breathe. Genji couldn’t even see a silhouette, not with the candle flickering so low and dim. But Hanzo was there, for certain. Grim. Furious. Unmoving, unmoved.

Genji swallowed hard, hands clenching into fists. The little brother would have thrown open the door and pushed himself into Hanzo’s personal space without question. But they were men, now. Men, and strangers. And Genji had come to apologise and make amends. He would not dare to do as he would have done as a child.

He tried to press his memories into the door, to remind Hanzo of that time the elder brother had sought the younger in the rain. The peace offering. The small talk, the umbrellas, the promise of tea. This was that moment, once again, though this time it was the younger who was baring his soul and bowing deep in penitence.

“Please.” He whispered, fighting to keep his voice from trembling. It was a fight he lost. “Open the door, anija.”

He stayed knelt, in seiza, eyes fixed on the floor. His legs burned. In his left hand, the thumb drive pressed tight along the scar grew warm from being clenched in Genji’s fist. Genji didn’t move. He waited.

He waited.

Five minutes.

Hanzo’s presence did not change. Did not move.

Ten minutes.
The candle continued to burn.

Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five.

“Please,” Genji whispered. The word was strained.

Thirty. Forty minutes.

He was out of time. But he didn’t move. He waited. Just a little longer.

Forty-five minutes. Fifty.

The guards would be coming down that hallway any second now.

It was too late.

Genji screwed his eyes shut tight, and pushed himself to his feet. His legs were numb, but that felt like an insignificant problem. It was nothing, under the weight of grief, the feeling that it had been too long, too far, to reach to his brother. That there was nothing left of his brother, after all, just the words and schemes of their uncles, and the weight of Goro’s legacy.

It was too late.

He could feel Hanzo’s observation burning through the paper, watching him rise. Waiting for Genji to leave. For the unwelcome intruder to remove itself from the halls of his castle. His castle, alone, the heir, just as he had been raised.

Genji considered the thumb drive in his palm. It was useless, now. Hanzo wouldn’t take it, not even if the younger flung open the door and threw it at the elder. Genji couldn’t leave it outside the door, either, because the guards would see it, take it, destroy it or - worse - pass it on to one of the Shimada-gumi.

So he pocketed it, and turned and walked away. Heel to toe, making no secret of his retreat, as he left the way he’d come. He travelled light. His heart was heavy. His footsteps gave it away.

He would weep later. When he had the time.

Up the stairs, and Genji pressed himself flat against the wall. Counting silently to himself, listening for the muted footsteps of the guards. It would be a challenge to slip past them. But as long as he timed it right, he might be able to get over the walls before they were able to call for reinforcements.

He waited. Listening. There was only silence. With every passing second he grew more uneasy. The rumbling storm overhead and the profound feeling of loss behind him left him with a growing sense of desperation.

… where were the guards?

He couldn’t wait any longer. He slipped down the hall, easing silently over the floorboards. His eyes darted back and forth, watching for moment in the garden and in the shadows. The thunder rumbled, then it was quiet again.

Almost. There was a muffled thump from the broom closet.

Genji diverted his path, frowning. Indulging his curiosity for a handful of precious seconds. The door was not locked.
The guards were there, mouths covered and hands bound with duct tape, legs tucked up underneath them so that they both fit in the crowded space. Unconscious. One of them had knocked over a broom. That was what Genji had heard.

Someone had done this.

… And someone was watching him.

It was an unpleasant realisation, to know you were being watched in your own home. Genji turned slowly, following the sensation, until his eyes fixed on the source of the observation. A small camera, the size of a shirt button, pinned to the wall, poorly hidden in pattern of timber. Genji stared at it for a moment, then quietly closed the closet door. A single pace forward, and he scraped the camera from the wall with a fingernail.

He hadn’t heard anyone. He hadn’t even sensed anyone. But someone had come through, into Shimada Castle, while he was here. Impossible. And yet, the proof was undeniable. Someone had been here. And, now that he was paying attention, Genji could feel that they still were.

He reached up, and placed the camera back on the wall, this time higher up and at a far better angle, a far less noticeable position. He pressed it into place, cleaned his thumbprint from the glass, then gave the camera a small, careless salute with two fingers.

Someone wanted to spy on Shimada Castle? Well, good luck to them.

Genji had other places to be.

The clouds were thick overhead, by now. The wind whipped the trees and flickers of lightning illuminated the pitch blackness. Time to go. It was time to have already been gone, long ago.

Hanzo hadn’t listened. Hanzo hadn’t even opened the door.

Genji moved slowly, dipping through camera blindspots, feeling the unfamiliar eyes on him. He didn’t care. He wasn’t going to be an issue, a problem. He was leaving, a sparrow on his own. Spring was over, the storm was about to break, and here was he, all alone. Just as the story on his back declared.

Dragon’s head, serpent’s tail.

He froze for a moment, his hand on the edge of the balcony. His path was clear: over the roof, over the wall, and away. But a scan of the courtyard, and he saw great-grandfather’s scroll. Storm Bow and Dragon’s Straight-Edge stood together, flanking the daishō sets in their stand. They caught his eye, and the grief formed a hook in his chest. Guilt. He could taste it.

There was one more thing to be done. One more proper thing to do, to show, before his story with the Shimada empire was over. One thing that his family believe he lacked: respect.

He left his bag and sandals at the door, crossing the room in tabi. Silent. Unwelcome and silent. Overhead in the decades-old portrait, the dragons of north and south winds curled together, united and balanced, safeguarding the heavens. Genji looked downward, to the prophecy and accusation in black and white.

You are a disappointment. You wasted your potential. You made your father laugh but you would never do more than that. And now look at you. Fleeing your father’s house, fleeing the castle you were supposed to inherit. Spitting on all that was done for you. You should have died a sickly child instead of surviving long enough to bring such shame on your family.
He looked lower, at katana and wakizashi. A warrior’s honour and a warrior’s soul. He deserved to carry neither of them. He didn’t deserve to carry anything. Not the daishō. Not the sword his father crafted for him. Not even the Shimada name.

Let the wind have him, then. The wind, and the waves.

Genji knelt, and stared up at the scroll, written by his great-grandfather’s hand, and he felt his throat clench tight. For a moment he did not know what to say. But something had to be said. Something had to be declared, here, in this sacred place. It was only right.

He wanted a clean slate, after all.

But his voice would not come out. It did not deserve to be heard.

_I am sorry I could never make you proud, tou-san._ He thinks instead of speaks, letting it all come out in a jumble and a rush, a torrent that he leaves in his words, blinking to keep it from his eyes. _I am sorry I could not be the heir you deserved. But I do not think this is what you imagined when you left your name to your sons. Your legacy is poison, and I am powerless to change it, let alone stop it. I am sorry._ He closes his eyes. _I failed you. I failed the family. I failed myself. I failed Hanzo. So it is time for me to go. I will leave the name Shimada Genji at your feet, and I…_

There was an odd kind of silence that descended on him. A stillness. The next breath was hard to draw. The winds outside died down, and the rumbles seemed muted. Distant. But they echoed in every direction, as though encircling this place. The eye of the storm. Genji felt frisson down his back as he realised how still it was. How nothing seemed to move, not even the air.

He knew that if he turned around, he would see his brother in the doorway.

When two winds met, there was always a storm. That was how it had always been. The law of nature.

Time was up.

Genji half-turned, just in time to see Hanzo launching himself across the room. Teeth bared, eyes wide with fury, outrage, the righteous anger of a man who had been fed a lie that was now nothing but true. There was no time to take a stance, but no stance could block a strike like this. Genji tumbled aside, ears ringing, as the punch connected with his head, as Hanzo’s weight came down on him, pinning him. There was no grace to this, shoving and kicking and clawing. Hanzo’s fists struck at Genji’s head and face, over and over. He snarled and grunted with the effort, with the rage.

Genji clenched his teeth, hands gripping the front of Hanzo’s haori. Head spinning, he wrenched his brother sideways and up, and threw him aside. Hanzo roared, on his feet in seconds, launching himself at Genji again. Genji leapt back, tabi sliding on the smooth floor, buying him a precious moment to pivot, to leap aside. But his balance was off, and Hanzo’s hand caught at his shirt, gripped, spun, threw him hard.

Dragon’s Straight-Edge broke his fall, the pinewood stand shattering under his weight. Genji and ōdachi fell to the ground, the sword thudding heavily on the mat. He landed on his knees, braced catlike to leap again. Still dizzied, still disoriented. He could taste his own blood.

Hanzo had something to say. But all that came out was a furious roar. He lunged, arm drawn back. Genji shifted his weight to his hands, spinning his legs forward in a move that had more place in a dance than a dojo, clipping Hanzo’s feet from under him before rolling aside. Hanzo went down hard, among the wooden splinters, while Genji crouched warily just beyond the daishō. Another
roar, bestial, and Hanzo threw a handful of the splintered wood at Genji. It was child’s play to deflect them, twirling the blade expertly in his hands to send the shards harmlessly to one side.

Oh god.

Genji stared at the weapon in his hands.

Oh god.

Shimada training was so ingrained in him. He’d grabbed the katana from the daishō stand as he rolled past. He’d drawn it. He’d used it. He was holding it.

No. God, no.

*But the two brothers argued. Their quarrel turned to rage and their violent struggle darkened the skies.*

Please, god, no.

Hanzo’s teeth were so white, and his eyes so vivid. He always looked good in Shimada colours, and with his hair wild and unbound he looked like he belonged here, in this chaos and fury and the primal energy of the eye of the storm. He got to his feet, snagging his own katana from the daishō stand as he rose. He tore aside the knot, threw the sheath to the ground, clasped both hands around the hilt. He took a stance.

Chest heaving as he struggled to breathe, Genji lowered the blade to his side, both arms lowered either side of him. He did not take a stance. He would not. He would not.

Hanzo shouted his *kiai*, and leapt, sword raised overhead.

The blades clashed. Genji’s arms shook as he braced his brother’s weight, struggling not to drop to one knee under the force of the strike. The blade was inches from his face. He’d barely blocked it in time.

Hanzo had not hesitated to strike.

Genji locked eyes with the man who had been his brother once.

There was no madness in Hanzo’s gaze.

Genji couldn’t tell if that was better or worse.

Hanzo lifted the sword again and brought it down harder. And again, like one would as an axe against timber. Furious, snarling, roaring, raging. And he advanced with each step, bare feet braced and claiming each step while Genji’s tabi slipped and slid.

Genji grit his teeth, and when Hanzo’s sword rose again, he pivoted, the sole of his foot connecting hard with Hanzo’s stomach, enough force to wind him. To force him back.

Hanzo staggered. His mouth opened and closed, gaping like a fish. He braced himself, the tip of the katana wedged into the mats so he could stay standing, while he clutched his stomach and tried to breathe.

Genji stood, sword lowered, arms by his side. Watching. Likewise, just trying to breathe.

It was so still.
There was no world outside. There was just this room. There was just the two of them, before the shrine.

Hanzo sneered, and tilted his chin at Genji. A silent order to run, the disgust and anger plain on his face. He was granting this, a dismissal Genji would be a fool not to take.

Genji felt the doorway behind him, the door to the cage wide open for the little bird. The way was clear. He could leave, now. He could run. He could get out of the castle safely, flee Hanamura, let the storm obliterate his path and have him be utterly lost. It would be weeks before the Shimada-gumi would even know where to start looking for him. And they’d never catch him, either, if he put this head-start to good use.

But he had come here to show respect to the family name, even as he set it aside. If he turned away now, bared his back to a drawn blade, the Shimada-gumi would be justified to call him coward. They would laugh, and mock. Hanzo would be within his rights to strike Genji down, for cowardice, for disrespect, for the shame that Genji brought.

Genji did not move. He inhaled, and exhaled. Slow, and steady. He would not run. He was cleaning the slate. He was proving himself a warrior, not a disgrace. All was going to be made right, tonight. He did not feel panic. He did not feel fear. He felt only a calm, quiet certainty. It was inked on his skin and written in his stars. Stories were told again and again; history repeated itself. They were one and the same. He would not run. He could not.

So this is what it felt like, to know you were going to die.

Hanzo’s eyes followed, furious, disbelieving, as Genji crossed the room, as Genji knelt and picked up the discarded saya. For a moment, Genji held the scabbard, as though to sheath the blade within. To accept the end. A man always chooses how he dies, after all.

_I would not have chosen this_. Genji looked at his brother, and felt a sad, rueful smile curve at his lips. _I would never have chosen this._

But he was out of time.

Hanzo took a stance, and lunged.

It felt like fire. Genji gasped as he twisted in place, driving Hanzo’s blade away a second too late. The cut across his face burned, and thick warmth dripped down his cheek, his chin. First blood. Brother striking brother, not in play and not in jest.

_Made of the same iron, quenched in the same oil._ Goro’s voice was distant, but the lesson lingered as memorable as any one of his stories. _They can be drawn together, but never be drawn against each other._

Hanzo’s sword was chipped. The smooth weapon was marred, broken. He didn’t seem to notice. He lunged again.

The stances that might have worked in play or practice were useless, here. Hanzo was a fury, a flurry, a wild tornado of strikes. Genji was hard-pressed to defend himself, saya in one hand and blade in the other, muffling cries as the chipped katana nicked his face, his neck, his arms. He dared not take his eyes from Hanzo. Not even while his heart sank and his pulse ran cold.

They could have sent anyone. An assassin, paid in clan coin, remorseless and efficient. A cousin with a scar and a grudge, and all his friends with their own scars and their own grudges. The elders could have come themselves. But it was Hanzo, his own brother. His own brother, in anger, in hate.
In duty.

Genji grunted as he blocked the blade, steel grinding on steel as they faced each other squarely. Genji tossed aside the saya, bracing the blade with both hands, arms straining to match his brother’s strength. Hanzo grunted back, in effort, pushing his blade hard against Genji’s. Then with a snarl, he shifted his hold, and cut downwards.

Genji screamed as the blade bit into his arm, slicing into him from wrist to elbow. Through the flesh, and into the bone. He swung wild, pivoting his weight to one foot to kick out, to push his brother back. There was so much blood. His left hand was numb, hanging limp. He tried to move his thumb, to coax himself to hold the sword again. He couldn’t.

Hanzo lunged again, and one-handed Genji was forced back, back, the swords clashing. Genji was fast, but Hanzo was strong, and fed by the storm and the lies and backed by the whole family. Genji was a sparrow on his own. The sakura blossom was gone, broken by wind and rain.

He felt his back hit the wall, and then felt Hanzo’s katana slap his aside. Fire. He screamed, screamed his agony as Hanzo’s sword buried itself in his gut, shearing through cloth and skin and flesh until it hit the wall behind him. A frantic left-right swipe was enough to draw Hanzo back, but to feel the sword being pulled out of him nearly made Genji collapse.

Nothing had ever hurt like this.

Blood was splattered over the tatami, dripping from his half-sliced arm, and now spilling from his torso. Pouring out like dark wine. It coated Hanzo’s blade, down the sharp edge, catching and lingering in the place where the metal had chipped.

Hanzo stepped back, looking at Genji grimly. Satisfied? No, not satisfied. His eyes were cold, his lips pressed in a thin line.

Genji took a shuddering breath, one which escaped from him in a sob. Then another. Weakly, he lifted his crippled left arm, tucking it into the waistband of his pants. It was an agonising process, but a necessary one. If it could not hold a sword, then perhaps it could stem the bleeding there, to stop his organs from spilling out of his belly. He sobbed through the pain, as the blood darkened the already-dark cloth, as the agony burned along the exposed bone and torn muscles.

How was he still alive?

Hanzo stared in disbelief as Genji pushed himself off the wall. As Genji stood there, muffling his sobs. Still holding his sword. With a snarl, Hanzo lunged again.

Genji ducked low, crying out from the explosion of pain from within as he tucked and rolled. He took a knee, forcing himself upright. His arms were burning. His chest heaved. He blinked away the blood that threatened to blind him. Hanzo was a blur, a strike of lightning, and Genji took another strike to the face, then another to his shoulder. He blocked the next, then took another, this one to the neck, barely missing the artery. The blood pattered against the ground. Hanzo’s strikes were brutal, vicious, unceasing. He was leaving the grace and artistry of his training, choosing to use sword like an axe would be used against timber, or a butcher’s cleaver would be used against a carcass. Cutting up the meat.

How was Genji still standing? His blood was splattered and smeared over the room. He could feel it soaking his skin. How was he still alive?

Hanzo slashed sideways, and across Genji’s face another burning wound opened. Genji brought his
sword up to block the return strike, but not well enough, not quick enough. Steel bit into his right arm. His fingers spasmed and locked.

_Hanzo._

The pain in Genji’s eyes, the muffled sobs, the blood spilling everywhere, nothing touched Hanzo. Nothing woke him.

_Hanzo! It’s me! It’s me!_

There were no brothers here.

Genji saw the open doorway. Hanzo silhouetted by it as the lightning struck, driving Genji back. A strike from below took advantage of an unprotected leg, and Genji howled as he felt his calf sliced open. More blood soaked the mats. His steps became limps. His speed was gone. Another cut, and he tasted more blood, spilling more down his face, his lower lip just gone. The katana caught in his collarbone, wrenched free with a crunch, setting Genji teetering, staggering, spitting red and weeping.

The human body was so fragile. He’d put eight men in the hospital, once, long ago. A few seconds was all it took. How was he still standing?

Another slice to the face, and it felt like a grenade had gone off. A piece of his ear hit the mat. Warmth soaked his hair, his headband slipping, his hair falling into his face and sticking to the red. His head pounded, and agony pulsed through his veins. Genji shook himself, trying to see, trying to focus on the dark, furious storm before him, to at least try to block the next strike. Sobbing aloud, but screaming, screaming, , trying to be heard across the silent link that was their bloodline.

_Hanzo, it’s me!_

His tabi slipped over the bloody straw mats, and Hanzo roared a _kiai_ as he brought his sword down. Iron bit through cloth, through flesh, through bone. Severing Genji’s left leg mid-thigh.

Genji howled, forced to shift his weight to his right leg. The hamstring there, already weakened, snapped. For a moment there was nothing but white, a flash of lightning that rocked him to his core, a brief glimpse of nothingness, oblivion, before the pain descended on him, and he was wide awake and able to feel every second of his knee wrenching out of its socket, of muscles tearing, of bones breaking through skin.

He fell. He’d been driven back, against the wall, beneath the family curse, between Storm Bow and the pair of wakizashis. His and Hanzo’s. Still in the stand. Still together.

His every breath was a staggered, sobbing inhale, his every exhale was a moan, an animal sound of pain and distress. He was still alive.

He was still alive.

He stared at the broken mess of his legs, of the puddle of blood growing around him. The artery in his thigh, pulsing, spurting. The mangled mess of his right knee, turned outward at a sickening, impossible angle, white and pink and red. So much red. His stomach throbbed, all slick and warm against the ruin of his arm, his hand. His face was burning from all the cuts, his messy hair sticking to those wounds. He was dressed all in black, now. His blood had stained the green. _Kuroko._

At his side, his hand still clutched the katana.
He was still alive.

Hanzo stood over him, sword raised. Held in both hands. His face was in shadow. His eyes were black.

The thunder rumbled outside.

Genji could feel his own heartbeat. It was still steady, despite the fact it was slowly pulsing every last drop out of him. He was bleeding out. He’d be dead, soon.

A man chooses how he dies.

But he was still alive.

He looked up at Hanzo, gulping air, tears burning down his face with the red, the flowing red blooming around him. Shaking, he started to raise his right hand. The blade had never felt so heavy.

But he was still alive.

It was the best steel from the bests craftsman in Japan. It was so heavy. He raised it, growling, howling, sobbing with the effort, the pain.

But he was still alive.

Genji pressed the hilt against his thigh, forcing his locked hand to slide free, to loosen those fingers that had tightened from agony. A cry, a defiant, desperate cry, and he flung his arm to the right with what strength still remained. It wasn’t much, but it was enough. The sword skittered a few feet, and lay still.

There wasn’t a drop of blood on it.

And he was still alive.

Hanzo’s eyes followed the blade, and for once, for a moment, Genji saw his brother there. Somewhere, buried under the black and the storm. Hanzo was there.

But it was too late.

The world was fading as the blood spilled out of him. Hazy. The thunder’s rumble pushed darkness into the corner of his vision. He was fading.

Something had to be said. Something had to be declared, here, in this sacred place, where the Shimada name had endured for centuries, where tradition had ruled and men had knelt in respect to each other and to the will of the clan. It was only right that he say something now.

The Dragon of the South Wind had triumphed.

“Do it, then,” Genji’s voice was a harsh rasp, through the agony and the grief. He did not break their gaze. Man to man, their eyes matching copper. Familiar, familial. Even as he slurred the words, dizzied, drooling from a ruined mouth, they were clear enough. A clear as his eyes. “Kill me.”

He had not run. The one time he should have run, and here he was.

Hanzo tightened the grip on his sword, and Genji stared him down. Weeping. Teeth bared. Hanzo showed nothing. Black, against white, like words on paper.
Lightning struck again.

And so did Hanzo.

There was still pain to feel, as the katana sliced downwards, the force shearing open flesh and bone and there was so much blood and oh god oh god that was his heart *that was his heart* he could see his h--
Dragons are born of fish, they say. Carp that persevere and swim up the stream of the mighty mountain. One final leap, and the struggle is rewarded.

White flakes from the sky. It must be ash. It is springtime; it cannot be snow. It is snow.

The winds howl. The snow traces its shape like currents of water. Koinobori flutter weakly. Too weak to swim upstream.

It's so cold.

The millet bowl is empty. You must be hungry. Catch the stars in your teeth.

Or maybe snow. Or maybe ash.

It is snow. It makes you shiver.

Swim. Swim over the mountain, and down the sides again. Down and down and down.

Into a snowdrift.

Shh.

Shh.

The mountain. The wind. Swim. Swim as hard as you can.

The bronze fish statue in the garden gapes at the sky. The sakura trees are not in bloom, they are burning. Those aren't flower petals, they're flakes of ash.
It's snow.

Snow on the mountain.

You made that leap. But now...

You're falling.

Into the snow.

Wake up.

There was a field of white; white; white textured like chipped bone. Perfect squares. Steel lines. Silver and white. Criss and cross. A light, bright, glaring, straight lines made a perfect rectangle, tucked between these squares. Light, between the white; white, between those lines of steel.

The bars on a cage.

His eyelids felt so heavy. He closed them again.

There was a rhythmic pulsing, an electronic beep that kept the time. Unobtrusive. Soft. Everything felt soft. Or distant.

His eyelids felt so heavy. He opened them again. The field of white blurred, came back into focus again. So bright.

There was breath in his lungs. He felt his chest rise and fall. It felt so difficult. So far away. So heavy. The beeping continued.

He didn’t remember letting his eyelids fall. But he needed to open them again.

The lights were dimmed, this time. The white overhead was grey. The beeping still continued. The breathing noise was so steady.

Father must be here. Those were the sounds of the machines that helped him breathe.

*Tou-san, tou-san, are you proud of me?*

He didn’t remember letting his eyelids fall. But he needed to open them again.

The light was different, again. His hands were itchy. He couldn’t move.

The machines breathed.
Tou-san. He struggled to think, to form the words. I chose how to die. Are you proud of me?

The machines breathed.

His mouth felt dry. His whole body felt so heavy.

His head was pounding. The beeping continued. It smelled like a hospital in here. The beeping continued, like it was counting his life away. His head was pounding. The beeping continued.

The ceiling. It was the ceiling, all white panels and fluorescent lights. A hospital. That smell. The sound of the machines, and the beeping. The measuring of heartbeats.

Whose life were those beeps counting?

He tried to turn his head, to see his father. Something choked him, a hand at his throat. No, not a hand. A tube. And there was a mask over his mouth and nose, fogged from his own breath. But was it his breath? There were tubes that ran from his throat to those machines, and another to his chest, the tube dark with something thick and red.

He let his eyes linger on them. He didn’t understand. Why was he connected to machines?

Those machines had been the only thing keeping his father alive.

And now they were keeping him alive, too.

He let out a low groan, a feeble, frightened sound that didn’t come from his throat. There were tubes in there. He struggled, trying to press his hands and feet against the bed, to sit up. His body was so heavy. His limbs weren’t answering him.

He turned his head, an agony, a lifetime. There were so many tubes in his neck. It made looking around hard. He looked down his body, at the blanket that covered him. His body looked wrong. He squirmed, lifting an arm. His right arm, to push away the blanket, to brace himself and rise and --

And he stared.

It was gone. It was a bicep with a bandaged stump.

A low animal groan rose from his chest, bewildered, panicked. His leg kicked, and even through the haze of the anaesthetic he could see - and know - that the blanket was not supposed to move like that. He kicked again, again, choking, the beeping getting louder, measuring the frantic fluttering of his heart.

The blanket dipped at the knee. His legs were stumps. Stumps.

He turned his head again, frantic, and looked down at himself, at the last thing he remembered seeing. His heart. His heart.

His body was bandaged. His left arm was just a fragment of shoulder, and he had been bandaged and stitched together.

His heart was beating beneath the skin, even if it was being fed by tubes. A machine, pumping blood in, and blood out, aiding the crippled organ, working in tandem with the machines that helped him to breathe.

The dragon was gone. He couldn’t feel it, couldn’t feel the power that he had felt since he was a boy. He could only feel the empty weight of his missing arms and legs. The dragon was gone. He was
broken, a broken vessel, and a dragon never served a broken vessel. The dragon was gone.

He was alone. He was crippled. And he was alive.

Genji lay back and stared at the ceiling, at the lines of silver and white like bars of a cage. He shut his eyes, and through a throat that was gaping with tubes, he howled.

Nothing answered him. Not even his voice.

He had always been loud. For once, it seemed like he could barely even hear himself.

He had chosen to die.

But something had decided that he was to live.

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**Notes (from previous chapter):**

- *Ame ga shitashiru satsukikana.* - This was part of a saying attributed to Akeichi Matsuhide, the general who killed Nobunaga in the Honnō-ji Incident, before he began his assault. His poem began with ‘toki wa ima’, rendering the whole phrase as either ‘the time is now, the fifth month, when the rain falls’, or as a complicated word play with ‘Toki’, Akeichi’s ancestral family name, to mean ‘The Toki clan will now rule the realm under the sky’. Considering that dragon kites were seen flying in the Dragons cinematic, we know that Hanzo and Genji’s climactic fight took place on Children’s Day, on May 5th. May, the fifth month, when the rain falls. It was an impossible-to-miss piece of symbolism, another link to the recurring nature of history and stories.

- Having Genji dying his hair black and dressing in green and black was a reference to his Sparrow skin, albeit without the Shimada mons, crest, or extra pieces of armour.

- The photograph in Genji’s room in Nepal was important to him. Hanzo was important to him. Now was the only time that Genji would have been able to take that photograph with him. The amount of time explains the level of damage on the photograph, even though it has been given a new frame.

- *Jo-Ha-Kyū* - the philosophy used in many Japanese arts, including that of theatre and kendo: all actions start slowly, speed up, and end swiftly. Much like, up to his point, the story itself as it followed Genji. As a practitioner of kendo and a patron of the arts, as well as someone utterly embedded within both old and new aspects of his culture, Genji would be very aware of this principle.

- Hanzo’s sword in the Hanamura shrine is chipped. That kind of damage to a weapon speaks to not only the force behind the strike, but that the katana was used inappropriately. Katanas are slashing and piercing weapons. That particular kind of damage to the sword suggests it was brought down hard, as ‘an axe onto timber’, brought down repeatedly onto one single sturdy point over and over again until the metal strained and broke. Judging from the size of it, it would not be unfair to surmise that Hanzo’s blade broke against Genji’s. That single chip in the sword tells volumes about Hanzo’s ferocity - perhaps even butchery - in the fight between brothers.

- Genji’s short-lived attempt to defend himself with sword in one hand and saya in the other was a reference to the nitō style of kendo, using two swords, which he can be seen as a practitioner of in one of his Halloween sprays.

- The wakizashi was a representative of the soul, just as the katana was a representative of honour. Both of them still being together in the stand was, perhaps, foreshadowing for the meeting ten years in the future, no matter what happens/happened between the last strike of
Hanzo’s and then.

- The line in the English version of the Dragons short was ‘do it, then: kill me’, in comparison to the Japanese ‘what’re you waiting for, kill me’, and it was difficult to decide which should be transcribed here. Ultimately, I chose the English rendition. Both carry their own implications, but I had decided from the very beginning that Hanzo would have chosen his last words to be the last words his brother had uttered.
- And now we begin the Overwatch chapter of Genji's life.
Chapter 14

Emotions, exhausting. Body, heavy. Throat raw, the machines breathing, pumping. Everything was moving around him, without him. His head was filled with fire and ash, fury and grief. He was a storm, a hurricane, but trapped in a snowglobe. He was a lump of useless broken flesh, immobile, helpless.

Alive.

He heard a door open, and close again. A silhouette behind the green curtain approached. He felt his hands tensing into fists before he remembered he didn’t fucking have hands anymore. He could feel them, like ghosts, and the tension was real, he was gripping at nothing, he couldn’t grip, but he could feel it, could feel his own hands.

They were there, and they were all he had.

They were gone, and he had nothing.

A woman pushed back the curtain. She smiled when she saw him. “Ah, you are awake. Hello.” Her smile faded. “I understand you have plenty of questions, and an explanation is owed to you. But it would be remiss of me to speak when you cannot. I will keep things brief.”

He stared at her. She spoke Japanese. Not like any foreigner he’d ever heard, either. Most of them sounded like first-graders, but she had a Tokyo accent. She spoke like a local. But she had blonde hair, and blue eyes. It was wrong, all wrong. He felt sick. His non-existent fists stayed clenched, his body trembling from the intensity of the tension.

She continued to look at him in sympathy, but she stood professionally, straight-backed, hands clasped behind her back. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to live. It was very touch-and-go. The fact you are alive is remarkable. And quite a relief.”

A man chooses how he dies, he thought, furiously, blinking to hide the heated tears. A man chooses how he dies but it’s always someone else who has his life. It’s a woman, it’s always a woman, that starts it.

It was her fault he was alive. He didn't know who she was, but he knew it was all her fault.

“There are people who wish to speak to you.” She stepped forward, still smiling, beatific, gentle, kind. “But you are in no state to receive visitors, let alone speak to them.”

He realised now that the weight he felt on his mouth was not the weight of his lips. The upper one was there, of course, numbed warm flesh. But his bottom lip was gone. It was gauze, damped cloth, wrapped around his jaw and held in place by the oxygen mask. Sodden with his own drool. And blood? Probably blood. He couldn't taste it but he could feel his own hands, so clearly his senses were fucked up. Broken. Everything about him was broken.

“Genji.”

He looked at her, furious. His fists strained against the mattress, against nothingness, his mind was awhirl with fire and --

She took a half-step back.
-- and nothing answered him. Nothing. The dragon should have rippled under his skin, should have brought a chill breeze to the air, should have manifested. He strained again, calling, desperately reaching through the ether. But he could feel the hollow place inside him. He could feel the broken tether. The dragon was gone. Utterly gone.

There were tubes in his chest and throat. There was no room for a dragon.

He slumped back into the mattress, eyes lifting to the ceiling, to the lines that he had thought were prison bars. What need were there of prison bars, when he was trapped in a body that could not move, breathe, even sustain itself? Trapped and alone.

“Please forgive me.” The woman said, softly. “I know we are strangers, and so it is very rude of me to address you by your first name. Would you prefer for me to call you Mr Shimada?”

God.

Fuck.

He weakly shook his head, eyes closing. Wishing for something, anything, to lunge at him while his eyes were closed. A ghost, a dragon, a knife-wielding assassin. But there was nothing. He was still breathing, the machines beeping and wheezing steadily either side of him. ‘Mr Shimada’. Fuck.

“Then is it alright for me to call you ‘Genji’?”

He shook his head again.

He heard her hum, softly, heard her move closer as she investigated the machines he was plugged into. He heard her checking the readouts, and felt her hands glide over him, gloved fingertips brushing over his skin and adjusting the blanket over him.

“I am Doctor Angela Ziegler,” she said, standing over him, a hand resting lightly over his chest. “And I am going to take care of you.”

Beneath his skin, his heart beat. He could feel it. It was beating because of her, because of this foreign woman. She’d done this.

It was her fault.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

She smiled back.

His heart beat steadily. Like a machine. Keeping him alive.

The surgeries were going to be complicated. The doctor used words and phrases that meant little to him, even when she dumbed it down. Her explanations were supposed to comfort him, no doubt, that she knew what she was doing and could be trusted to perform every surgery well, that there was no risk of failure, that he could be helped. But all that he felt was a continued numbness. He was broken, irrevocably. How was anything supposed to make him feel better?

But it wasn’t like he could push her away, or run. Or even tell her to go to hell. She was here, after all, and he was in hell. So there it was. There it was.

After the first surgery, he woke to find one less breathing machine at his bedside. Another surgery after that, and the other had gone, and the heart machine with it. His chest was a mass of scar tissue,
and he was able to look down and see it all. But the scars from the surgeries were thin, stitched neatly closed. The scar from shoulder to hip… fuck. They’d had to graft something on him, to hold those pieces together, to keep him from splitting in half. The skin was different colours. Mottled. Imperfect. Not himself.

He spent his time in a haze of anaesthetics, painkillers, and grief. His lungs (one old, one new) worked on their own. His heart - mended with something more than just flesh - thudded inside him, and did not grant him the mercy of stopping, or letting him die.

He hadn’t needed to sleep for years. All that energy, all that motion, and he never stopped. Yet here he was now, unable to move, floating on a heady cocktail of prescription medication, and he fell so quickly into sleep. It wasn’t as though there was much else for him to do.

He was running down the road. Ashleigh was just ahead of him, flickering in and out of shadow in a red dress that was fastened the wrong way, her hair trailing on the ground behind her. Her heels struck the time, ba-thump, ba-thump. Heavier than a woman’s heels should.

Was she going to take him to the bar? The karaoke room? The bridge? The cemetery?

She looked flirtatiously over her shoulder, that smug kittenish look that in an instant seemed downright pantherine. She wasn’t interested in any of his lines, or his games. She wasn’t going to let him catch up. And she wasn’t Ashleigh.

He cried out, desperately, reaching for her. Knowing just what she was, and terrified that if he didn’t touch her, if he didn’t get a hold of her, he knew where he’d wake up, what kind of a prison he’d be in.

Her heels struck the ground, ba-thump, ba-thump. There were no feet in those shoes, no legs. Her face was a skull.

“Let me kiss you,” he begged. “Please, just one kiss.”

The spectre that looked like Ashleigh just kept walking ahead of him. Getting further and further ahead. Leaving him behind, to beg, to stumble, to end up on his belly in the gutter, unable to crawl, unable to move, unable to do anything but watch her disappear.

“Three out of ten,” she said, as she faded into mist ahead of him. “You weren’t even trying.”

Ba-thump, ba-thump. His heartbeat woke him.

He woke up, staring at the lines of the ceiling. Numb and resigned, silent and trapped.

The next surgery was shorter. He went under in the morning and was awake by the afternoon. It didn’t feel like a lip, or like flesh - it was too sturdy, too strong, unpleasantly pliable and cool - but he refused the mirror that the doctor offered. He didn’t want to see himself. He didn’t want to look on the fucking mess that he was. But now he could close his mouth on his own. Now he didn’t drool on himself.

Was his heart made of the same faux flesh that composed his lip? Was that why he felt nothing?

“There was a huge thunderstorm last night,” the doctor told him, when she visited next. “I hope it didn’t disturb you.”

A thunderstorm, and he had slept through it. For the first time in his life he had slept through a thunderstorm. He turned his head towards the light, where, on the other side of the privacy curtain,
the window would have been speckled with last night’s rain. He hadn’t been woken. A storm had shaken the very building he was in, and he had slept on, oblivious.

The dragon really was gone.

He’d never been so alone.

The last surgery was on his throat. He had no way to judge the time, no sense of how many times the sunlight had changed outside his window, the window obscured by the privacy curtains around his bed, the window that looked out into a world he hadn’t been permitted to see. But he was breathing, and his eyelids were getting easier to lift. And there were no more of those damn tubes down his neck.

He reached a hand up, to touch his throat. The stump of his right arm rose within his vision, reminding him that he had no hands. He let it thud back down at his side, furious, embarrassed, helpless, numb.

He swallowed. Rolled his tongue in his mouth, pursed his lips - his upper lip, and whatever it was that replaced the lower one, anyway - prodded his teeth. And, warily, hummed.

At last, a sound. It felt like a bubble of phlegm caught there, like his voice was punishing him. They all should have died, his voice, his heart, his breath, his everything. He should be dead.

He managed a sob. A soft, animal wail. But then he was silent.

When the doctor came to check on him, he pretended to be asleep.

He couldn’t avoid her forever.

She came to check on him again, and again, and again to the point of regularity, to bring him food and drink, to change his catheter bags, to even curl up at the couch at the far end of the room and just nap (he had heard her exhausted sighs and her steady breathing often enough). She kept her visits perfunctory, professional, until he was so starved for the sound of her voice that he made eye contact the next time she entered.

And she smiled. “How are you feeling today, Genji?”

He grunted.

“Ah! So you do have your voice back. Shall we do some exercises? It would be an excellent way of testing your strength.”

“Not Genji.”

Concern clouded her pretty blue eyes.

He could feel the hands he did not have clenched into tight fists. “Genji is dead.” His voice sounded strange to his own ears, to speak caused unpleasant vibrations that he was not familiar with. It was him, but it was not him. It could not possibly be him. “I am not Genji.”

She sat down at his bedside. “You are, Genji. You are Genji. You’re alive.”

He shook his head, intensely frustrated, angry, helpless. How was a foreigner supposed to understand? How was anyone supposed to understand? “Not Genji,” he insisted, hating the sound of his voice. Wanting to use it as little as possible.
“Then what should I call you?”

Her voice was so soft and kind and gentle, and he hated it. Hated her. He was so angry, how dare she let him live, how dare she keep him alive when all he wanted was to die. He didn’t want her kindness. He didn’t want her fucking pity.

When she gave up trying to coax him to speak, he tried to get back to sleep. But he couldn’t. All he could think about was the room he was in, the bed he was in, his useless shredded remains of a body. He’d seen his heart, he’d seen his fucking heart, his flesh and ribs sheared open to for him to see it. There’d been so much blood. How was he still alive? And why?

Why?!

His hands, the hands he no longer possessed, stayed clenched too tight, too tense, for him to rest.

Yet at some point, his eyes must have closed. The light was different when he was next aware. And there was someone in his room with him.

What was left of his skin prickled with goosebumps under the blanket. Instinct rising up to tell him that whoever this was, was dangerous. He opened his eyes, slowly, peering left and right with careful movements of his eyes. Watching without giving away that he was doing so.

He saw his guest sitting in a chair. Half-slumped, as though dozing, but there was something about the stranger that suggested the same kind of watchfulness that he himself was using. Watching, without giving it away. Both men were alert. Both men were wired for combat.

He opened his eyes and turned his head. The stranger lifted his head and gave a wry smile.

Neither would admit to being caught.

The stranger stood, unfolding his arms, and moved to stand by the bedside. “The doctor’s getting some sleep. You’ve been keeping her up for quite some time, Mr Shimada.” He tilted his head. “I’m guessing you have questions. I would, if I was in your position.”

He was angry. Furious. But losing his temper required legs, and arms, and a hand that could wield a sword. He was forced to lie there, in this man’s shadow. “Speak slowly,” he said, the words so low they were almost a growl. “My English… not so good.” A decent enough excuse. He had no desire to talk to an American.

The stranger raised an eyebrow, lips parting from a wry smile as though to offer a rebuttal. But then he gave a small smile, a shrug, and a nod. “Do you know why you’re here? Why you’re alive?”

He shook his head.

“You’re here, and alive, because Overwatch operatives managed to extract you in time. You’ve heard of us, I imagine.”

He waited, giving his fury time enough to broil over this new information, to make it seem like he had understood the words in the hated accent. He remembered the camera, the sense of being watched in the castle. How he’d wished them good luck. Bile rose in his throat. He forced himself to nod, even though what he’d known of them - from forums, from news bulletins, from hushed discussions overheard from the air ducts - didn’t fit with the idea that Overwatch would use spies as the Shimadas did.

They were out to save the world. Weren’t they?
And why save him?

“Overwatch operatives aimed to gather information about your family’s business empire. The fact we found you presents an opportunity for the both of us.”

It took willpower not to narrow his eyes straight away. Fury. Anger. Despair.

The stranger seemed to understand. His voice lowered, and softened. “We can help you walk again, Mr Shimada. We can give you back your arms, too, and your whole body. We can fix what was done to you.”

He stirred, his non-existent hands tensing into fists again, a dull throbbing ache that swelled and clawed at his head, behind his temples, a cold stone in his gut. Meanwhile, his heart kept time, steady and mechanical.

“We have the funding, the technology, the personnel with the skill for such an endeavour. All we ask in return is for your help in dismantling the Shimada trade empire. We want to undo the harm that they’ve done, and stop them from doing any more.”

Here is where he would have turned away. Where he would have stood firm on the memory of his father, on the love that a son should feel. Here he should have stood on promise, on loyalty, on duty. But he was laid on white sheets, his body broken, his dragon far from the hollowness of his chest.

In his mind, the storm raged. He saw a face, a brother’s face, eyes black with anger, a sword brought down; his mouth remembered the taste of blood.

Legs and arms. Face and skin and body all ruined. And only one name to blame.

Shimada.

His eyes held the American’s. Fiercely. “Yes.”

“You don’t have to decide now. I haven’t even finished talking.”

“I said yes,” he hissed, his throat burring, thrumming unfamiliarly, his voice still strange to his own ears.

The stranger studied him, frowning in thought, and then nodded slowly. “Alright. We get you a body, and you give us everything we need to take them down.”

“I give… my blade.”

The stranger looked to the other end of the room, to something beyond the privacy curtains, to something obscured from sight. He looked back, frowning, shaking his head. “We wouldn’t ask that of you.”

The dark eyes. The flash of lightning. The searing agony of steel through flesh and bone. It was as real as his hands. They were there, he could feel them. Could feel every moment with intense clarity.

“I left my name behind,” he hissed. His fists were aching now, nothing but ghosts but aching all the same. “They are not my family. I will do whatever it takes.”

The stranger said nothing for a moment. “Revenge isn’t exactly a noble purpose. But there is no denying it is a hell of a thing to get you up in the morning.” Another pause. “You don’t have to, you know. The information you can give us might well be enough. I wouldn’t ask you to strike down
your own kin.”

He said nothing. Staring intently. His fists - not there - clenched tight. His hands needed to hold a sword. It would never make him whole again. He would never be whole again. But he needed to hold a sword.

“… yeah.” The stranger nodded, giving a short sigh through his nose. “Yeah, alright. I get it.”

“Jā... Do we have…” The words felt like fire in his throat, and he wished there was smoke to herald them, a roll of thunder, a crash of the waves against the cliffs. Something. Anything. Anything but the groan from a dead man’s chest. “A deal?”

“We have a deal.”

He nodded, grunting. Despair was flaking away. There was possibility ahead of him. He could taste blood. He could feel the fire burning in him.

He imagined the face of his killer, imagined their places reversed. The satisfaction he felt would not doubt be far more intense in real life, with a blade in his hand.

There was no dragon. But there was a hunger, and a certainty… and a certain hunger.

His bowl was empty. But it would be filled.

“I do have one question.”

He focused on the stranger again. Impatient, irritated about being interrupted from the only hope he had.

“If you’d left your name behind - I’m guessing that’s why you don’t want to be called ‘Genji’ or ‘Mr Shimada’ - what do we call you?”

He stared up at the ceiling, at the lines in silver, at the pocked white panels. He had no answer to that. He’d left the name in the shrine. He was left to the wind and the waves, which had brought him here.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find something.” The stranger turned for the door. “We’ll have our introductions later.”

He let him go. In quietness and solitude, he breathed, until real sleep came.

Sleep, and no dreams. Not even a breeze over the mountain.

The doctor was upset. The American visitor had no right to be in the ward, no right to speak to her patient without giving them all the facts. It wasn’t going to be as simple, she explained, as giving him back his arms and legs. There was a lot more involved than that, and the fact that Genji had not been given all the information before making his choice was unconscionable.

“You should have been informed of all the consequences and options before you made your choice,” she was saying, testily. Eyes like chips of ice. “I will be having words to the Commander about this deception.” Her voice lowered and she muttered to herself, a language he couldn’t place.

“So tell me,” he breathed, watching her intently, “What I do not know.”

Her temper and righteous indignation faded, melted, into hesitation and concern, and something very much like pity. “Genji, you have suffered serious damage that will not be simply-mended.” Her
fingers idly smoothed over the sheets as she stood at his bedside, adjusting the blanket around his shoulders. “The superficial scarring on your face can be dealt with easily, but… we can’t give you back the arms and legs you had before. We will have to give you prostheses. And even then,” she continued, unaware of the chill he was feeling down his spine, “For the level of advanced treatment that you need…” She paused, and rested her fingertips on his chest, over his heart, over the scar. “I will need to take more, Genji. I will need to remove tissue that is too weak or too damaged for the prostheses to attach to, and I will have to add non-biological structures to support the weight of every addition, and… so much more.”

There would be less of him. Less of him, than there was right now.

He lay still, while in his mind he struggled, while the fists he did not have stayed clenched tight against his sides. He’d be an eta. Of course he would. What was he imagining, that they’d grow him new arms and legs from a vat, or that there was a transplant surgery option? Ridiculous to imagine it. Of course it would be prostheses. Of course his new body would be fake.

Of course he’d be an eta.

It was worse than being a cripple.

But he would be able to hold a blade, and then the greater shame would lie on the head of those who would be struck down by him. Fine. Good.

It would be enough to get the job done.

He met her gaze, and nodded. His mind unchanged. “Do whatever must be done.”

“Genji.” She shook her head. “Please, I know that look in your eyes. You’re angry. You make bad decisions when you’re angry.” Her hand pressed firmly down against his chest, and he could feel the warmth of her palm. “I know you want revenge. But it is not what you should be focusing on. Do not give your killer a second chance, don’t put yourself into that kind of danger a second time.”

‘Your killer’. A strange thing to think, when he knew his own heart still beat and he still drew breath. But this wasn’t living, was it? It wasn’t. Not at all.

“Your situation is very delicate, and --”

“Then do not make me ‘delicate’,” he said, his rough words made rougher by what she had done to fix his throat.

She took her hand from his chest, looking hurt.

He breathed hard through his nose. It was a long moment before he could speak again. “Is there an alternative, doctor? Did you have some other plan?” He held her gaze.

“You need to listen to me, Genji. If you focus on your anger…”

No more of this. His phantom fists slammed against the mattress, his stump arms twitching. “I have no fucking arms, and I have no fucking legs. I haven’t moved from this bed for what feels like weeks. I piss into a plastic bag. The only things I have been able to eat are weak broth and medicinal paste.” His voice hummed and burred unpleasantly in his neck. There was no taste of smoke to go with them, though, no bile or brimstone, not even ash. “Anger is not what I feel!”

The doctor looked at him, steadily.
“And I am not Genji,” he said, quietly. Firmly. He breathed out through his nose. Whatever heat there was was quickly extinguished. “… You speak about knowing all the facts. Fine, then. If I had refused the offer from Overwatch… what would happen to me?”

Now, Doctor Ziegler had to look away. “I cannot speak for them. I don’t know enough. But I think it likely they would not let you go. You know who you are, what your family is. If you refused to provide information, you may be held here, as something of a prisoner. And, as such, it is likely that Overwatch would not agree to your reconstruction. At least, not on the holistic level they have promised. Perhaps you would have been given arms and legs, yes, but… the very bare minimum. You would be able to take care of yourself, but… little else. Certainly nowhere near what you are used to.” Her expression was grim when she looked back at him, her hand resting over his chest again. “But there is just as much chance that I would be denied the right to care for you. You may remain… an invalid, like this. Indefinitely.” She took a slow breath and refused to continue.

He was a young man. Even if his limblessness meant he wasn’t in his prime, she’d mended his heart and lungs and kept what was left of his body in good condition. He would live for a very long time. Euthanasia would not be on the table, not for him. Not for someone who knew such useful information, and not for a doctor who cared as deeply as she. He would suffer, trapped in his own useless body.

Overwatch. They were supposed to be the good guys. But their own doctor was warning him about the torture he could be facing. And torture it would be - he’d barely survived these maddening days, weeks, months, however long he’d been just lying here. It would be torture. It was torture.

There are no monsters anymore. Just people.

“So, this is the sum of your objections,” he murmured. “That I have no free will.”

Doctor Ziegler shook her head. “No-one should be subjected to this. They’re forcing you to agree. They’re leaving you with no option. This is unconscionable. You deserve to have the choice to decide what happens to you!”

I did. I decided to die. But here I am.

“I am used to having no choice, Doctor.” He closed his eyes, focusing on how warm her hand felt through the blanket, how his heartbeat bounced off it. “Do it. Do whatever it is that needs to be done.”

He may not have had a choice about whether or not to accept, but he didn’t care. He had accepted.

And he didn’t regret his decision.

The doctor brought in a new visitor not long after: short, brusque, an eyepatch, a craggy face with an over-proliferation of blonde hair and a dense beard gathered in two kempt bundles. Doctor Ziegler had introduced him as Torbjörn Lindholm, Overwatch’s Chief Engineer. “Mr Lindholm will be making the framework for your prosthetics. While we will be using nanotechnology and biomechanics for the majority of your operations, many of your prosthetics require a set of skills that I do not myself possess.”

The engineer nodded, and a rough tumble of syllables cascaded from his mouth. And the doctor replied, in a soft, lilting tone.

They were speaking what couldn’t possibly be English, and yet could be nothing but. Their accents were so thick and European that he had a hard time understanding either of them. He had barely
grasped the understanding of the words veiled in her accent when the bearded man was halfway
through some manner of explanation of his own. And then she would reply, and then he would
reply, and the conversation continued between doctor and engineer without any input from the man
in the bed. They might as well have been talking over him, around him, not to him.

But he gathered, as his mind scrambled to keep up with what they were saying, that they were
beginning their work immediately. He heard soft pings of a machine, felt the tingle of a laser grid, felt
hands both rough and gentle easing along his stumps and his frame.

“… precise measurements are a matter o’ great importance…”

“… an induced coma may be necessary for some of the detail work…”

“… not jus’ a matter of strappin’ pieces o’ metal t’ his body. If it were that simple, anyone could do
it…”

“… been informed of that. We are going to do the best we can for you, Genji. Don’t worry, we…”

“… ‘bout the end of the month, I wager…”

He closed his eyes and let them work, without interrupting, giving up on the attempt to follow their
words or decipher their accents. Letting the engineer measure, letting them talk about the pieces of
him they would have to replace, or enhance, or whatever it was they called it.


God.

Fuck.

“Genji? What is wrong?”

He opened his eyes, and looked into Doctor Ziegler’s face. How could he say it? How could she
possibly understand? He shook his head, instead, and closed his eyes. Forcing his mind away from
his body.

He remembered Horishi’s scars, her false leg, the places where smooth metal gave way to ragged
skin. Would she laugh at the irony? Would she smirk? It didn’t matter. He’d never see her again.

There was a meal. There were reassurances. Then the doctor placed an oxygen mask over his mouth
and told him to breathe deeply.

The dreams were stranger, after that.

He dreamed that night of visiting her, and finding only the empty room and the mirrors. His
reflection was as it had always been, but in the refraction of the light, he saw pieces of him fading
away.

He heard someone laugh. Mockingly. A voice so familiar it was terrifying to hear.

“Dragon’s head. Snake tail.” From the place between the mirrors, his brother stepped out, flanked by
guards and cousins and flunkeys, by familiar faces twisted into grimacing masks. Genji felt himself
stumble backwards, and fall, and when he landed he had not a leg to stand on. He howled as the
mirrors showed him his reflection, the disgusting ruin he had tried so hard to avoid looking at.

“He’s too short to be a snake.” Another voice offered.
His brother’s sword chopped at the phantom legs and arms and cut away even the ghosts, *ton ton ton*. “So what are you, then? What should we call you?”

“I think we should call him a worm, Young Lord.”

“A worm.”

“A worm.”

“A worm.”

Genji tried to crawl for the mirror, for the door, for any kind of escape.

“*Sou*. A worm.” The voice was so cold with triumph. “And he should crawl around in the dirt where he belongs.” The sword came down.

In another time, he might have woken from the nightmare with a gasp, the scar from shoulder to hip burning him.

But there was no wakefulness, not this time. Instead, there was just sleep. Sleep, and the aches from a disgusting ruined body that caused him to shudder and tremor.

There were times when his consciousness did skim close to the surface.

He heard voices like avalanches, rumbling stone, low echoes through distant caverns.

He dreamt of snow, deep snow, so cold, so white it might have been flakes of ash.

Sometimes he called out, for Horishi, for Saori, for his father, for his mother, for any one of his many companions or lovers. Even Cake Shop. Someone, anyone, to hold him, to comfort him, to make sure he wasn’t alone.

No-one ever answered. He was alone. Utterly alone.

He saw, or thought he saw, flecks of dust suspended in a sunbeam, and his brain picked out constellations from them before they all went dark.

He was sitting, propped up on a cloud. Pillows, a pile of pillows. He drank what was poured into his mouth, coaxed by a touch to his throat, by soft words he couldn’t understand. He felt fingers through his hair, nails lightly over his scalp, and it made him shudder, made him turn his head for more.

Through eyes that struggled to open, he saw white. Not the white of the ceiling, the prison, but a labcoat. Her coat, the doctor’s. Soft lines, gentle curves. Angela Ziegler stood at his side, smiling, leaning down over him.

“Lift your hands.”

He swallowed again, his tongue catching on the dense faux-flesh mesh of his lower lip, unable to keep from worrying at it. He groaned, tired, wanting to go back to sleep. Wanting to just lie there and have those lovely fingers playing with his hair.

“Genji. Lift your hands.”

He tried to speak, but his tongue was too heavy. Everything was too heavy. He couldn’t even wonder if he’d drunk too much last night. Too much. Thinking was hard. Far too hard. So he did what he was told.
Elbows resting on the mattress, he raised his hands. Palms outward, away from him.

“Very good. Make two fists.”

He curled his hands into his fists. Dimly, far, far away, something didn’t feel right.

“Very good.” Her nails scratched over his scalp. “Now, open your hands again, and turn your palms to face you.”

He did so, and the hands pivoted, slowly, to face him. Light glinted off metal and gleamed off plastic.

“Now make a fist with your right hand. Very good. Now open it. And make a fist with your left hand. … Genji?”

He was staring, now, at his left hand. There should have been a scar, there, from one edge of the palm to the other. But there wasn’t. The flesh was pristine. No, not flesh. It wasn’t flesh at all. There was nothing about it that looked organic. It gleamed like silver, patched between with plastics and stripes of dark, spongy mesh.

The scar wasn’t there. It had been lost, along with his hand.

“Genji. Make a fist with your left hand.”

His fingers curled inwards, silver and black, the joints clicking softly. He saw round spheres of metal between each piece, ball-bearings. The tips of his fingers were smooth, tapered pieces of plastic, textured on the underside. He had no fingernails anymore.

He could feel the weight of the hand, could feel the shape of it in the air. But there was no warmth, no coolness, no way to feel what the air in the room felt like. He unfolded the fist, flexing the fingers and palm, turning it this way and that. There were clicks, occasionally, but it moved so smoothly. Almost entirely in-sync with the way his own hand would move. But there was no feeling to it.

He couldn’t feel a thing.

“Very good.” The doctor stroked his hair, still trying to calm him, trying to make the frantically-beeping heart monitor slow. “You’re doing very well, Genji.”

*I’m not Genji,* he tried to say, but his words were choked in his throat. *I’m not Genji, anymore.*

She coaxed him to sit, to brace the hands against the mattress and push himself upright. He could feel the prosthetic straining back against his right upper arm, just above the elbow. To the left, he felt it against his chest. She’d taken the whole stump. His entire left arm had been replaced. He rolled his shoulders, and felt the sickening difference between left and right. Right was flesh. Left clicked smoothly.

He pulled away the blanket, and saw she’d done the same to his leg. He ran plastic fingertips over the metal and plastic limb, dimly aware of her explanation. The femur had been severed too cleanly, the tissue degeneration had left her no choice but to completely amputate. The mechanical hand slid upwards, pulling aside his scrubs to see the scar on his hip, a surgical scar, from where she’d cut into his hip and placed god knows what to make sure the leg attached to his body. The right leg was simpler, fastened mid-thigh. Plastic and metal to replace all the shattered bones and snapped tendons and everything that was gone.

And so much was gone. There was nothing left of him.
He put his head into the hands and let out a long, low animal moan.

His skin felt rough, but he didn’t feel it through the hands, he felt it through his face, the way the smooth plastic caught on every scar, and worse, on his skin. There was something wrong with his skin.

These weren’t his hands. They were just hands. He didn’t want them touching his face.

There was something wrong with his skin. There was everything wrong with the rest of him.

“I’m here, Genji.” Doctor Ziegler stroked his hair. “Tell me what you need.”

He didn’t know how to put into words what he needed.

He made no sound.

His new limbs were heavy, and slow, and each time he moved he was overcome with a feeling of wrongness, of revulsion. Nothing felt right, not moving, not holding things, not even walking. He stumbled, and limped, dragging himself around the room as the doctor walked with him, her hands gently steadying and guiding him.

The room was bigger than he’d thought. It felt more like a studio apartment than a hospital room. The privacy curtain hid a lot of open space, three tall windows of shaded glass, a comfortable couch, the doorway to a bathroom, and a door that would lead to the rest of… wherever he was.

He didn’t want to find out. He didn’t want the world to see him.

He didn’t even want to see himself.

She made him walk the length and breadth of the room. Made him sit and stand, made him turn and flex and stretch. It was all wrong. The left side of his body felt so much heavier than the right. He was slow, and cumbersome, and ugly. The ghosts of the limbs he’d lost didn’t sit properly in the shells that had been made for them.

His swords were here. He stopped when he saw them. Dragon’s Straight-Edge leant in the corner, the katana and wakizashi bound together beside them. Like two little siblings hiding in their father’s shadow.

He felt bile rising in his throat.

“They’re yours, aren’t they?” She rested her head on his shoulder. “They were brought in with you. You didn’t have much with you. Just a bag, and these swords.”

“Yes.” It was so hard to speak. “They were mine.”

If she noticed his choice of words, she didn’t say anything about it.

While she went to make tea, he looked away from the swords, and picked a pen up off the table, trying to twirl it between his fingers. He dropped it, immediately. With a groan, he bent over to pick it up, and tried again. Again, he dropped it. He used to be able to do knife tricks, card tricks, coin tricks, pen tricks; he could conjure folded paper swans from nothingness like it was magic, could make his lovers howl with pleasure, could strike a mosquito from the air. He could, past-tense. There was no agility in these false limbs. A child could flip a pen, but not him, not anymore. The third time he tried, frustrated and desperate, the pen snapped in half between suddenly-clamping fingers. Ink splattered over him, over his false limbs and his scrubs. He sat back on the couch and stared at his
left hand, at the scar that was no longer there.

He didn’t want to move. He didn’t want to exist. But here he was, alive.

If anyone could call this ‘living’.

The tea was hot, a shock to his senses. He couldn’t tell what kind of flavour it was, masked with milk as it was, but it was richer, stronger, than the broths he’d been sipping so far. As good as a pinch to tell him he wasn’t dreaming.

“Do you feel ready to have visitors yet?” The doctor asked him, as she sat on the couch beside him, legs tucked up underneath her and both hands wrapped around her mug. “There are a few people who wish to see you. Some of the agents who were involved in your extraction, for instance. The people who saved your life.”

They would expect gratitude, and he had none to give. He shook his head.

“In a little while, then. When you’re more used to the prostheses.”

He looked down at his hand. Out the corner of his eyes, the swords mocked him. Those hands would never wield those blades. They did not deserve to.

He did not deserve to.

He and the doctor drank their tea, then walked circles around the room again. Going nowhere. Changing nothing.

When she left him, he found his way to the bathroom. At first, he avoided the mirror. It could wait. The horror that was his existence wasn’t about to end anytime soon. He needed to piss. And for the first time in a long time he’d be able to do it on his own. But the hands, the metal and plastic, loomed in his vision.

He remembered how easily the pen had shattered in his grip. How the ink had gone everywhere. How loudly and suddenly the pen had just… broken. And he was going to put those hands, where?

“… Fuck that.”

He sat to piss, hands clasped tightly in front of him. Plastic and metal creaked.

He could add fear to the list. Disgust, hate, and now fear of his own body. Not that this was his body. His body was all but gone, and what was left was at risk from what had replaced him. He was at war with himself, and he was losing.

*Might as well get it over with, then.*

He looked himself in the eye for the first time in days, weeks, however long it had been. His hair had been cut, shorn close enough to be manageable, practical, without any care for looks. He wished it was longer, so he could pull it down over his eyes. To hide himself away.

Scars. He could see them clearly, now. He could remember where they’d burned from the sword strikes, where the steel had sliced through flesh. Forehead to eyebrow. Across his cheeks, twice on the right and once on the left, in differing angles. His lower lip, which was gone, which was black faux-flesh down over his chin. Over his temple, too, where the katana had sliced away half his ear, which had been mended with the same black mesh.
He’d had a face that made so many swoon. He’d been unabashed to kiss his own reflection. Now he
was a ruin, a wreck. He bent over the sink and retched up the tea.

He turned on the shower, and sat in the cold tiled cubicle with the water washing down over him.
Maybe if he waited long enough, he’d drowned.

But if he drowned, then how would he avenge himself?

He had to live.

He had to live long enough to see another man die. After that, then he could drown. Drift down the
river.

Wash out to sea, like mother did.

He towelled off, and shut the bathroom door behind him. Limping, stomping unbalanced in a circuit
around the room before finally coming to a stop.

The view out the windows was spectacular. The sky was so vast, so blue. Uninterrupted for miles
overhead. They were on a mountaintop, or close enough to it. Nestled between several vast peaks,
looking down over a dense township of foreign architecture, of slopes of dense green grass and
bright, nodding blossoms.

He saw a fluttering flag in the distance, and recognised the design upon it. Recognised that he’d been
here, years ago, as a child. Switzerland. It was just as beautiful as he remembered.

But his mind refused find joy in the memories, because all those years ago he’d come here with the
man who’d killed him, who’d murdered him, and what laughter and excitement there might have
been then was ruined, a pall descending over it like night. His memories were all blackened and
scarred. There was no joy in them.

He stared out at the beautiful sight, and hated it. Hated it for every moment it reminded him of all that
had been stolen from him, and from the thief who was responsible. He looked at the blue sky and the
tall mountains and the clean lines of the roads and the buildings in the valley below, and he clenched
his fists so hard they almost broke.

They would not break. He wished they would, but no. These metals and plastics were stronger than
flesh. They would outlast him.

The doctor and the engineer brought him to a small obstacle course, looking between him and
holographic display screens that tracked his vitals. They trusted him to move on his own, watching
from a distance. There was no-one else to watch, but he flushed from embarrassment with every
fumble, with every misstep, with every fraction of a second too long that it took to make his feet
brace themselves. He was sweating from exertion, and the number tracking his heartrate was
climbing too fast, too unevenly.

He saw his own face in a panel of polished glass. He saw it, saw wild eyes and wicked scars and
bared teeth. He saw an oni.

He slipped on a set of stairs, tumbling backwards, crying out as his hands did not catch himself, as
his feet did nothing but bend and allow him to fall. He hit the floor hard, hissing his pain through
clenched teeth. He tried to get up, rolling from one side to the other like a trapped turtle before he
finally managed to get to his side, to push himself to hands and knees. Sweat dripped from his
forehead, leaving droplets on the floor.
They were not tears. They were not.

“Genji, are you alright?”

“This isn’t my body!” He screamed at her, at the engineer, at the universe that had left him in such a god-awful state. “This isn’t good enough!”

She knelt with him, offering her support to help him rise. He shoved her aside, showing her just how helpless he was. How long it took for him to push himself to his feet, how he couldn’t straighten up or he’d unbalance and tip to his left. How he couldn’t do a god-damn thing without her hovering, without her touching him. Rage filled his chest instead of air, to the point where it was almost painful.

He screamed it out of him. “I thought you were going to help me!”

She pressed her lips together, a thin line. Her eyes were hurt, though she tried to look stoic.

Lindholm folded his arms, and spoke. English, though dense and nearly indecipherable. “What did he say?”

The doctor dusted herself off as she rose, answering him in the same language, with a similarly difficult-to-understand accent. “He is frustrated. As anyone would be.”

“Angela. Tell me what he said.”

She frowned, and fixed her coat. “He said that the prostheses aren’t good enough. That they’re not helping him.” She hesitated. “That we’re not helping him.”

He turned away, hissing, and leaned against one of the climbing walls. Three feet high. He could vault something like this in his sleep, if only he had a body that was whole, and his, and not this horrific fucking mess. He leaned against the wall, and refused to look towards the glass. He couldn’t bear to see his face again. Couldn’t bear to see the monster that had his face.

The engineer grunted. “He’s right. We can do better.”

Her look darkened to sternness, defensiveness. “The surgeries were traumatic enough. Any additional work or prostheses will be too great a strain on his heart.”

“So, we make more hearts.” He tilted his chin forward. “Tell ‘im.”

She hesitated. “He won’t agree to it.”

“Let him decide for himself, Ziegler.”

So she did. He had another option. It would be more than just replacement. It would be reconstruction. Lindholm designed omnics, of all kinds. He knew how to make them work. Using that same technology, changes could be made to the prostheses, for a greater sense of coordination. Implants could be put into his body, to heighten electroconductivity so as to better help with motor control, with balance, with reaction times, with the ability to feel sensation through the bioplastics and faux-flesh in the same way he felt through his own skin.

He nodded, dismissively.

“Don’t say yes, Genji.” The doctor’s eyes flared, bright with temper. “I’m not finished.”

This would require more surgery. And a greater amount of risk. If this was going to work, she’d
need to operate on more than just his body. The implants would need to be connected to his spinal column, and his brain.

The fists were clenched tight. He could feel the muscle tremors up his arms.

She spoke plainly, simply. She had no doubt in her abilities. But there was a chance he could die on the table. Or even if he didn’t, there may be significant mental, emotional, or even physical side effects. Brain surgery was delicate at the best of times, and they were going to go ahead with a very risky procedure. But if it worked, if the implants and surgery meshed properly, he would be able to move like he remembered. Maybe even better. But that was a very big ‘if’.

She paused, taking a breath, and gave him a sharp, unflinching stare. “Do you think that will be enough to help you?”

He stood in silence. Fists clenched. Staring at nothing as he considered his fate. He took her sarcasm without pulling away. Just as he’d taken the last strike on the dojo floor.

She stepped closer, put a hand on his upper arm. On the part of him that was still flesh, that could still feel warmth. Her tone gentled, softened. “You would still be human, Genji. You would still be human.”

*Oh yes. Just… one-seventh of one.*

“We will give you time to think about it.” She patted his arm gently, and started to pull away.

“… No.”

Lindholm raised an eyebrow. Ziegler looked at him in concern.

He spoke slowly, haltingly, deliberately fouling up his words and syllables to maintain the illusion that his English was poor. “No. Do not wait.” He raised a hand, his left hand, and opened it, then clenched it into a fist again. “I do not need to think about it. If you can fix me, then fix me. Do not hesitate. Do what it is that you need to do.” He looked at the doctor first, then the engineer. “If you can do this, then you should do this.”

“You should give yourself some time.” Doctor Ziegler said, softly. “Practice with the prostheses.”

“No.” He shook his head. “No more time.” He slammed his fist into the wall. “No more practice. Fix me.”

She flinched. “Genji. Please. You need to think this through.”

Lindholm grunted and shook his head. “I’ll bring the blueprints to his room. Show him he’ll be almost an omnic by the time we’re through. That’ll slow him down.”

They tried, in their own ways, to talk him out of it. To show him the scope of what he was asking. To make him reconsider the risks, to even make him acknowledge them.

He almost listened.

But under the blue Swiss sky his disgust, anger, and fear was too strong.

He drank, he lay back, and he dreamed.

He saw Doctor Ziegler’s face, rounded, obscenely close to his own as though through a fish-eye lens. Speaking, lips moving, though he couldn’t hear her. But the weight of the words lay on his
skin. *I will need to take more.*

He could feel himself floating at times, weightless, where he dreamed of rising bubbles and seaweed drifting around his face and chest. How deep was the water, here? How strong were the currents?

Lights passed by his eyes. Once, twice, he thought he saw needles hovering in front of his eyes. They moved closer. Closer. Through. He didn’t feel a thing.

He sat in the dark and cried out for his dragon, snot and tears running down his chubby face. Nothing answered him. Not even his own flesh and blood.

He felt Ashleigh’s - no, Angela’s - fingers through his hair. Felt the pinch at his elbow and shoulder and hip and thigh as the prosthetics were removed, reattached, fused with his flesh and blood. Felt himself melting, being tempered, being reforged. She was so gentle. She was pulling him apart.

There was a light in the snow. Or was it an ember in the ash?

“Make a fist with your hand.”

He did as he was told. Then he braced both hands against the mattress and sat up. This was no time for small movements. No matter how his head spun.

He wasn’t finished. It was plain he wasn’t finished, he was someone’s hobby kit left incomplete. But from what he could see, and what he could feel, he was not far from a finished product.

It felt much smoother, now. He rolled his shoulders. It felt real. Everything felt real. He ran his fingertips over the sheets, and felt the softness of the fabric. Up his chest, and he felt the warmth of his chest. Half of it, at least. There was a growth over his right shoulder, a metallic fungus, where at the heart there was a circle of heat and light embedded into his skin. His heart beat on his left, and the other heart, a well-lit core, thrummed on the right.

He extended his right arm. Everything moved so well. It was hard to see all those parts, all that stark machinery, all that shine and gleam.

“Ugly,” he said, almost laughing. Bitter, but laughing.

“There is a synthetic bioflesh being created for you.” She traced her fingers down his left arm. “Some of it has fused successfully here, and here. If you like it, we can continue to use it.”

He extended his left arm. From neck to fingertips, he was flesh. He curled his fingers inwards, looking at the plastic fingernails, feeling the metal clenching under the skin, feeling fingertips rubbing over skin. Rubbery. Warm. Almost real.

There were tubes sticking out of his arm, here and there, as proof that his left arm was anything but real. Still, the faux flesh was effective. It hid where the prosthetics began and ended. It helped hide the scars.

It might even make him forget to hate himself.

“Can you stand?”

He threw back the blanket and rolled to his feet. Taking a moment to test his stance. He could feel the segments in his soles, his heels, his toes. He could certainly balance better. He had more control. The ghost of the limbs he’d lost fit far better now, in these pieces.
He bent down, testing his knees, then straightened up, head tilting back to the ceiling. And he froze as he felt something at the back of his neck.

“Careful.” She tried to guide him back to sit.

He did not sit. He brought up both hands, touching his hair - he could feel the fibres of his dark, short-cropped hair, feel the warmth of his scalp, as faux-flesh hand and mechanical hand alike made their way backwards. Slowly. He felt bone turn to metal beneath his touch, and in dull horror he probed downwards from the back of his skull, down his neck, between his shoulderblades. There were bulges beneath his skin, tubes of insulated wires hanging from ports, and bare ports still open, and a long array of segmented metal where his spine had been.

No. More than just the spine.

He moved, taking three long strides to the bathroom, flinging open the door, turning his back and flicking on the light. It was hard to look over his shoulder, hard to look and see. But there it was. Black and silver and red, like a sword.

“I am sorry, Genji. It was a lovely tattoo.” The doctor gave him a sympathetic look, from the mirror, from the reflection. Her eyes were heavy and sad, but she still tried to smile for him.

*You took my spine.* He couldn’t get the words out. *You took my whole spine and put machinery into my brain.*

It was one thing to agree to it. It was another thing entirely to know that it had been done. And another, far worse thing, to see it for himself.

*You took my dragon.*

He reached behind him, and traced his finger over where the tattoo had been removed. As fingertips touched spine, metal to metal, he felt a jolt of power - of pain? - through his whole body. And he saw it, in the mirror, in the reflection. His skin was twisted and burned, but he could see the colour bright and vivid still inked there. The sparrow, the flowers, the mountain, the storm. They were all there, on the burned flesh. And, above all, there was the dragon, all coiled and gleaming, suspended on his back. But the dragon’s head was gone. Sheared straight off by the straight surgical plunge of his new spine.

The dragon had been decapitated.

He turned away, bracing both hands either side of the doorframe. He breathed hard, and deep.

He felt his heart beating. He felt the main core thrumming, echoed by smaller ones embedded in his legs, his stomach, his arms. He burned with power, was tense with it, felt like he’d be breathing it if he put the effort in.

He could breathe fire. He couldn’t breathe at all. He felt like he could crush a mountain between his bare hands, he felt like he was made of glass and a breeze could shatter him. He was standing. He was a prop in a cage of flesh and metal.

He choked on a sob, a scream, a wail, a curse. Something. Hard to tell. He choked on the sound, swallowed it, internalised it.

The doctor moved closer. “It will take some time to get used to,” she tried to assure him. Smiling, putting her hand over his heart.
He didn’t need much time, really.

Just enough to kill a man for making him this way.

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**Chapter notes:**

- This was something of an experiment in style, this time, a constant single flow without a break, to reflect Genji’s anger and disorientation, as well as the conglomeration of flesh and machine. It was a little difficult for Genji to never to refer to himself without a name, but I did my best to try and eliminate confusion.

- My ideas about what Genji would have looked like were somewhat solidified before the release of the Blackwatch skin, but the release of that design has made me reconsider much of my earlier decisions and to reexamine the scientific, mechanical, and medical properties of what it would take to have him up and about. Still, I do not believe the Blackwatch skin to be his first prototype, nor would it be one he would be using for extended periods of time. This shall be discussed in greater detail the next chapter.

- Thanks go to CaduceusGuard for not only some of Angela’s dialogue and point of view, but also her real-life medical expertise and training to assist me in the finer details of lifesaving, surgery, and prostheses. Some liberties have been taken, due to the fact Genji is a cyborg with a magic dragon in a video game world, but I have done my best to keep things rooted in current and potential-future medical technology, and I appreciate her taking the time and significant effort to educate me.

- Edit: small update to Torbjörn’s description based on decisions made regarding his Ironclad skin and the Feb ’18 lore release regarding White Dome.

- Happy new year!
Chapter 15

They made him lift weights. They made him go through obstacle courses. They put him on a treadmill. They made him run slow, run fast, run in place, all without him going or getting anywhere.

He swallowed down every complaint, choked every frustrated scream, silenced himself but for the occasional grunt or the absolutely-necessary communication with the doctor or the engineer. He barely made a sound.

This body was, they promised, only a prototype. There were plans and blueprints for upgrades, but for now they needed to know he was adapting. This was a traumatic experience, and there was a lot to get used to. There were things about this body he could not get used to.

He watched the doctor pull his left leg right out of his hip socket. His left arm, next, disengaging right from the shoulder. There wasn’t pain, not in the way he was used to. All he had to do was think, and deactivate the power cores, and press a few buttons, and his limbs just - pop - came out. The ghosts of his limbs itched and spasmed when they had nothing to inhabit. He hunched forward as the doctor pulled off his other leg, then came for his other arm. Her arms supported him, eased him sideways, laying him on his stomach. She stroked his hair and told him to breathe deeply. He did, as he felt the needle’s sting to his neck, as the anaesthetic took hold, as he drifted away.

No dream. Just a waking nightmare. To sit up to the same soft-spoken orders, to see the same kind of plastic and metal where flesh should have been. To feel his limbs’ ghosts moving within them, giving them life. These pieces were smaller, lighter, the cores covered, his joints more flexible. Engineer and doctor were improving their designs. They called it ‘mark three’.

It. Him. Same difference.

At mark four, he could feel the new weight to his bones, the tingle to his skin where scars were healing, where nanotechnology mended him and left no sign of the operation. He felt warm, itchy. The sensations faded. He learned to adapt.

He ran. He jumped. He climbed. He went through every test they could devise, and he settled into this horrible shell that encased and mimicked what was left of his flesh. Mark five. Mark six. The body moved smoother, his sense of touch almost like it had been, with each upgrade and implant. He could feel heat, and cold, and texture, but even so he knew he wasn’t feeling it. Not really. Not through metal and plastic.

She brought him his meals, every day, and sat to watch him eat them. They were bowls and plates of tasteless paste, day in and day out. There was no flavour to the food, if ‘food’ was what it could be called. The doctor saw his discontent and apologised, but his diet needed to be strictly maintained while the surgeries and upgrades were continuing. The tasteless pastes contained all the vitamins and minerals and substances his body needed. It was so bland. He hated it.

“Is there anything you need, Genji?”

What a question. Where would he start? Maybe something simple, to stop her from looking at him like that.

“A mask.” He raised the hands, palms hiding his lower and upper part of his face - though not touching his skin, god, no, he couldn’t bear to let those hands touch what part of him was still human - and he peered out at her through the gap between the two palms.
He let his hands drop, when he remembered he’d done something like this when he was younger. When he was posing in a mirror, a stupid little boy.

There was nothing wrong with his face. All the more reason to hide it. He flinched each time he saw his face, or anyone came close enough for him to see them looking at him. They saw his scars, and the place where flesh and faux-flesh met, and he couldn’t bear the looks of pity on their faces. He didn’t want them to look at him. He didn’t want to be seen.

He would have laughed, had he not felt so bitter about it. A mask. He’d always wanted one. Now, he needed one.

The engineer made a prototype, a hood from faux-flesh that hooked into the metal plate at the back of his skull and at clips along his jaw. It hugged his face, clung tight to his scalp and forehead, hid his hair, covered all but his eyes, and then over that, plates of metal to go over it, as a helm with a visor. *Men-yoroi*. The engineer spent a lot of time with measurements and cutting and shaping. And with the cords and wires that dangled from where metal spine dug into flesh.

Every brush or tug at those wires had him trembling. They went right into his brain, they were rooted in the part of his body that his thoughts inhabited. The machinery was in his thoughts.

The first time the visor was activated, it was a frightening sight from within. Lights flickered a bright incomprehensible display, tracking his gaze, displaying in numbers and gridlines before settling. He remembered the needles that he had dreamt had driven into his eyes, and he knew this was another piece of himself that was irrevocably changed. Behind the metal and the plastic, he saw the world in light and dimension, a constant shifting display of what was and what could be.

He almost threw up.

The engineer removed the helm but left the hood, and promised that it was just a prototype, that there would be improvements, that everything would be familiar in time.

And he had nothing but time on his hands. Or the hands they had made him.

He was free of the hospital bed, free to move and stretch and train himself to be used to what he was becoming. He could walk on his own, now, without listing, without struggling. Some days, he was even allowed to put himself together, to pull the faux-flesh over the bare metal-and-plastic frame of his body, and hide it from his own sight. And, when he plugged himself into it, attached the cabling at his spine to the ports hidden in the mesh, he could feel through it, through the skin-over-his-skin. Hot and cold, the pressure of touch, the sensation of fabric or air or motion. It may have looked like flesh, with the lines of the bioplastic mimicking muscles and hiding the wreck beneath, but there was an indignity to it. Pulling it on or off felt like the struggle with a heavy wetsuit, a dense and lifeless plasticised fabric. It felt like real skin, warm and pliable, but only after it had been against his body for a time. Worst of all, the private humiliation of the bathroom. Unable, unwilling to touch himself more than he had to with those metal-and-plastic hands, he’d soiled himself. The one time he dared to try taking a proper piss, at least half of it never made it to the toilet bowl. He didn’t even notice, didn’t feel it, until he stepped back and slipped, and he hadn’t felt it spill down his legs because they weren’t his legs, they were metal and carbon fibre and a biomesh over the top and he hadn’t felt anything, *they weren’t his fucking legs*.

He was a hideous mess and he hated every single piece of himself. He couldn’t even piss in a straight fucking line.

But he said nothing. Just showered, cleaned up, and never said a word.
More tests. More upgrades: mark seven, eight, nine, ten to thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. The indignities of maintenance and cleaning that he was incapable of doing on his own. He did not make a single sound of complaint or outrage or humiliation. He kept quiet. Each word unspoken was more fuel on the fire, the rage which would burn slowly and steadily until he had a chance to burn his killer alive with it.

And the chance would come, the sooner they deemed his replacement body good enough to let him loose.

“Sync with BCI complete.”

“Alright, let’s see how we do.”

The doctor squeezed his shoulder. “Ready, Genji?”

He blinked against the bright light, raising a hand against it. But the light came from within his helmet, from the visor. This time, he was ready for it, blinking a few times to settle his vision, which pulsed once or twice before settling in-sync with his eyes. Everything had a faint reddish haze over it, matching the quality of the light and the plastic through which he peered.

His vision was a lot sharper, now. He could see details of the faces before him, and of the room, he hadn’t noticed before. A mere thought, and there was the quick flicker of characters and numbers in the corner of his vision: temperature, time, elevation, heart rate, numbers that flicked into his attention before fading to the background. This mask reacted a lot smoother and quicker than the last few iterations. There was no vertigo, either. Just a faint feeling of hazy unfamiliarity, like with a new pair of contacts. He’d get used to it.

He gave a low hum of approval, and rolled his shoulders.

They had reached mark nineteen before they were all, together, satisfied. Medically, physically, mechanically, he was fully autonomous. He could take care of himself. He was ready for more vigorous training.

“Let us see what this body can do.” He pushed himself off the bed.

“What’d he say, Ziegler?”

“He said he’s looking forward to seeing what he can do.”

The engineer grinned, and nodded. “This way.”

“Hai.”

There were strangers in the observation booth, this time. As he ran, as he vaulted, as he pitted himself in hand-to-hand combat with the clunky training dummies. He tried to pay the strangers no mind, but he had a crawling sensation on his skin - his real skin, not the faux-flesh he wore over the top of everything - as he felt their eyes on him.

The American was there, the same one who had made him the offer. Another man stood beside him, in every way the American’s opposite, and yet somehow utterly indistinguishable. Same strong jaws, same sturdy silhouettes, same hard eyes. Matching salt and pepper shakers. They stood at the glass, watching.

The way they watched was familiar. The way they assessed him, like the tutors and trainers and
teachers he’d been surrounded with, as a boy. How they’d stared him down and wondered if he would ever be good enough, if he would ever meet their expectations, if he would ever compare to the one for whom they held in higher regard.

He clotheslined a robot, pinned it to the ground, then flipped backwards and landed hard, driving his foot right through the mechanical face. There was some satisfaction, here, to feel how swiftly and forcefully this body could act. Almost as smoothly as his own.

Behind the glass, the American smiled. The man beside him frowned.

“Overheating will be an issue.” The doctor’s hand pressed against his forehead, and her brow creased. “If he continues like this, Torbjörn, he’s at the risk of heatstroke.”

“We could make the faux-flesh thinner,” the engineer grunted, looking through the digital readouts of his notes, flicking between the various prototypes.

“That won’t mitigate the heat buildup from the cores, or the way his body temperature rises through action, particularly exercise as vigorous as what he just demonstrated. He will need some kind of cooling system, internally. Or a way to exude all this heat naturally, seeing as he can’t sweat it out.”

“Lägg till några öppningar för ångan,” the engineer muttered, sketching something quickly with flicks of his fingers. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The patient sat silently, as the doctor mopped down his face and neck with a damp cloth. Unmoving. Silent. His eyes locked on the middle distance.

In the stillness, he was all the more aware of how much he didn’t feel. So much of the sensations he had felt so keenly while alive now felt dull and distant. It was strange how different the damp cloth felt over his scarred face as it did over the faux-flesh, or how echoes of the reverberations of fist against steel gathered in his knee, his hip, his upper arm, his chest, lingering even though the strikes had ceased. A man would bruise and bloody his knuckles, but he patient didn’t have that luxury anymore. He had to endure the ache everywhere else, while the plastic and metal of his hands remained unblemished. Unmarred. Pristine.

“You did well,” the doctor smiled, running her hand over the mesh of his hood, stroking where his hair would have been. “The Commanders are both impressed with how well you’re doing.”

“He’ll be ready for field work, soon.” The engineer said, light-pen flicking as he started sketching some changes to the holographic displays.

The doctor frowned disapprovingly. “No, not yet he isn’t.”

“Mm, no, not yet. A few more tweaks of the helmet, perhaps.”

He felt ready. But they didn’t ask his opinion.

He might as well have been furniture.

The city lights outside the window blocked out the stars above, but there were still more here than there were in Hanamura. The window didn’t open, so he couldn’t feel the night air on his face.

Just as well. It was a long drop to the promenade below.
He didn’t need the temptation. He had a promise to fulfil.

He lingered at the glass a moment longer, then started pacing the room, arms held close to his body, fists jabbing out. Left, right right, left, right left right. His feet moved slowly, carefully, taking familiar stances, as he fought the air.

Fighting the air. Running on a treadmill. Useless, pointless activities. But he had nowhere to go, nothing to do. The frustration was useful: it kept his mind sharp, and hungry.

He felt naked without a blade in his hand. But he left them where they were. An eta didn’t have honour, or a soul, so why should he? And the ōdachi, Ryu-Ichimonji? Why even look at it? He had no dragon, and he’d left his name on the family altar. It died with him.

He struck out, hard, hitting nothing, then hissed a growl that thrummed down his spine.

The doctor’s eyes were brighter than they had been in a while, a sign she’d finally gotten some sleep. She set down a vase with an iris in it on his bedside before presenting him with his breakfast tray. The usual medicinal gruel had a swirl of colour through it, and a sprinkling of brown sugar.

He stared at it, then at the flower, then up at the doctor.

“I know it might not be a cake, but I wanted to wish you a happy birthday.” She pulled her chair close to the bed, smiling warmly at him, her fingertips resting lightly on his hand. “You’ve done so well, and I’m so glad to see how well you’ve recovered.”

He sighed heavily. “It’s October.”

“… yes?”

“It is not my birthday.”

“It isn’t? Oh. I… I’m sorry.” She blinked, doe-eyed, startled. “But I looked up your…”

“I changed my birthday on all forms of social media.” He said, staring down into the bowl. “It was a test, to see how many people were my friends. How many people really knew me.”

“… I’m sorry, Genji. I didn’t know.” She curled her fingers around his hand, his left hand, her fingertips pressing into the palm that bore no scar.

He grunted, and stirred the spoon through the porridge with his other hand. He was tired of correcting her. At least she wasn’t petting him like a dog today.

Her smile hitched up, a little more determined. “Happy belated birthday, then, mm?” Her lips pressed gently against his cheek.

He gave a slight nod. Feeling tired, suddenly, as he realised how much time had passed, how much had changed, how much it hurt to remember that this was the first time someone had bothered to wish him an honest and genuine ‘happy birthday’ in at least five years.

The iris was so perfect. Such a memorable shade of blue.

Despite the colour and the crunch of the sugar, his birthday breakfast was as tasteless as every other meal he’d been given. He made a low noise of appreciation, but only because he had to, and not because he meant it.
He hadn’t felt like celebrating a month ago. It made no difference. It did not matter.

It had been long enough. There was no more delaying. He could walk, he could talk, and thus he was more than capable of holding up his end of the bargain. Overwatch had saved his life: it was time to give them what they wanted.

He was too well, too active, for scrubs. Besides, scrubs did not make a good first impression, nor were they suitable for such a formal, weighty meeting. The doctor found him a standard-issue jumpsuit in his size, a symmetrical design of orange, black, and grey, though she had to cut the sleeves so he could fit into it properly. The faux-flesh stood out starkly along his arms, textured musculature that hid the machinery within until the wrist, where the lie was revealed. Where the ugly truth was laid bare.

Despite the doctor’s objection, he wore the helm, the men-yoroi, the pieces of silvery metal that hid his face. Only his eyes were bare, savage and glaring out from behind the scars and shadows. It felt better this way. Safer. There was bound to be pity enough, he had no desire to earn more by leaving his face bare.

The doctor squeezed his arm, an odd half-hug that seemed odd and impulsive, a gesture that echoed the worry in her eyes. “You’ll be fine, Genji.”

He grunted, bowed a stiff farewell, then made his way down the hall.

At the room at the end, there was a round table, and most chairs were empty. Yet there was tension, and plenty of it, when he walked in, the weight of expectation. And more, too. There were three men in here. His entrance brought the number up to four. Unlucky.

Not that his luck could get any worse.

He recognised the American, and his cookie-cutter friend. The latter stood facing the window, looking out at the world with his hands clasped behind his back. The former rose, and came forward, hand extended.

“Welcome back to the world of the living. Have you picked a new name for yourself, yet?”

He shook the American’s hand, feeling the weight and strength of that simple hold, a quiet, tangible proof there was more about him that met the eye. Interesting: another chameleon. He was about to say ‘no’, taciturn, wanting to put an end to discussions before they began, to focus on the reason they were here, all of them. But here he was, in a room of strangers, about to speak more than he had in the past few months. He had to have a name. He had to have some kind of label, something to make himself seem more real.

These foreigners… He heard his father whisper, echoing around a meeting room that felt like it could have belonged to the family. Prove them wrong.

“Yes.” When the handshake ended, he lifted it, and stared at the pieces, the joints, the plates. Plastic, black and grey. If he let his eyes drift, the colours blurred, and the shine took on a new hue. He lowered his hand again, and met the American’s eyes. “Gin. Gin-Roh.”

“Silver Wolf?” The American looked mildly amused.

Gin said nothing. He didn’t feel like explaining, or reminiscing. Betrayal was already heavy on his shoulders.
“Right. Well, lemme introduce you.” He gestured first to the man on the opposite side of the table. “This is Gérard Lacroix, our counter-terrorism expert.”

The thin man nodded, politely, but offered no verbal greeting. He looked like a banker, a salary man, a clerk, with his hair slicked back and a pencil-thin moustache and a very neat suit. His eyes flicked over Gin’s barely-concealed reconstruction, nodded again, then stared at his notes, flicking through the digital pages restlessly.

The only reason Gin did not dismiss him right away in return was there was something naggingly familiar about the Frenchman. Gin just couldn’t place how or why. Had they met? Yet the more he tried to think of how or where, the less he seemed certain. Perhaps this was just his imagination. Such a bland, featureless man could fit in anywhere.

The American distracted Gin from his wonderings. “You’ve met me, already. Gabriel Reyes. Commander.” He gave a lazy salute as he slid into a vacant chair opposite Lacroix, adjusting his beanie and hooking one leg over the other. Casual, self-assured. “All that’s left is…” He gave a flourish of a gesture to the man at the other end of the room.

The man at the window turned to face Gin, his face grim. “Myself. I’m Strike-Commander Jack Morrison.” His voice sounded decades older, a tired soul in a young man’s body. He wore the same black turtleneck and combat pants that Reyes wore, but gave off the impression of being neater, more prepared, more in charge. Perhaps it was the long blue-and-white coat he wore, a gleaming medal prominent on the lapel, which stood in stark contrast to the comfort and casual vibe given off by Reyes’ well-worn hoodie. The Strike-Commander met Gin’s eyes squarely, did not look anywhere else. Steady, and respectful.

Gin immediately felt his hackles rise. He couldn’t explain how, or why, but he did not like this man. Maybe it was the Hollywood face, with those baby-blue eyes and striking chin. Maybe it was something else, something instinctive. Something he’d been taught, or something he’d learned. Maybe dislike didn’t have to have a reason.

Morrison extended his hand, the gesture serious and grave. “I understand this must be difficult for you. But please know that we appreciate everything that you can do for us. We’re here to make things right. For you, and for the world.”

With great reluctance Gin accepted the handshake. He didn’t need to be lectured. He didn’t need a ‘going to war’ speech. He knew what he was doing, and it was betrayal, pure and simple. Betrayal on the path to revenge. There was no need to dress it up. “My English, it is not very good. Please, speak slowly.”

Commander Reyes hid a smile behind his hand, clearing his throat.

“That’s fine.” Morrison squeezed Gin’s hand before stepping back, and taking a seat at the head of the table. “There’s a translator in the middle of the table.”

The thin businessman tapped the miniscule machine with a pencil. “J’espère que ca fonctionne.”

“I hope it works.” The machine echoed, first in English, then in Japanese.

Gin snorted behind his mask.

The Strike-Commander sighed and ran a gloved hand through his hair. “Ideally, we’d have more people in here. But Amari’s with her family, and Liao’s dealing with other issues right now. We’ll fill them both in later. So.” He folded his hands in front of him, leaning forward, his brow furrowed,
his eyes intent and piercing. “We need to know everything you can tell us about the Shimada clan, and their holdings. We need to know how they’re being financed. We need to know who buys from them and sells to them. We need to know who they count as allies, who they blackmail, who might be considered enemies. We need everything you can tell us, Gin, because they need to be stopped.”

As the machine translated, Gin scratched his fingertips over his jawline - an old habit, not necessary now most of his jaw was metal and bio-mesh - and took a moment to focus on simple things, little details in the room. The knife peeking out of Reyes’ boot. The sidearm under Morrison’s coat. The way that Lacroix was slowly turning his pen over and over. The gleam of the table, polished to a mirrorlike finish. The dim light peeking through the slatted blinds, through the tinted, bullet-proof glass of the windows. It didn’t feel like a business meeting in here anymore. With all three men staring expectantly at him, it almost felt like an interrogation. Black and white and blue, in contrast with the jumpsuit that left Gin feeling like he was a hazard sign.

God, it almost felt like a stage. Colour-coded characters in a well-set stage play. But for whom was the performance?

“I will do more than just tell you.”

He set the thumb drive on the table, the one he’d taken from his room the night he had been killed, the one that had never made it to its intended destination, the one that had sat at the bottom of his pack all this time, the twin of the dictionary hidden in a shrine on the other side of the world.

He flicked it up into the air like a coin, caught it, then slid it across the table. “I will show you.”

In his own tongue, a machine translating, he spoke. For the next four hours, he betrayed everything the Shimada name had held dear, and gave all of their secrets to a room full of foreigners.

He floated through blackness, through an inky sea. He held his breath, for a while, before exhaling a spiralling cascade of bubbles.

The sea washed away all the parts of him that caused it offence, piece by piece. His hands, his feet, his legs, his arms. He watched from where he stood, and from some point far away, as pieces of him vanished. Rusted and broken away in pieces, in dust, that the tide consumed. Everything that had been ruined was being eaten by the waves. His ribs, his bones, his sinew, his eyes, his tongue. None of them were his, anymore. His heart, his lungs, his spine, his brain. His blood drifted away, dissipating like wine into the wide, drowning ocean.

He drifted, onwards. All that was left of him was the front of his face, with a gaping hollow maw, and two holes where the eyes would have been.

That was all that was left of him.

He drifted. Until he found a place on the wall to hang.

A mask. That was all he was. That’s all that was left of him.

“Fika-paus.”

Gin lowered his hands, turning to face the engineer. “I do not understand.”

“Coffee break,” the shorter man held the door ajar. “Important. Come on.”
Gin hesitated, then gave the training dummy one last vicious punch, enough to lay it out on the ground. He was punching metal with a bare fist, and he felt nothing. It was exhilarating; it was frustrating in a way he didn’t have the words to express, let alone think. “Where is Doctor Ziegler?”

“Sleepin’.” The one-eyed engineer lead the way, to where a small table had been set up in the patient’s room, with two soft chairs facing each other. “God knows she needs it. Has barely let herself have a proper sleep since you got here.”

He fought the urge to bare his teeth. The woman’s wellbeing was none of his business. “My English is not good. Please, speak slower.”

Torbjörn grunted, sitting himself down. “Angela is sleeping. She needs the sleep.”

“Yes.” Gin sat down opposite the engineer. “She does.” He looked over the tray, seeing one sturdy mug of black coffee, one mug with a teabag soaking in it, and a plate of cookies.

“Help yourself.” The engineer hopped up into one of the seats.

Gin pointed to the cookies. “I cannot eat these. The doctor will not let me.” Besides, there was a plate of metal that covered his face, from the bridge of his nose to the curve of his jawline.

“The doctor is not here,” Torbjörn said. He took one of the cookies and popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly. Was that a smile?

Gin did not take a cookie. He stayed seated, still and silent.

The engineer ate another, watching Gin closely, then sighed. “So. Looks like you’ll be on field duty soon. You’ve given us plenty to act on. Hrm. Silver Wolf. Is that what we are to call you, now?” He grunted. “Good enough, I suppose. I have heard worse callsigns.” He muttered something to himself.

Gin stared down at the tea and the cookies. After months of tasteless but nutritional slop, he was craving something flavoursome. But he was in no mood to sit and have a ‘coffee break’. He did not want to sit still. Especially not with a stranger.

Even a stranger who had saved his life.

“Why’d you pick it?”

He looked up.

“Silver Wolf. There has got to be a story behind that.” The engineer took another cookie, deliberately making eye-contact as he ate it.

Gin hesitated. “My father would tell stories,” he said, as slowly and simply as he could manage.

“Sounds like you respected your father a great deal.”

Regret tasted like bile, and anger like blood. “He is dead.”

“… m’sorry to hear that.” Torbjörn was still for a moment, then reached for his coffee mug, cradling it in both hands. He sipped, watching Gin over the rim of the mug.

Gin looked away, gripping the edge of the chair and wishing he could go back to punching training dummies. Why was he here? Why was there such an interest in his personal life? That life was over. Done. As dead as Goro, as dead as Gin himself was. Why could he not simply get into field work now? Why were they keeping him here?
“I would like to hear the story. If that’s alright.”

Gin fought a bitter sigh. This was one story he could not tell a foreigner. So he shortened it. “Father told me to be strong and fierce as a wolf. The wolf is no more in Japan. Only in spirit, and in story. But it is still remembered.”

“The symbol of the Shimada was the dragon, wasn’t it?”

“… yes.”

“… interesting.” One hand moved away from the coffee mug. The engineer grabbed a pen from his coat pocket, clicked it, and hastily started to sketch something on a napkin.

Gin did not use the pause in the conversation to grab a cookie or to pick up his teacup. He sat still.

“Did your father ever tell anyone else that story?”

There was a looming shadow in his memory, a spectre, a smudge, a black flame that burned where someone else once stood. A void. Gin recoiled from the memory; he felt his heart clench inside him, the hate red-hot. “No.”

“Good.” The engineer grunted. “I’ll make some changes to your mask, so you look more wolfy. Add more silver…” A pause, and he sipped his coffee, gesturing with the pen. “It is good you’re not picking any dragon symbolism.”

Gin waited a few seconds, until it would seem a proper amount of time for an internal translation. “Why is this?”

Torbjörn gave him a flat look. Disappointed, almost? “You think we’d go to all the trouble of keeping you alive, and then just dangle you back in front of them, ‘yoo-hoo, here he is’?” He scoffed. “Give us a little credit.” He paused, and started speaking slower, reading Gin’s tense shoulders as a response to trying to keep up with a language Gin did not speak well. “The Shimada clan thinks you’re dead. If you show up alive, they’re going to know something is up. They may even know right away you are who you are.” A low growling sigh. “But with the right mask, and a believable lie about where you’d come from, and maybe that can stay quiet. At least you were smart enough to know to throw your name away,” he added, with a punctuating grunt and a sip of his coffee.

He felt suddenly defensive. “‘Genji’ is not a bad name,” he said, shoulders straightening. “It would be a good disguise. It is like calling an Englishman…” He pauses, has to think for a moment. Europeans recycled so much of their history. Charles. George. Henry. They used the same names over and over, normalising and claiming a link to their history through the names, the stories, the histories, the… No. Focus. “… it is hard to say. They use the same names as their kings. Arthur? Or, more like ‘Hamlet’.” He stared down at his knees. “Real, but also just a story. Real, but also not real.”

“Oh, yes, ‘Genji’ would be a good callsign… For anyone but you!” Torbjörn furrowed his brow, lips pursing disapprovingly. He set his mug down to gesture with both hands. “Genji Shimada disappears, and suddenly there’s a Genji running with Overwatch. Right! Of course! No-one would ever suspect the two were related! Not at all!”

Gin flushed behind the mask, mostly with fury. Rage was an easier emotion to parse. It was simpler. Cleaner. Quicker. It did not require introspection, or remembrance. He sealed his lips tight. The rest of this conversation, he told himself, he would not waste so much of his breath, if he was just going
to be mocked and belittled.

“Silver Wolf is better.” Torbjörn continued to sketch, humming as he chewed on another cookie. “Hrm. This will be tough. Jag kommer inte bygga dig en mask som får dig ser ut som en pälsälskare. I’ll keep working on it.” He wrapped the napkin around the pen, and put both into his coat pocket. And then he took another cookie, dusting crumbs from his beard, glancing over to the corner of the room, one hand swinging over in the direction of his eyes. “We’ll also need to do something about - -”

Gin almost lunged forward and caught the man by his shoulder, one hand clawed threatening at the open air, the other drawn back in preparation to strike. “Don’t touch those!”


Gin bared his teeth behind the mask. His gaze didn’t leave the engineer, but in his periphery he saw the three swords where they rested against the wall.

“I don’t speak Japanese,” Torbjörn said, levelly. “But I know those are special to you.” His hand flicked, pointing upwards. “The big one. I know the man who made it.”

Gin lowered his arms, keeping them tucked close to his side. Just in case. “Horseshit.”

“… again, I don’t speak Japanese. But I do know the man. He’s a friend of mine. A colleague from the old days. Not surprised he went back to the traditional craft, when it was all over.” Slowly, Torbjörn lowered his hands as well. “There’s something downright comforting with having things exactly the way they were before. Right?”

Gin grunted.

“You know, now I think about it, I think he might have made all your swords. Smithing techniques are a near-lost art.” He hummed thoughtfully, then focused again. “As I was going to say, we need to do something about your weapons.” A careful gesture, this time, making sure that it was just a general sweep towards the sword, not the reach-and-grab motion that had triggered Gin’s explosive reaction. “I know these are yours. I know that they matter to you. But we need to find something else for you to use.”

His decision made earlier in the month was suddenly less easy to affirm. Eta or no, Gin missed those blades. He missed how right they felt at his side, or in his hands. Yet, he remembered throwing his katana aside, discarding his honour in order to die; his soul had never even been picked up, never even left the stand. Would the blades even want him? To take up the daishō again would not be right. Not for the horrific ruinous mess that had become of him. And not after he had left his name to burn.

But… Ryū-Ichimonji had barely left its stand, over the course of his life. He had used it for training, but the ōdachi had never been used, never been carried, never been awoken.

Gin’s left hand clenched. He knew exactly on whom it would be whetted, whose blood would be used to baptise the blade.

Fury was easier to parse. But much, much harder to let go. He could feel its talons digging into him, keeping his skin heated under the faux-flesh. “No.” “No?”

Gin folded his arms. “It is the sword, or it is nothing.”
Torbjörn grunted and folded his arms in return. “Did you not understand what I said before? If you use these swords, you will be recognised. And I didn’t put in all this work to just--”

Gin rose to his feet, and crossed to the corner in a couple of strides. Standing in front of Ryū-Ichimonji, staring intently at it. “This is all I have left.” A vague gesture with his hand, to where katana and wakizashi were bound together and tucked in the shadows. “These are nothing to me now. But this blade,” his hand hovered over the ōdachi, drawing slowly downwards as though caressing the sheath, “Is mine. It must be my weapon. I must have it with me.”

The one-eyed engineer heaved an exasperated sigh, muttering something that was no doubt an insult, or something an old man would mutter about the young. “… fine. You want to take that sword with you into battle? So be it. I’ll get the smith himself to make the necessary modifications. Tell him to try and hide how distinctive it is.” Torbjörn shook a meaty finger at Gin. “But I’m telling you now - and I will tell you again, once it comes to pass! - that you are just setting yourself up to get called out by the Shimada family. And that’ll be its own brand of heartache, mark my words.”

Gin nodded, only out of politeness, lost in thought as he stared at the ōdachi. Wondering if it would look as ugly as he was, when the ‘modifications’ were done. It would be fitting. A broken blade for a broken man.

The pen clicked, and Torbjörn reached over to grab Gin’s napkin. Jotting down a few notes. “Maybe make a matching blade for it, too. Those things are supposed to be in pairs anyway, right?”

An ōdachi was nothing like a katana; there didn’t need to be a companion blade. The traditions were all different. But if it meant he could carry it, he would do anything. He was living proof: a liar, a traitor, not even human anymore… so, of course. Anything. Whatever it took. Gin clenched both hands into fists. Whatever it took.

Gin returned to his seat, and put his hands precisely on his knees. There were three cookies left and steam was barely rising from his cup anymore. He remained still. Waiting to be dismissed. He could feel the restless energy building in him, could feel himself becoming as tense as a coiled spring.

Torbjörn put napkin and pen away, and focused intently on Gin’s face. A thoughtful silence passed, and he stroked his beard, first one braid and then the other. “Do you know why I asked you to have fika-paus with me?” When Gin gave a perfunctory shake of the head, the engineer sighed. “I wanted to see how you were. Angela can give me all the reports she likes, but you and I? We needed to talk things over.”

Gin frowned, thinking back through the thread of conversation. Trying to figure out what was so urgent.

“You’re a long way from home,” Torbjörn said, his voice softening. “You might feel you have no-one you can relate to. No-one you can trust. But you have Angela. And you have me.” He shrugged off his coat, tugging down the sleeve on his left side. His arm was plastic, and metal, from fingertip to shoulder.

Gin sat up a little straighter. He hadn’t even noticed, hadn’t even realised. The man always wore thick gloves. But his entire arm was gone…? He lifted his own left arm, and examined it, before looking back to the engineer.

“I know what you’re going through, how tough it is. How much you miss it. How wrong it feels. Those little aches and itches.” He grunted, and pulled his jacket back on. Reaching up to touch his eyepatch, expression drifting for a moment. “Pain can be very isolating. But you are not alone.” His gaze flicked up. “Do you understand?”
Gin looked down into his palm, to the scar he no longer had. His closed his fist around it, and nodded.

“There was grief, that’s normal. But I didn’t waste time. I understand that what happened to me, happened.” He sobered a little, lifting his hand and staring at it, into the gloved palm. But there was no wistfulness there. He was stoic. “I had an arm. I lost an arm. I built an arm. It is important to be practical, to know when and how to move on.”

Gin said nothing. One arm, old man. You lost one arm. I lost both of mine, and my legs, and then even more than that. But on the heels of that dark thought, there was the stirring of something. Relief? He didn’t feel so isolated. He tried to tamp it down.

Torbjörn grunted, lips pursing into a wry smile. “It took me a few tries to get a prosthesis that actually worked. But all that hard work paid off for me. And for you, as well. I knew how to help you.” He sat forward again. “And I can still help you, if you need it. Angela wants you to take things slow, see a therapist, make some friends. But you and I both know that sitting around moping won’t do anything.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “We’re men, men of action. We’re better off doing rather than thinking.”

Gin almost smiled. He had to fight it back.

“Personally, I can’t wait to get back into the field. Won’t be long now, for either of us.” He gestured to Gin. “Are you ready to keep moving, Silver Wolf?”

He nodded, slowly. “Yes. I am ready.”

“Good.” He folded his arms. “Now, eat a cookie. My wife sent them,” he added, and it almost sounded like an accusation.

Gin stared blankly back. “You are married?”

“Eat a cookie. I’ll show you photographs of my children.” He narrowed his eye. “But not photographs of my wife. I’ve heard stories about you.”

Gin actually managed a ragged, choked noise. It might have been a laugh. And it might have been just what the engineer had hoped for.

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**Chapter Notes:**

- Developments of BCI, ‘brain-computer interfaces’ have been used already in medical fields, practically for those missing limbs or suffering from Locked-In Syndrome. Invasive BCIs, such as electrodes implanted directly into the brain matter, have been used to help people recover lost sight or regain mobility. Sherry Baker’s ‘Rise of the Cyborgs’ discusses this in greater detail, and has provided a lot of the realistic background for my decision regarding the removal and replacement of Genji’s spine.
- **Men-yoroi** is a form of Japanese armour, used to protect the face. Each kind of men-yoroi had a different term, depending on how much of the face and which part it covered. Genji’s Blackwatch skin would count as a **menpō**, while his standard skin would have a **somen**.
- The iris, as a symbol of in the language of flowers, stands for loyalty. There is one breed of the flower that shares its particular shade of blue with the tattoo on Hanzo’s arm. I realised, only while proofing, that the flower could also stand in as a foreshadowing homonym.
- The name Gin-Roh was used in light of the symbols written on Genji’s Chrome skin. The symbol ‘狼’, for wolf, can be pronounced as either ‘ōkami’, or ‘roh’ if used together with
another symbol. The name might have been chosen by the developers as a link to Hanzo's Ōkami skin, as a reference to 'Jin-Roh', a Japanese animated thriller, or both. The link between the 'last wolves of Japan' was too great a temptation to miss.

- Thanks to TurretMaker/TrickyMagician for providing the Swedish translations for Torbjörn in this chapter and the chapters ahead, as well as for the deeper characterisation and expansion on the motivations of the engineer and his interactions with others.

- I was halfway through detailing the scenes with Torbjörn and consistently encountered narrative roadblocks. Most of the scenes had been written when, in February ‘18, thelore team released Torbjörn’s letter to his wife. Suddenly, the knowledge that Torbjörn had made a prosthetic before made certain elements of the story flow better, as well as explain why Genji’s body was not simply regrown. Usually, fanfiction is used to fill in the holes left by lore, but this time I was very appreciative of the seeming reciprocation. The previous chapter has received some minor edits based on a reconsideration of events.

- In light of the recent lore retcons, I feel it necessary to mention that I have written segments of future chapters, including devising a good deal of lore and backstory for Zenyatta, and the omnics of Nepal. At this point, I feel confident enough in what I have devised that I do not think I will need to change it, but I will have to wait and see what transpires, and what - if anything - is released for Zenyatta and the omnic population at large.

- This chapter was intended to be longer, with more interactions within Overwatch. However, it was difficult to maintain thematic coherence, so this chapter has been cut in half. Hopefully, the next chapter will be up by the end of the month. Thank you for all your kind words and suggestions thus far!
“So the story we have so far is, you were a stuntman.” The Commander was leading him through the halls, tapping on a tablet and angling it so Gin could read along with him. “Japan has a pretty big entertainment industry, there are plenty of overseas film crews at the moment. Stuntmen get the short end of the stick: plenty of them get hurt doing what they do.” He scrolled through fields of statistics, some company logos, a headshot or two.

Gin didn’t recognise the photographs of ‘himself’. It was a stranger’s face. Was that better, or worse, than editing one of the thousands of photographs that existed online of his face? Of his real face? Was it better to be a stranger? He certainly wouldn’t recognise himself now, not like this.

Reyes continued, “We’ve been able to create a believable scenario referencing an incident with a film crew in Myanmar. You know, something bad happened, we happened to be in the area, right time, right place, yada yada. Basically exactly what happened to you, only in a slightly different context. It’ll be just enough mention in the foreign press to give credence to the whole ‘we found this guy and helped him get back on his feet’ thing, in case anyone goes looking for ‘proof’.” He scrolled again. “We’ve also invented a whole backstory for you. You can read it on your personnel file, when you get the chance. You’re apparently allergic to shellfish, so don’t go trying to eat shrimp or anything while anyone’s around. I mean, I know the doc has you on a pretty strict diet, but…”

“This is the information age,” Gin said, slowly and carefully, still maintaining the illusion that English was not his strong suit, determined to maintain that illusion no matter how much the Commander found it amusing. “People will find the holes in your story.”

“Naw, we’re far too good at that.” Reyes continued scrolling. “We’ve fabricated everything from employment records, school transcripts… even a birth certificate.” He enlarged the image. “See? You’re all set.”

The birth year was his own. Too much of a coincidence? Who knew. But he shook his head. “Someone will figure it out. Someone will realise everything about me is a lie.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion,” Reyes shrugged. “But we’ve made a lot of new identities for people here, particularly for the people under my command. So far, it’s been foolproof.” He swiped the display back to the main page, where the title of ‘Agent Gin-Roh’ hovered over the image of a stranger’s face and a military-style headshot of Gin’s current semi-rebuilt state. A before-and-after.

“It would have to do, for now. Until the right kind of fool came along. “A stuntman,” Gin sighed, wearily.

“Well, yeah.” Reyes’ lips curved. It seemed to be a constant that he was either smirking or fighting to hide it. “You drove a Lamborghini, and racked up plenty of attention doing so. Never really getting arrested, never really getting in trouble, but you know. Real Fast and Furious shit. You know how to ride a motorbike, right?”

“Yes.” Every Shimada did. And to ride horses, too, even in this day and age. Horses were reserved solely for the lords of the castle, and their children. He missed Haru, suddenly. But the horse was long gone. Everything else was, too, god, not gone but lost. Lost to him.

“Yup. And you punch, kick, climb walls, jump, use swords… What kind of career is there these days requires that kind of skillset? I mean, aside from crime-lord’s son?” The smirk widened. “It
makes more sense than pastry chef, don’t you think?"

Gin stared ahead at nothing, his mouth a grim line behind the mask. There was something on the tip of his tongue, but ‘I wasn’t just a pastry chef’ didn’t seem like the sharpest of retorts. So he just walked in grim, insulted silence.

Reyes just chuckled, then tapped a code into a door panel. “Come on, Wolf. You have to meet the rest of the team. You’ve been making a couple of my guys anxious.”

“… is that so?”

“Well, yeah.” Reyes stepped aside to let Gin enter the room first. “I mean, the last they saw you, you were bleeding out on the floor of the Orca. The only news I’ve been able to give them over the last few months has been ‘he’s getting better’. So to actually see you up and about will be a huge relief.”

“I don’t…”

“IS THIS THE GUY??”

Gin staggered back, his hands clawing helplessly at the air as something - someone - barrelled into him, picked him off the floor and spun him around. He yelled in surprise and outrage, an ache through his limbs and spine as he felt everything suddenly leave his control.

“Yup,” Reyes said, calmly watching the spectacle, hand still on the door panel. “That’s the guy.”

Every reflex to strike and fight was out of order, out of place. This wasn’t his body, he wasn’t ready, and he felt ashamed from being caught so off-guard, so unready, so unprepared. Gin wriggled, but he was very firmly held. It was, he realised with immense discomfort, a very tight hug that he was in.

“Hanase yo!”

“You’re alive! You’re alive, that’s amazin’, hoo, you’re here, you’re okay! You’re alive!” Another tight squeeze, and a lift. “Had me worried there, partner!”

“Hanase!” Gin barely stopped short of kicking the other man as his feet left the ground, toes barely able to make purchase on the floor as his legs swung and kicked. Finally, the embrace loosened, just enough for Gin push himself back, to stand on his own two feet, to get a look of just who had been so excited to see him. And he blinked, not entirely certain what he was looking at. It was such a jarring experience.


‘Partner’…?

Oh my god.

Gin squinted in disbelief.

A cowboy. That’s a cowboy.

The man hadn’t stopped grinning from the second he had tackled Gin in the doorway, but the grin seemed to widen now. He reached up to tip his hat - what the fuck, he was actually doing it just like they did in the movies - and he said, he actually said the word ‘howdy’. Howdy.

The fuck.
Gin blinked slowly, then looked at Reyes in accusation. This had to be a prank. This had to be some kind of hazing. This couldn’t possibly be a real person in front of him, right now, dressed like this and talking like that.

Reyes had one hand over his mouth, but he cleared his throat and straightened up, gesturing with the tablet. “Gin-Roh, meet Jesse McCree. Jesse, this is Gin-Roh, Silver Wolf. As you can see, he made it.”

“Pleased t’meetcha.” The man called McCree beamed, clearly itching to lunge forward and hug Gin again. He rocked back and forth, heel to toe, unable to keep himself still. He offered his hand, grinned, sheepishly took it back to rub the back of his neck, then beamed just as wide as he continued to almost bounce in place.

Gin kept his shoulders hunched and his arms half-raised to ward the stranger off, rigid and unmoving. “Mm.”

“I was on th’ task force,” Jesse continued, proudly. His chest puffed out as he put his gloved hands on his hips. “Front ‘n’ centre! No need to thank me, jus’ glad I could help!”

“If he could,” Reyes said dryly, “He’d take full credit for your rescue.”

“Well, I did do most of the work, y’know.”

“Mm-hmm.” Reyes smirked. “Course you did.”

Gin wondered when he was supposed to speak. It was convenient that he didn’t feel like it.

The cowboy rocked heel to toe again, back to grinning once more. “So, you’re with us, then? You gonna join us for all our adventures, shenanigans, and all the rest?”

“I am not cleared for active duty,” Gin said, stiffly.

“But when y’are? You’ll be our team, right?”

Reyes made a low, disapproving sound in his throat.

Gin looked at the commander. Curious, that there should be an ‘us’ and ‘them’ within Overwatch.

Reyes shrugged. “It all depends on what the Strike Commander thinks is best.”

“Boss, c’mon.” The cowboy gestured at Gin. “He’s a ninja! He belongs with us!”

‘Ninja’. The thought of smacking the man across his big, stupid face was so, so tempting.

“I shouldn’t be saying this,” Reyes finally turned to address Gin’s question, “Not until you’re cleared for active duty. But you remember Lacroix? Counter-terrorism unit?” When Gin nodded, Reyes gave a thin smile. “That’s kind of what we do.”

Jesse hooked his thumbs into his belt and nodded. Winking.

Gin ignored the man in ridiculous clothing. “Kind of?” He hummed. “I see.”

“Gérard’s kind of taken a step back, rejoined the ranks of Overwatch’s peacekeepers and soldiers, doing his work there. He used to be front line.”

“Fella’s whipped now,” Jesse offered, with a shrug. “It happens t’ th’ best of ‘em.”
Reyes didn’t even look sideways, just brought up a hand to clip Jesse over the head, sending the hat flying to the ground, and kept talking like nothing happened. “He used to be front line. Used to be, while I’m still doing my thing. You might fit in well with us, Gin, but, again, Morrison will have the last say.” A shrug, a grin. “I still think you should come and meet the rest of the team, though. I got a feeling you’ll be working with us.”

“You’ll be the new guy.” The cowboy pumped a fist in excitement, a motion continued from his bending to sweep his hat up off the floor. “I won’t be the new guy anymore.”

“Jesse,” Reyes sounded a curious mix of world-weary and amused, “You’re not the new guy. It’s been years. We have had over twenty new agents join the roster since you signed on. Marcus, Seine, Mosswood, Chevy…”

“Parabola, an’ she’s tiny,” he added, pouting. “But they all still call me ‘new guy’. But now we have an actual new guy! I won’t be the new guy!”

“It’ll be another few months before --”

McCree appeared not to hear him. “I’m not! The new guy! Anymore!” He cheered and pumped both fists into the air, punctuating each joyous whoop. His spurs clicked and chimed.

Gin sighed. His head was aching, and this loud, excitable person was not helping. “Hey. You.”

“Yeah?” The cowboy paused mid-dance to focus. “What’s up?”

“You are the most American man I have ever met.”

And, of course, Jesse McCree beamed. Because only an American would take that as a compliment.

The segments of his forearm rolled and shifted between themselves, swallowing down the blades within them, out of sight. Where veins and tendons might have been, now there was only metal and wires. A mere thought and gesture, and he could watch a trio of blades emerge from within, disgorged from his wrist and through the back of his hand to nestle between his fingers, sharp and perfectly weighted. Ready and waiting.

He flicked his wrist, listening to the satisfying ton ton ton as the blades struck their targets. He felt the burning, crawling sensation of his arm as three more blades were disgorged and readied for him to throw. And he did. Ton ton ton. Again he threw, and again his arm buzzed as the parts scraped to bring forth more, and more, until he felt a hollow sensation along where his ulna would have been, a blip, a thrum, and then fresh blades were shunted from the ‘ammunition storage’ in his right bicep, scraping him from the inside as they unfolded, metal sliding on metal.

He was full of weapons. He was made of weapons. He was a weapon.

Torbjörn had been true to his word: the daishō had been left untouched, while the ōdachi had been returned: disguised, weighted, changed enough to look a different weapon. There was also a small blade, not quite a tanto but not quite a wakizashi, designed to be the ōdachi’s companion, and two others tucked alongside his leg as backup. There were also these blades, these three-sided throwing knives that were stored and dispensed within his right arm. Stars, really. ‘Ninja stars’.

He preferred kunai. But after all that had been done to keep him from bleeding out on the floor of his far-distant home, he did not feel it was his place to complain. He had a purpose. This body - this weapon - would suffice.
All of this made him feel coolly, bitterly confident his purpose would be achieved in not too long.

His hand flicked again, again, again, cutting down the targets at the far end of the room almost as fast as they appeared. In the reflection of glass and the moving platforms he was forced to run, vault, slide under, he could see a scoreboard with a climbing number, rising faster than the timer could count down. He wasted no time with theatrics, picking off the distant foes as he hurried closer to his goal.

And now the close combat began. Hand-to-hand, at first, crippling, tripping, crushing, clearing some space for him to draw the massive blade, to swing it in a wide and vicious arc, then left-right-left, slashes to carve a new path. He jumped, rolled, rose from a crouch to cut a target in half from crotch to shoulder, to kick the pieces into one target to slow it while he leapt to cut down a second, then pivoted back and cut down the first for good before he had even landed.

Shimada training was more than instinctive. Right now, it was all he had. There was no conscience to slow him down, not anymore. The number on the scoreboard rose higher.

His ghost moved, and the metal body followed like an obedient shadow. His arms and legs buzzed, thrummed, burned. Everything did.

His path narrowed, a corridor, and as he hurtled down it the doors opened late, far too late to engage properly with him, and whatever targets leaned out to attack him fell swiftly as he threw razor-sharp stars over his shoulder with one hand. The blade carved through the door on the other side before him, and he set upon the room with ferocious slices of Dragon’s Straight-Edge.

Then the lights flicked on, and the walls started rising away, leaving Gin poised and furious in the middle of the training hall. He turned, looking up at the observation window, where the woman in white and the man in blue looked down at his progress.

“I am not finished!” He shouted up at them.

The Strike Commander waved a hand in the negative. When he spoke, his voice carried and echoed through the whole chamber. “You killed three of the hostages. You failed the mission, Genji.”

Some of the pieces of the machines on the ground were blue, in contrast to the red. He hadn’t noticed. But he barely noticed them now, as he barked upwards at the man watching from the window. “Gin! I am Gin!”

“Commander,” Angela's murmur was softer, but her voice still filled the room Gin was in. “Perhaps we could reset the chamber and try a different scenario…”

“Again!” Gin shouted, swinging the ōdachi in a wide arc. Trying to beckon the walls to descend.

Jack Morrison shook his head. “You were given clear instructions about how to proceed with the mission, Genj--” And he and Angela both recoiled as stars ricocheted off the glass window. They were in no danger, but the stars were deadly weapons regardless, which struck hard, and loud, and sudden.

The cyborg glared upwards, sword held ready, new stars clicking into place between his fingers. “My name is Gin!”

The comms clicked off, allowing doctor and Strike Commander to have a private conversation, leaving him in silence, leaving him with nothing but the sound of the dummies and the room recalibrating. Gin fumed, silent, his head ablaze with curses and fury that he crushed, swallowed, internalised. He kept his rage to himself, sheathing the sword and stars, and turning to stalk out of the
training room.

The scoreboard was blank. It had been wiped clean. He wasn’t allowed to see the final result.

He was as ready as he could be. People didn’t act like training dummies: if this was a real hostage situation, he would have things under control. The hostages would have had a different posture, a different energy, he’d be able to react differently. These were inert, lifeless machines, how was he supposed to get a good read on those? Everything would be different with people, real people. He just needed to get into the field. He just needed to do what he was born - and remade - to do. Why couldn’t they see that? How was he supposed to give them the perfect score they wanted when he was so broken? So flawed?

And what were they planning on doing with him, if he didn’t meet their expectations?

He was calmer when the Strike Commander called Gin to his office, later in the afternoon. Calmer, if only because the rage Gin had swallowed had joined the rest, compressed, saved for later, diffused through what was left of his veins. He stood listlessly as he was told, again, that he would not be cleared for active duty. The rest of it passed in something of a blur, as Gin tuned out the lecture from the foreigner, the American, who wanted a perfect crew-cut legion of soldiers who marched in a straight line and fought good and fair.

There was no such thing as ‘good’ or ‘fair’ in a fight. That was for children to believe.

“Agent Gin-Roh.”

Gin refocused. “Hai.”

The man sounded tense, terse. “I understand that what you’re going through is difficult. But we had an agreement.”

“And I have honoured my part of the agreement,” Gin folded his arms. “You have not honoured yours.”

Morrison opened his mouth, shut it again, frowning in frustration as he reconsidered his words. It was with great effort that he spoke, both hands pressed against the desk in front of him. “I know this is personal for you. I know you are eager to deal with the Shimada Clan. But we are not giving you preferential treatment. You have to go through the same processes as anyone else. If you want to be cleared for active duty, you follow protocol. You go through the same training, the same testing, the same simulations as all of our soldiers.”

“That is your mistake, then,” Gin said, snorting. “I am not a soldier.”

Again, Morrison paused, taking time to centre himself.

Gin maintained a steady, unblinking stare.

“Doctor Ziegler tells me you’ve been avoiding therapy sessions.” The man sat down, slowly, calm and controlled. “Those are, as of this moment, mandatory. You will not be cleared for active duty until you have fulfilled a set requirement of hours and assessment.”

Gin bared his teeth behind his mask, his hands both tensing. He could feel cracks forming, running up his fingertips, wrists, elbows, shoulders, hard enough that pieces of him were breaking off and falling, dispersing into the air around him. But he was undamaged. It was just a feeling. A feeling without form.
“You killed three hostages in the simulation today.” The white man’s eyes flicked up to his. “You’re careless, and thoughtless, letting speed and violence rule you. That’s not the kind of person I want representing Overwatch. You straighten yourself out. Then we’ll reassess you, and see if you’re ready for the field. Dismissed.”

Gin held the gaze a moment longer, before snorting and unfolding his arms, rolling his shoulders as he turned away.

Revenge seemed further and further away with every passing moment he was here. This was a waste of time.

The therapist was quiet, professional, and patient. Gin endured session after session, answering the questions in shortness and terseness, or sitting in stoic silence. He hated sitting still. But every motion he could not or did not make, he focused inwards. On the blades hidden beneath his skin. On the cores in his arms, chest, legs, hip joints, pulsing with power and heat that vented through his false skin. Winding himself tighter and tighter.

No, he didn’t want to talk about his father. No, he didn’t want to talk about his mother. No, he didn’t want to discuss his family, or how he felt to be apart from them, on the other side of the world surrounded by strangers who looked different and spoke different. No, he didn’t want to talk about how hard it was to piss, how difficult it was to lie on his back, how painful it was to stand upright, how it took hours to fall asleep and how he always woke with a start and the disassociation of his sense of self. He was fine. Put him in the field. He was ready. Put him in the field.

The sessions always took part at the same time every day. The therapist always took the same amount of time for a coffee break. The cameras never turned, never scanned, sitting on the same corners. Gin never moved until the sessions were over.

Everything was so predictable.

If he was being forced to bide his time, he did his best to make it productive. He watched very closely, and he memorised every second of the routine.

Gin soon discovered had a problem: the cowboy seemed to be everywhere he went. The clinking of spurs and the rough drawled call of his name with a ‘howdy’ or ‘hold up’ followed him like a curse. No matter where he went, no matter how he varied his routine, no matter what he did to hide himself, McCree was there.

Hey there, any word if you’re in the field, yet?

Wanna coffee or somethin’? There’s a new pot just filled in the mess hall.

It’s snowin’ outside, come an’ see!

Look, I gotta ask, are you an’ the doc…? You know…?

Koh nee chee wah, Gin-san! How y’all doin’?

Annoying. Irritating. Loud and constant.

And there was that time when Gin thought he’d avoided him entirely, a whole day free of childishness, only to come across the cowboy in the training room. A row of targets had been set up, and there was music blasting over the speakers. A song Gin didn’t recognise, but one with a good

The cowboy was *dancing*, moving to the beat of the music. The smell of gunsmoke was dense in the air. His voice was rough and smooth all at once, like a good whiskey. He flicked the gun open in his hand, palming more bullets into the open chambers, snapped the pieces back into place, taking aim and firing, all following the same rhythm. Movement smooth and unbroken, the proof of years of practice. He clipped one heel against the other, spurs ringing *ting ting*, before pulling the trigger, making targets shatter at the other side of the room, explosions ringing in time with the song. Head back, eyelids low, moving so casually. *Ting ting*, his spurs rang, his head bobbed, a rough humming coo rising from his throat between verses, the scoreboard on the side wall growing higher and higher with every shot.

Gin watched, dumbfounded. Frozen in place long enough, foolishly, for the song to end, for Jesse to holster his weapon, hitch his thumbs in his belt, and turn around. He smirked at the scoreboard, then his expression shifted. Surprise… and then delight.

“Oh! Howdy, Gin! Didn’t see you there.” His smile was wide, his skin flushed from excitement and exercise. He hitched a thumb towards the scoreboard. “One’ve the highest in the team, y’know. Don’t mean to brag, but I’m probably the best there is.”

Gin scoffed, unable to stop himself in time. He hadn’t meant to voice his derision out loud. Hadn’t meant to engage with the irritating man.

The cowboy took it as a challenge. “Oh yeah?” He thumbed his head back from his forehead, letting Gin see the raised eyebrow, his grin growing wider. “Beat it, then. I’d like t’ see you try.”

“I have nothing to prove to you.” Gin started to turn away. His whole body already itching and aching from the fact he will have done nothing at all today. Nothing but run and sit and pace the same rooms and halls.

McCree clucked like a chicken. “Brawk brawk braaaaawk.”


… Gin stopped walking.

“S’okay, new guy. I get it. You’re still findin’ your feet here, don’t wanna make yourself look like a fool in front of…”

The blades flew from between his fingers. Gin stood with arm outstretched, fingers aimed towards the cowboy, as the three stars streaked past - barely missing the man, a few strands of hair severed to float downwards - to thud heavily into three of the targets directly behind the cowboy. *Ton ton ton.*

No-one called him a coward. No-one called him a fool.

McCree’s grin didn’t falter. Staring down at the blazing fury in Gin’s eyes with something like playfulness. “Make it a race, then? First to five hundred?”

“… *bakaero,*” Gin snarled, softly. Turning and leaving, flushed behind his mask.

“I prefer ‘vaquero’ to ‘buckeroo’,” McCree called after him. Laughing.

The cowboy’s attempts to socialise doubled after that. It was easier to just play along than to wear himself to exhaustion trying to avoid the irritating, loud, obnoxiously-cheerful cowboy. So Gin played along.
But it was only because he didn’t have a choice. Like anything else out here, in this season, Gin had no choice.

The therapist had noted Gin was spending more time with the cowboy. There was glowing praise, murmurs about improvement and inter-personal connections and so on. Gin still couldn’t remember the therapist’s name. It was still unimportant. He just watched the motions of the therapist’s fingers over the keyboard, and worked out exactly how much of the room was covered by the security cameras.

It was three more sessions before Gin returned to the room. Alone, and in the dead of night, just around the time the security guards changed shifts - facts he’d learned as McCree had taken him on a tour of the base and introduced him to almost absolutely everyone. He left the lights off, making a calculated leap from couch to corner, and clambering along the back left wall to slide himself behind the therapist’s computer. He tapped quickly over the keys with the memorised password, logging himself in to look over the notes, the files, everything that had been written about him.

He had only intended to make a few modifications. Time was short.

But his personnel file was right there. Right there, in the Overwatch database, the complete one, not the one available for all to see. Lies had been crafted to hide his identity. But there was a story here, information that anyone with the right clearance could delve into.

It was his life. He had clearance.

Most of it was about what was expected. Reports from the sessions. His contributions to the dirt-digging on the Shimadas. Careful records of his social media presence, back when he still had a life, complete with annotations about what was real and what had been staged. Combat reports, from the training rooms. Medical history, the largest folder.

His gut clenched, as he felt an odd, discordant echo with something long in the past. It jarred now, just as it did then. People had access to his medical history? How much of it? To his childhood, his illness and recovery? Or was it merely the most recent, to all that had been done to him here in the recent months?

He clicked into a folder, and found video files. Dozens of them. Now, as it had been back then. But the dates were more recent. This was not years ago. This was months ago.

Don’t, his gut told him, clenched tight and cold. Don’t.

He clicked into one.

Doctor Ziegler’s voice filled the room, soft and lilting, over the sound of grunts and metal slicing flesh. It was all so clinical, and yet so terrifyingly personal. He recoiled, but was unable to tear his eyes away. His body lay on the table, his face reddened with burns and open wounds, his eyes rolled back until only the whites showed. She was bloody up to her elbows, talking through a face mask as she dissected him. Machines wheezed. Sparks like motes of gold hovered over his body, illuminating the mess. He was breathing. Wetly. Gurgling. There was so much blood.

How could a dead man have so much blood?

The doctor lifted her hands out of his chest cavity, holding something dark, something heavy and dripping with red, and she set it into a silver tray beside the operating table. There were several of those trays. They were all full.
Full of pieces of him.

She kept talking, talking about the subject’s physiology, his physical fitness, the extent of his injuries, how he was moments away from brain death and she needed to hurry. A syringe of adrenaline, hastily plunged into his open chest, triggered the horrific gargling scream he made - as he lay there, neither living nor dead - and the spray of blood that spattered her coat.

Gin almost forgot himself.

Gin almost screamed.

Gin almost lost his temper.

He breathed hard behind the mask, losing track of where he was, who he was. Almost. So close. The rage was cold and crushing and smothering but he breathed. He breathed. He breathed. He breathed the rage inside of him, where it could be kept, safe, for later. But he was still angry. Still teetering on the verge of losing himself.

Angela Ziegler.

He remembered erasing the time stamps of his passage and logging out. He remembered sneaking out, avoiding the cameras and the guards. He remembered leaving. But it felt different than his arrival. Surreal. Smoky. The world had stopped and he was a blur. He listened to the beating of his heart in his ears, and the soft clicks of his joints as his new body - and all the pieces of it - carried him like the wind.

It was late. The medical bay was empty. She should be asleep.

The blade was in his hand, though he didn’t remember drawing it. The doors opened before him, though he didn’t recall how. He didn’t know how he’d crossed so many rooms, to bring him here, but the walls gleamed red from the glow of his eyes and the core set off-centre in his chest. His hand creaked, and he felt it shatter, though a glance briefly downwards assured him that the pieces that now made him up were unbroken. Would maybe never break, no matter how his ghost felt inside the shell of them.

His hand had not broken: it still held a sword.

Overwatch had a huge information network. Every department independent but linked like a daisy in a chain. It wouldn’t take much, to take one of the servers out, to destroy the information within, for good and for all. It would break easier than the training dummies did. Red or blue, they all broke. Just machines. Just machines. Just machines.

“Gin…?”

He pivoted, bringing the blade up in both hands, defensive.

“Gin, what are you doing?”

He recoiled. He didn’t want to hear his language from her mouth. He didn’t want to know this. So he shouted at her in English, broken and stuttering and stumbling over the words not from a deliberate attempt to look incompetent, but from the rage that flooded his veins and made it hard to think.

He saw her eyes. Disbelief. Fear. Steely determination.

He didn’t know how she had known to be awake. She was still speaking, but he could barely hear
her over the roar in his ears. He felt the demands leave him, the orders, the threats. A hissing snarl warped, flanged through the changes in his throat, through the distortion of his mask. He sounded like a beast. Certainly not a man. God, no, certainly not a man anymore. He hadn’t been a man in months.

And she didn’t look at him like he was a man. She looked at him like she saw a monster.

Just that look from her, it hurt. It made everything in him spasm and clench, made flesh and wiring pull apart in opposite directions.

He screamed - he roared. *Erase it. No-one needs to see that.*

In his hesitation, she outstretched a hand to him. Trying to reach him. Risking her hand; god, how easy would it be to just lunge forward and strike her down? She was just talking. She wasn’t armed. She wasn’t ready. She wasn’t…

She wasn’t to blame for this.

And he hated her. So much. He hated her, for bringing him back to life.

He should be dead. He felt dead. He hated her.

He chose to die and she’d brought him back.

No.

No, it wasn’t her fault.

It wasn’t her fault.

… it was someone else’s fault. Someone who put this rage inside of Gin. Someone who had taken away his life and limb. Someone who was going to suffer.

Someone who deserved to suffer.

Someone he hated.

Gin didn’t hate *her*.

He couldn’t.

Her hand touched his shoulder. The blade clattered from his hand. She caught him, knelt with him, held him, rested his head on her shoulder and murmured her reassurances.

He reached for the blade. His hand closed over air. He did not reach a second time. Instead, he held her. He wrapped his arms around her, held her, and let himself be held. His body rocked in spasms he couldn’t control.

It was all out of his control, all of it.

There was a dissection.

Piece by piece, she removed and excised, and she let him watch. She was quiet, glancing between one machine and the other, between him and the computer. Piece by piece, she erased her charts. Her video logs. Her notes. Every mention of him from her research. She spoke, softly, gently; her words
were soft and her eyes were steel. The lights of the server flickered as files within it were lost, erased, gone, piece by piece.

Her life’s work. That was her life’s work, every bit of good she had done for another living person. Gin sat in silence and watched as she took him out of it. Until there was nothing left, nothing but the false identity and the lies, shallow as a pond but free of misery and pain.

The misery and pain would be his alone to bear.

“There. It’s done.” She waved a hand, showing him, showing him the void where his name had once been, the operations and recovery and everything she had done to save him. It was gone. Utterly gone.

If there was anyone else like him, she’d have to save them by memory.

The ‘thank you’ stuck in his throat. He couldn’t say it. The shame of his actions weighed so heavily. The thoughts that had been not thoughts at all but a wave of unthinking rage. He was better than that. Or he had been.

He stared down at his hand. Metal, and plastic.

God.

Fuck.

She closed down the computer display, the light in the room vanishing as she did so, and moved to sit with him. Keeping her distance, for once, no longer reaching for his hair, or his shoulder, or his hand. She was still afraid. Still wary. Still upset with him, and what he’d made her do.

He bowed his head, unable to look her in the eye.

“Gin.”

“Mm.”

“Do you trust me?”

Through the drawn slats over the windows, the darkness outside was slowly turning to blue-grey. The sun would be up, soon. But now, the world was shadowed, the light was unclear, indistinct, something only hoped for. In here, in this room, it was still dark. Mostly dark. Red thrummed softly, dimly, from his chest, the light bathing them both.

Light that cast more shadows than it dispersed.

“Gin. Do you trust me?”

He looked at her. There were no shadows under her eyes, eyes the blue of clearest skies. Her hair was down, unkempt but vibrant in gold. Her pale skin was tinged, slightly, by the light he cast, spots of red reflected in her eyes. It was impossible to forget the sight of her, from the video, dressed in white and sprayed with his blood. Elbow deep in his chest. He could feel her arms and hands there, still, shaping his insides. Clasping his heart and keeping the broken halves from splitting. But the video was gone, now. Gone forever.

All that was left was the second chance she had given him, and the lingering sensation of her hands around his heart.
“With my life, doctor.” His voice trembled. He hadn’t meant to sound so bleak, so helpless.

She gave him a faint smile - a smile that seemed to take a world of effort - and picked his sword up from the floor. Offering it to him, the heavy blade braced in both hands, tentative and uneasy still.

He rested his hands lightly against her arms, and leant forward. Neck bared over the blade.

She sucked in breath through her teeth, and shoved him back with her elbows. Eyes wide again, disbelieving, fearful, both and neither. Sword still in her grip, she took a step back.

“With my life,” Gin repeated, softly.

She studied him, eyes narrowing, the expression severe almost to the point of sourness, before she sighed, and moved closer. He took the sword, sheathing it across his back; her hands were free to clasp his face, smooth pale skin over the warped scarring and the metal mask. He could almost feel it, could feel her touch through the metal. Or maybe he just wanted to pretend he could, as she looked down at him. As she touched him, and as she sighed, and as she quietly forgave him for his monstrous anger.

“With my life,” he said again, for the third time, and it was as close to a ‘thank you’ as the scars would allow him.

The therapist didn’t say anything about Angela the next time they met.

No-one did.

Gin was happy to join them in all pretending that nothing happened.

But it grew inside him, that dissatisfaction, that overflowing well. He was restless. He was angry. He was on the other side of the fucking world from making things right.

He trained in brooding silence, getting used to every new improvement made to his body, to the weight of Dragon’s Straight-Edge. Trying to be faster, trying to cut harder. Trying to focus his anger on his true target, and not the people around him who were only trying to help.

He shut out all thoughts but the ones of revenge.

He pictured the man, or tried to. In all his memories, the man was now a hazy, smoky black cloud. No face. No features. A voice distorted to written characters dashed between the smoke.

Gin imagined him. Imagined the suit and tie, the sharp haircut, the circle of toadies and bodyguards. He imagined the wife, the marriage, the smile, the way they would stand hand in hand. He imagined the child… no, not child, children. Two children, as would befit the heir of the clan. Two, as proof of divine providence, of the succession in its rightful place. Two children, a wife, and an empire all of his own: the man-who-was-shadow had everything, absolutely everything. He had the world, just like he’d been raised to expect, just like father wanted him to have.

Gin held the blade steady and faced them down. Behind his mask, behind his eyes, he saw red. His breath was cold, and it steamed in the winter air.

*I'll kill them. I'll make you watch. You'll watch as I take everything from you, like you took it all from me.*

He could see Rin’s face clearly. He could imagine the children, too, a son and a daughter.
A deer, and two fauns.

His gut clenched, recoiled, and for a moment the point of the sword turned aside.

Then his rage brought him back into focus.

On the training dummy before him, it was not Rin or the children that he saw. It was the shadow. The shape of the man he could not bear to imagine, would not dare name. The shadow of the man who killed him.

Who left him worse than dead.

Everything of mine you have taken from me. My life, my body, my dragon, my home.

The bowl was empty of millet. The dragon was gone. Gone for good.

The shadow stood before him.

The blade barely seemed to move, but the dummy split, sliding into fragments, bisected from shoulder to hip.

The shadow moved, taking its place over the dummy across the room, fleeing for its life. Gin charged for it, and this time his swings were rough, brutal, though his stance was as steady as a mountain. He hacked the dummy to pieces. Left arm, right arm, left leg, right leg, hip-to-shoulder. Less artistry, and more a butcher at work on an animal carcass.

It was only fitting, really.

I do not need to take everything from you.

He paused, then drew back the blade, delivering one last strike.

I only need to take one thing.

The dummy's head bounced along the floor.

He sheathed the blade, then kicked the head as he left the training room. Maybe he imagined the wet splat as it hit the wall.

His imagination was, after all, very vivid.

“So, you want the Santa hat, or the antlers?”

Gin stared McCree dead in the eye and did not blink. He certainly did not look at the obnoxious Christmas sweater or the tinsel band around the stupid cowboy hat or the sleigh bells that replaced the spurs. No matter what had been taken from him, by god, Gin would not lose his dignity.

The cowboy just grinned wider, proffering both options. “C’mon, you gotta pick one, Gin. Get into that ol’ holiday cheer.”

“No.”

“C’mon.”

“No.”
“C’mon.”

“No.”

“What on earth is going on in here?” Angela looked decidedly amused as she entered, the gentle babble from the crowded room behind her cut off as the door swung closed again. There was a tray in her hand, and she looked warm and comfortable in a wear wool sweater a size too big. She looked so different with her hair up.

“Tryin’ t’ get Gin to dress up for Christmas.” By now, both the Santa hat and the antler headband were both practically pressed into Gin’s face. “He ain’t playin’ along. Doc, you gotta make him. Tell him it’s for his health or somethin’.”

Angela held the tray out to Jesse. “Chocolate? It’s Swiss.”

“Ooh! Don’t mind if I do!”

Gin used the momentary distraction to slip away from McCree, and to hide behind Angela’s shoulder. She gave him a wry, knowing look, before they both turned to watch McCree do a full, confused 360-degree-turn to look for him.

“C’mon, you sneaky bastard. It’s just for the party.”

Gin folded his arms.

“Just wear the stupid hat and have some stupid chocolate, you asshole!”

“He can’t have chocolate,” Angela said, softly. “His diet needs to be strictly regulated.”

“Still? It’s been months! Let the boy eat, Angela!” He dashed forward, trying to put the antlers on Gin’s head. “And make him join in the festive funtimes, too!”

Gin ducked away. “I am festive enough.”

“That’s a standard-issue jumpsuit an’ it in no way, shape, or form, counts. Put on the damn hat!”

Gin narrowed his eyes and stepped away. And again. And again. All without uncrossing his arms. Letting the cowboy chase him around Angela, without getting close.

The doctor set down her tray with the rest of the breakroom offerings, then put a hand out. Catching Gin by the shoulder and making him stop. “It’s Christmas,” she said, firmly but fondly. “There’s no harm in indulging in the silly season, is there?”

Gin grunted.

Jesse set his chin on Angela’s shoulder. “You gotta. Please?” He pouted, making his eyes as wide as possible.

Gin grunted, louder, then snatched the Santa hat out of McCree’s hand. He put it on with violence, indicating clearly by his eye contact that he was doing so only because he had no choice. The hat was dangerously lop-sided. The helm made it very hard for it to stay on.

“Aww, lookit us three!” Jesse looped his arms around their shoulders. “Angie in white, Gin in red, an’ me in green. We’re a proper Christmas trio!”

Angela laughed. Gin did not.
“You still have the antlers to put on someone, Jesse.”

“Sure do.” He let go of the broad-armed hug, holding the decorative headband thoughtfully in both hands. “Hey, who do you think I should plant these on? Torbs, or Jack?”

“Jack first, I think. I believe Torbjörn already has his outfit ready. The Strike Commander, however…” She shook her head sadly. “Not nearly festive enough, I would say.”

It was a sensible man who would recognise sarcasm. Jesse was clearly too excited to be sensible. “Got it!” He turned and dashed away, every step jingling loudly.

Angela laughed softly, then turned and started fixing Gin’s hat, adjusting the way it clung to his helmet. “It might be a good idea for you to not linger in the room full of food.”

He grunted. Holding very still, for her sake.

She stepped back to look at him, and nodded in satisfaction. “There. Much better.”

“… I feel ridiculous.”

“It’s Christmas.” She shrugged, then glided out of the room, ostensibly to follow Jesse and witness whatever mischief he had in mind. To rejoin the party that Gin had not felt comfortable enough to be a part of.

Gin went back to his room.

Old sleight of hand tricks had entertained his cousins and friends, in years past. He was still good at them. The stolen pieces of chocolate lay on his palm, and for a moment he just stared at them, savouring the sight of them. Salivating.

It had been months of tasteless gruel and vitamin-enriched broth, and it was maddening. He needed to eat something, anything, with a decent flavour to it. If he had to put up with the smell of roasting fowl and plum puddings and all of the food in the western tradition of Christmas, in addition to knowing this was the first time he’d ever had a Christmas all by himself, without his family, on the other side of the fucking world, then, fucking hell, let him have something. He couldn’t take it anymore.

He tossed aside the lower half of his mask, and eagerly, desperately, shove the chocolate into his mouth. He could feel it melting on his tongue, could feel the change of texture as he rolled the pieces and chewed. But that was all.

For a moment, he rolled the melting mess around in his mouth, waiting. Confused. He spat out the wad, poked it with a finger, ate it again, licked his palm clear of brown smears. But there was nothing, nothing more than the feeling of something melting in his mouth.

The kitchen was off-limits. The big German had made it very clear that he and he alone would be responsible for the Christmas feast. But by the time Gin snuck past, the goose had been served to the crowded dining room, and all the trimmings laid out on the table for everyone to eat. It was a time of celebration. No-one would disturb him.

He flung open the fridge and started going through whatever he could find. Milk. Lime juice. Garlic paste. Mustard. Fish sauce. Ketchup. Mayonnaise. He could feel the coldness on his tongue but nothing, nothing, nothing else. He kept trying, reaching, grabbing, throwing down bottles as his frustration mounted. Slowly becoming terror. There was whiskey there, a half bottle on the counter, and it burned his throat as he drank. The empty bottle shattered as he tossed it against the wall, as he
raided the crisper. Apple. Carrot. Pear. Broccoli. Orange. Cabbage. Lemon. Beetroot. Bell pepper. Every mouthful had its own texture, he could feel them crushed between teeth and tongue and roof of his mouth, he could feel them sliding down his throat to sit hard and heavy in his stomach. But nothing else. The cupboards, then. Sugar, oats, molasses, sugar, all those different boxes of cereal he dug out handfuls for then let the boxes fall carelessly aside. The spice rack. All the dried herbs, the basil, thyme, rosemary, the salt, pepper, turmeric, cinnamon...

It all tasted the same. It all tasted of nothing.

Coughing, spluttering, sobbing, he curled up with his head in his hands, shoulders shaking. His insides were burning, his mind was fogging, he felt woozy and unbalanced. There was an odd kind of heat, a clenching of the throat and the chest, something so tight and vicious he forgot to breathe. Before he even recognised the feeling, he’d already thrown up on himself. Drenched in his own vomit.

He couldn’t taste that, either.

“… aw, hell.” A clatter of a dish and a spoon, and Jesse ducked down into his line of sight. “Gin? You okay?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I’m gettin’ Angela, don’t you go n…”

“What happened here?”

Gin flinched from the booming voice, turning away to curl up on his side. His stomach hurt, everything hurt, his memories were raking at him and he tried to keep them there. Tried to remember the taste of rice, of the pastries, the cakes, the peaches from Taiheyoyo Orchard. He couldn’t. He couldn’t remember anymore.

It was all gone.

“Well, see, here’s the thing, it’s a funny story…”

“There is nothing funny about this!”

“No, no, Rein, it’s great, see…”

“Has he been drinking?”

“We both were! That’s the thing! See, you ever hear the game Fruit Ninja? He was tellin’ me that his sword could cut through anything, you know, and after a few drinks we thought it’d be a good idea to see if we could…”

“You gave him alcohol?” Now Angela voice’s joined the kitchen, bringing her quieter fury. “His body can’t process it, Jesse McCree, what were you thinking? No wonder he’s sick!”

“You will clean up all this mess!”

Jesse sounded like he had his hat in his hands, head bowed. “Yessir. Sorry, sir.”

“And you!” The looming shadow fell over Gin. “You are never to enter this kitchen again. Ever!”

Gin threw up again.

“I’ll make sure they’re both punished for this. Jesse, over here, now, help me get him back to his room. Reinhardt, we’ll handle this. Just go back and enjoy the party.”
“DISGRACEFUL.”

“Sorry again, sir, doc. I’ll get the right arm if you get the left.”

Angela was there when he rose back to sobriety, head aching, throat burning, mouth cottony, eyes bleary. He felt exhausted, all over. Even the parts of him that weren’t human anymore, everything felt heavy and tired. And she was there, sitting with him, a bucket in her lap, his head cradled against her shoulder, humming and shushing and running her hand over his patchy scalp as though he were a child. And he felt like a child, on the verge of tears.

Side-effects. She’d told him there would be side-effects, of putting wires in his brain and tethering him to a mechanical spine. She’d told him.

The timer in his visor flicked to zero, and a small message scrolled across his vision. It was the New Year in Japan. It was growing dark here, evening’s approach barely touching the Swiss landscape. But far, far across the sea, time had moved on. This evening, there’d be photo opportunities, Overwatch operatives posing and smiling and celebrating another year. He couldn’t be there. He wasn’t an operative. He was still just… nothing. Nothing here, nothing there, nothing no matter where he went.

**Warning**, the message flashed across his visor, filling his vision. *Disconnection of periphery without adjustment or warning could result in permanent damage.*

“Understood,” he said, listlessly. Periphery. Not ‘arm’. Men had arms. He had ‘peripheries’. He pushed it back into the shoulder joint, wincing slightly as the spark of reconnection thrummed down the whole limb, resetting the sensations. The burn lingered, as a chastisement.

The therapist had wanted to know about the incident at Christmas. What could he say? To start down the path of ‘I’d spent my whole life wanting to be a chef and now I couldn’t be’ felt childish, trite. About than eighty percent of his bodymass had been replaced or reinforced, and he was still worried about his ability to make cakes? Besides, he was supposed to be a former stuntman. He didn’t have the luxury of even pretending his old life even mattered anymore.

*Disconnection of periphery without adjustment or warning could result in permanent damage.*

“Understood.”

Jesse and Angela might have understood, might have seen the desperate mess in the kitchen as some kind of reach for normality. He’d hated the way they did that, how they walked on tenterhooks around him. He’d leaned into the fabrication, then, the drunken night of ‘Fruit Ninja’ that resulted in no sliced fruit but the ruination of Reinhardt’s neatly organised kitchen. It was a story to look back and laugh about.

Gin didn’t laugh, though. He did, however, enjoy that he was still good at lying. Everything went back to normal, and they believed he was fine.

*Disconnection of periphery without adjustment or warning could result in permanent damage.*

“Understood.”

Gin winced as a bolt of pain rolled down his left arm, causing his fingers to lock. Good. He could still feel. He might not be able to taste, might not be able to tell the truth, but by god, he could feel. And that was something. At least, it was better than nothing. He let go of his right arm, shaking out the hand, letting the shoulder click and recalibrate, letting the periphery lock back into position.
And for a moment, in silence, he sat perfectly still. He tried to remember Hanamura, how it looked in winter. How the fireworks lit up the sky, how the city glistened, how the mountain stood and watched. But it all felt like postcards, in his memory. Distant, perfectly-framed, artificial. Was it even real? Had it ever been?

It was hard to say. He hadn’t been allowed to leave the building. He wouldn’t be leaving the building today, either, for the group photographs, for the messages to the public, for training exercises, for field duty…

Gin reached up and grabbed his shoulder again, and pulled.

There was no emotion in the characters that appeared over his vision. Warning. Repeated disconnections could result in permanent neurological damage.

“Understood,” the words were on his lips before he’d had the chance to realise the message was different.

Gin looked down at his left arm, at the bare metal and bioflesh, at the ceramic joint, at the gleam of the exposed power core, at the tendril-like cables that connected shoulder to arm - to periphery - in an imitation of sinew or tendon.

His wishes had always been simple ones, at new year. Someone pretty on both of his arms, a strong drink, a good song, an audience. But that was all gone now, wasn’t it, gone with his sense of taste and the wholeness of his body. He wasn’t that person anymore. He wasn’t a person anymore. Now he was…


This year would be different. He couldn’t tell if he was reassuring himself, or hoping, or if he was just very, very good at lying. But this year would be different.

He pushed his left arm back into the socket, and grit his teeth behind the mask through the explosion of pain.

Mark twenty-two was smooth and sleek, dark plates of carbon fibre over sinewy faux-flesh that was a rich, obscuring cobalt. The helmet was snug over his head, the design reminding him of his old sports car. There were no more dangling wires from the back of his head, not since the upgrade. Everything was smoother now, hidden under flesh and faux-flesh alike, carefully engineered and masterfully crafted. Gin shifted as his nerves connected down his spine, as legs and arms connected at the joints all the way down to his toes and fingertips; there was less metal, now, they’d made improvements and replacements with carbon fibre. The pieces connected quickly to him, eager to be inhabited by the ghosts of his limbs. He wiggled his fingers, and they moved, silent and swift.

It felt good.

The UI was interesting. He let his gaze flick back and forth behind the visor, getting used to the text hovering over his sight. He barely had to think, and there appeared a gridline of the room, readouts of time, temperature and distance, a proximity warning of the people standing around him, as well as in the next few rooms over. Gin ran through the warmup, testing the various settings, as his hands flexed as his shoulders rolled. Bare movements from his fingertips, eyelids, glances, changed his sight through infrared, night vision, heat-seeker…

Iron goes through the fire, to be tempered and hammered and honed many times, before it becomes a weapon worth bearing. He felt like a worthy weapon now.
“Red was too aggressive,” Torbjörn was saying, arms folded. “As much it is a Blackwatch signature to be red and black, I think you deserve a colour scheme a little less… obvious.”

“A ‘ninja’ is not obvious,” Gin said, as he guided his sight back to the standard setting, as the numbers reset and the grid over the room faded unobtrusively from sight. “I understand.”

The engineer nodded with a grunt. “That new mask has just about everything you need in there. Design wise, as close to what you asked for as I could make it, without making it look ridiculous.” He gestured vaguely to the upper part of the helmet.

Gin’s hand went up to feel it. Horns. No, not horns, he was not a dragon anymore. Wolf ears.

“Those fins on the side, there, part of the communication relay. Tap in and out of communications, like you practiced the other day, but you can also, ah…” He rubbed the back of his neck, taking a breath as he forced himself to keep things simple for everyone who wouldn’t understand his technical genius. “Tap into local networks, if you need to. If that isn’t enough, you’ve one of your own.”

“Sweet,” Reyes laughed. “Free wifi!”

The engineer grunted, in a way that was neither a confirmation nor a denial. “You’ve only got a couple hundred terrabytes of storage,” the engineer wagged a finger, “So no downloadin’ porn.”

Gin blinked slowly, trying to figure out if that was a joke or not.

“You did put antivirus software on him, right?” Reyes smirked. “Just in case?”

Gin bit down on his own tongue, hard enough to hurt himself. The mask helped to hide the anger, and his body did not move.

Torbjörn hid a smile behind his facial hair, then waved a hand, moving on. “Now, I also made it so you got a camouflage setting set into that skin of yours. Try it out.”

Gin focused, his thoughts coaxing obedience from the shell that encased him. He held up an arm, and focused on the protocol. It was so simple, the way the software responded to his thoughts. He watched in interest as the blue of the faux-flesh darkened to almost as black as his plating. He adjusted it the other way, testing, and watched his skin lighten to sky blue. Good for shadows, and for perching on rooftops, then. Handy.

He shifted it back down to the darkest possible setting before letting his arm drop. Blue. It wasn’t his colour. Not the colour he lived in, or the colour he died in. But he would take whatever he could. Later on, he would take more. And more and more and more, until justice was done.

“Now all we need is to get that man some pants,” came the wry, smirk-heavy comment from behind.

Torbjörn scoffed. “I’m not a tailor,” he laid heavy emphasis on the word as he rolled his eyes. “You can handle that, Commander.”

“I just might do. Hey, Gin, what are your measurements? I could whip something up for you.”

Gin looked over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow behind the mask. The expression lost, utterly, but Reyes grinned a little wider regardless, as though he knew exactly how to read him.

“Gabriel.” Morrison’s voice was soft, stern. His chin was tilted low, his brow furrowed.
Reyes glanced over his shoulder, grinning. Nothing changed in the way the Strike-Commander stood there, but it was somehow enough to make Reyes’ grin drop, to make the Commander shrug in a harmless, jokey way. “Well, alright, I guess he could just wear the jumpsuit. The orange isn’t exactly a great colour scheme with his complexion, though.”

Black, blue, orange. No, not good. But it was a colour scheme that he was familiar with, since coming here. The colour of secrets spilled, of foreign involvement, of betrayal. He remembered the room. He remembered the meeting. He remembered the odd feeling of spotlight on the stage he was unfamiliar with, and the machine that had translated between them.

The Strike-Commander moved away from the wall, coming forward towards Gin. Gin hated having to look up at the man, to have to look the American square in the eye by craning his head back. He folded his arms, and waited.

Morrison’s gaze was steady, his expression grim. “I am glad to see you’re doing well, and adapting to the changes. But for the meantime, I need you to remain here at headquarters.”

Gin felt the rage burn in his chest.

But it was Torbjörn who raised his voice first. “Oh, come on! Du vet hur hårt hårt jag arbetat på det här och trots det vill du hålla han på hyllan som om han var en dalahäst?”

“I didn’t understand a word of that, and I agree,” Reyes turned to the Strike-Commander. “You know he’s ready for active duty.”

“Do I? Every combat training scenario has shown him to be reckless, impulsive, dangerous.”

“He’s been cooped up here for nearly a year. You remember how batty you went with cabin fever, back in the day?”

“This isn’t about me, Reyes.”

“Jack, this is horseshit…”

“Dalahäst,” Torbjörn muttered, tugging on his beard in irritation.

“… and you know it. All the information he’s given us has let us crack this walnut wide open. He’s got skills. We’ve given him a body, we’ve armed him, we know he’s more than capable of fighting, we know there’s no love lost between him and the rest of the Shimadas. He’d be a great asset in the field. He’s wasted just sitting around here. It’s not fair to keep him here.”

Morrison let his voice raise to match Reyes’. “This isn’t a matter of fair…”

“I am right here,” Gin said softly, fists slowly unclenching. “I can hear you.”

Reyes took a half-step back from the Strike-Commander, rolling his shoulders. Morrison looked back at Gin, taking a deep breath, unclenching his jaw.

“I am sorry,” he said, quietly. “But even after all this time, things are still… difficult. My hands are tied. There are very few places that I can send an untested agent at this time. All of our strike teams are carefully vetted by the governments of the countries we wish to deploy to.”

“We can send him to Russia,” Reyes gestured with both hands. “They’re always desperate for backup.”
“The Russian government made it clear that we are no longer welcome, regardless of the opinion of the military.”

“Egypt,” Torbjörn grunted.

“Still waiting to hear back from them. They’re very selective about who they allow in, and someone with that much technology on him will likely be seen as too risky.”

“I have made certain that he—”

Gin felt his fists clench tight once more. “Japan.”

Morrison’s expression went stoic, neutral. “I’m not sending you to Japan, Shimada. It’s too personal. You’re already reckless, but being there, being so close to home, you won’t have a clear head.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know me.”

Morrison’s eyes flicked upwards, slightly, before meeting his gaze again. “I know more than enough.”

Gin realised his hand was on the hilt of his blade, that his arm had been rising to grab hold of his weapon without his input. It took a concerted effort to let go, to lower his hand. Shimada. He was just as angry at himself, for letting the American get under his skin so easily, as he was at the American.

… had he grabbed the blade? Or had it been the shell of a body he was encased in?

Reyes sighed heavily. “How much longer does he have to sit here, Jack?”

“You could at least have him out doing PR work,” Torbjörn added, similarly weary.

“Someone like that will invite more questions than we are able to give answers regarding.”

“You’re just saying that because you…”

Gin left the room. They were talking about him, not to him. He didn’t have to be there.

“Hey. How’d it go?”

Gin threw another trio of stars towards the targets, then slammed his fist into the wall.

Jesse winced. “That bad, huh?”

Gin threw two more handfuls of stars. He could feel the kinetic motion being wound up within his limbs, building up to imminent release.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“You wanna go for a walk?”

He was going to say no. But he was antsy, irritable. Knocking down targets wasn’t enough. “Fine.”

“Nice new suit, by the way.” Jesse hitched a grin on his face as he led the way out. “Very spooky. You gonna have orange lights in there for Halloween?”
Gin grunted, and snatched up his ōdachi as they left the room.

There were plenty of training rooms. The one Jesse took him to was busy. Gin recognised, vaguely, the other people around, people Jesse had introduced him to. He tried to ignore the way they stared at him, but his mask picked up and amplified so much. He tried to focus on temperature and ambience and the quick flitted readings of how much everyone was benching or the speed and force of the two casually sparring, not the whispers or expressions on the faces of the curious.

The fact that Jesse kept talking throughout made it a little easier. Nattering away, forcing Gin to pretend he was listening.

“You wanna see the fish?”

Gin just looked at him.

“… you gotta give me more than that.” Jesse waved a hand in front of his own face, demonstratively. “Got no idea what you’re thinkin’ when you’re wearin’ that.”

Gin almost sighed. “Why do you have a fish?”

“It’s not a real fish. That’s just what we call it. Blackfish.”

A door opened at the far side of the room, and Reyes entered. A couple of the lingering agents saluted, but most continued about their business.

“Get it?” Jesse was saying.

“No,” Gin said, refocusing on the conversation. “I don’t.”

“God damn, you got a better poker face than usual, an’ it really ain’t doin’ me any favours.” His hands gestured back and forth. “We’re Blackwatch, see, and…”

“The joke will make more sense when he actually sees it,” Reyes planted his hand on Jesse’s head, grinding the heel of his hand into the cowboy’s hat, mussing it and Jesse’s hair entirely out of place. “Gin. Sorry about what happened back there.”

Gin just gave a stiff shrug, pretending to be more interested in the way Jesse was fixing his hair and shaking his hat back into shape. He was used to disappointment by now, his body language would say. Anything else would, thankfully, be hidden by this helmet, this complete mask.

“You need to blow off a little steam?” Reyes tilted his chin towards the sparring ring.

“I would rather not break your men.” Gin folded his arms, the metal plates grinding over each other demonstratively, his sword still held in one hand. “I do not need another reason for the Strike-Commander to keep me grounded.”

“Jack’s not here right now,” Reyes rolled his shoulders. “And I’m pretty sure I could take you.”

“You?” He scoffed, quietly. But he was conscious that several agents had suddenly looked over.

“Yeah. Call it curiosity.” He turned and started to climb into the ring. “Let’s see how Torbie’s work holds up.”

In Gin’s periphery, Jesse had frozen in place, eyes wide, mouth forming the words ‘holy shit’.

The Commander pulled off his hoodie and beanie, tossing them over the side. There was a plain
white sleeveless shirt underneath, the shape of a man still in his prime, and a necklace - dogtags, perhaps? - but no armour, no protection. Those tattoos weren’t going to block anything. “Don’t worry, this won’t go on your record. It’s just a friendly little spar.”

Gin set down his ōdachi against the wall. “Afraid to let it be known how quickly I beat you?”

“Shit-talking before you even get in the ring’s a good way to get karma on my side, ninja. Keep going.” He grinned.

The Commander was big, but Gin had learned how to deal with opponents of varying sizes. He’d had years of training, countless drills and focus on his growth and strength. And now, so much of him was metal. He was stronger, now. Reyes was just standing there, not even bothering to take a stance. This wouldn’t take too long.

It was concerning how every agent in the room had stopped what they were doing to come and watch. Gin put it down to toadyism.

He climbed into the ring fluidly, keeping to his toes and watching the American closely. Sifting through the readouts on his visor before blinking the numbers away and breathing. Readyng himself to strike.

“How you wanna do this? You know the Horse rules? Or, maybe, first knockdown?”

Gin felt his body tense as the space between them closed, the world a grey blur as he lunged. A swift strike to the gut to wind him, two follow-up punches, a leg sweep, he would catch the Commander’s arm, twist behind him, pin him to the ground.

At least, that was his intent.

But while the first strike connected, Reyes didn’t seem as winded as he should be. Light flared along the inside of Gin’s helmet, screaming a proximity warning as a fist moved - too fast, god, how could anyone move that fast outside of the Shimada training halls? - and Gin was forced to twist out of the way. He tried to adjust, tried to adapt to a new strike, but the Commander slammed a fist into him in return.

Gin staggered back, winded, blinking through the flashing alerts, the readout of measurement of speed and pressure and the likelihood of injury. The Commander moved to the other side of the ring, grinning as he shook out his hand.

“Ow! Ha! Torbie doesn’t mess around! That is one tough suit!” A laugh as he rubbed his knuckles. “I think that makes us one for one. Right, Wolf?”

Gin lunged again, leading with his fist. He was half expecting it, but was still surprised that the fist was snagged out of the air, but he followed up with a leaning leap, driving his knee hard into Reyes’ side before he felt himself being flung back across the ring to try and get his balance.

Proximity alert.

Gin felt arms crush around his chest, felt his feet leave the ground, then he watched the room flip upside down before the impact shook him. Dazed from the strike to the head, he pushed himself free of the Commander’s arms and threw himself forward again. One strike, one satisfying ‘oof’ forced from the man, before Gin felt his wrist being grabbed, twisted, his whole arm pulled around behind him.

“What’s the score now, three to three? Time for a tiebreaker.”
Gin bit back a curse as he hit the mat face-first, the Commander’s whole weight pinning him down.

“Say ‘uncle’.” Reyes laughed.

Gin grit his teeth, twisting, kicking at the Commander. Refusing to be pinned, refusing to stay still. Three repetitive motions, before he slammed his head backwards, hard and sudden. Enough to make Reyes recoil, and for Gin to scramble free and take a stance.

Reyes likewise straightened up, rubbing his nose. It wasn’t broken. How in god’s name was it not broken, when Gin had hit him as hard has he had? For a moment, Gin remained in the stance, desperately flicking through the readouts to try and understand why the Commander was so fast, so calm, so hard to hurt.

So when Gabriel Reyes moved first, Gin took a moment or two to go on the defensive, to read these strange new stances, to try and figure out how an American was able to stay standing, to hold his own against one of the Shimada’s finest. Against a machine. Against both and neither and god fucking dammit he should have been paying attention --

Gin almost flipped over the ropes, but managed to catch himself at the last second, springboarding back to plant both feet against Reyes’ chest. Hard enough to wind him. It should have been easy to jump back out of range again, but the man grabbed him by the ankles and threw him once more.

“You’re thinking too much,” Reyes said, smiling a little less, beads of sweat across his brow. “Come on, hit me. Stop thinking about how you’re going to hit me and just hit me.”

Gin managed to do so, twice more, before he was forced to focus solely on the strikes he was receiving, to adapting his style to the strange method of the Commander. Numbers flicked over Gin’s vision as Reyes swung, and they didn’t make sense. They didn’t make sense. He swung faster, moved smoother, hit harder than any man had a right to.

Gin staggered back to the other end of the ring, reeling, ears ringing from a barely-pulled punch. Reyes was grinning, bouncing on his feet like a boxer. Or like a dog at play.

“Don’t tell me you’re giving up already. I thought you said you were going to kick my ass, Wolf!”

Gin straightened up, his arms dropping down to his sides, and he bowed.

Reyes laughed, dropping his fists, shaking out his arms. It was a good laugh, a real one, and almost hid how it petered out into a low exhale. “We’ll call it a draw, then. Let me know when you want a rematch.” He climbed his way out of the ring, grabbing his hoodie and beanie as he went.

Gin followed the Commander, grabbing his sword and ignoring the way the other agents peeled away from the both of them. “What are you?”

“Now, that’s a real personal question, isn’t it,” his grin was cocky, but warm. He didn’t look smug in the slightest. “You familiar with the Soldier Enhancement Program? I don’t think you would be, it’s not declassified yet. But the US handpicked a bunch of soldiers, and Captain America’d them.” He flexed, and it made sudden sense that the shirt was sleeveless, given the size of the bicep. “I’m a tougher son-of-a-bitch than I was before.”

Ah, yes, the American solution to every problem: more guns, bigger guns. Gin’s vision blurred. He managed to catch himself against the wall before he stumbled.

“Looks like I did manage to get you after all.” Reyes stopped, catching Gin by the elbow and righting him. “Couldn’t tell how much damage I was doing through that suit. Torbie did good work,
sure, but…” He waved his hand in Gin’s face. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three,” Gin said, tersely, pulling his arm out of the Commander’s hold.

“And do you feel better?”

“… what?”

“Do you feel better,” Reyes raised an eyebrow. “You got to blow off a little steam in there, Wolf.”

“Holy shit!” Despite the boots and the spurs, Jesse had still managed to move very quietly, and the sudden whoop made Gin flinch in surprise. “You fought the Commander! You went a round with him, and you’re still standin’, holy SHIT!”

Reyes’ grin widened. “That’s gonna be a great video for the Christmas party compilation.”

The cowboy’s eyes widened in dismay. “I didn’t even think of that! But! But it was all over, like, wha-pah-pow, like that! Commander, I knew you moved fast, but that flippin’ ninja…! Couldn’t even see him some of the time!”

“It was pretty sweet, yeah.”

Gin blinked away another bout of dizziniess. Hm. Possible head injury? He idly scrolled through the readouts on his visor, assessing the damage. And, idly, he analysed the Commander, too. He noted with some measure of satisfaction the bruising appearing on the other man’s face, and the blood on the knuckles.

Reyes started walking, motioning for Gin to follow him. Jesse tagged along, still chattering.

“You took a punch to the face and you didn’t go down! He fuckin’ SUPLEXED you an’ you got back up again! Like, holy shit! And you punched Commander Reyes in the FACE! How are you still alive?!”

“I am a tough son-of-a-bitch,” Gin deadpanned.

Reyes barked a laugh.

They walked through doors, down stairs, around corners. Deeper into the base. The halls were silent, but for the ringing of the cowboy’s spurs and the back-and-forth banter between agent and commander. Gin could feel a change in the air. Not just temperature, but some deep mechanical thrumming. How far underground were they? What was down here? He didn’t have to wait long to get answers.

A hangar. A massive underground hangar. Gin looked over the collection of dark aircraft, of the smooth concrete floors marked with a skull within a red circle. Was it a skull? He blinked, his vision still blurred. A message on his visor advised him that, though the injury was not serious, it would be wise to seek medical attention. He blinked it away. It returned, an insistent reminder. He could see it, even as his vision blurred and his centre of balance wavered.

“Commander,” Gin said, quietly, “I need to see Doctor Ziegler.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I got a better idea.” He lead the way towards one of the massive aircraft, whose rear entrance hung open, a sloped ramp leading to a black-and-red interior. “Jesse, you want to finish explaining the Blackfish joke?”
“Oh! Right.” The cowboy paused, gesturing grandiosely to the aircraft in front of them. “This is the Orca. But because it belongs to Blackwatch, we call it the Blackfish.”

Gin waited. When no punchline followed, he murmured, “An orca is not a fish.”

“Yeah, well, you know about Sea World?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, they used to keep whales there, in captivity. Like, to perform for tourists? But someone did an exposé on how bad the whales were treated, called it ‘Operation Blackfish’... Get it?”

“No.”

“Okay, but...” Jesse was looking increasingly frustrated. It was highly amusing. “We’re Blackwatch. We do undercover stuff. This is an Orca-style aircraft, but we call it Blackfish because... we’re Blackwatch. It’s our orca. You know?”

“No.”

“Okay, lemme start over...”

Reyes had to duck his head to enter the aircraft. Gin did not. Black interior, red lights. He’d never seen a military craft like this before. Everything was so neatly laid out. Stark, almost. Everything had a place, strapped and buckled to the walls and ceilings and in the shelves, and there was a row of cabinets all clearly marked for what kind of supplies they held within. Most seemed to be weaponry.

Reyes had opened a cabinet marked ‘Medical’ in four different languages. He held up a cylinder to Gin. “Here. This’ll help.” He flipped it, caught it, then offered it once more, this time like a baton in a race.

Gin was glad Reyes hadn’t thrown it to him, given how shaky he felt. He wasn’t certain he had the hand-eye coordination at the moment. He accepted the cylinder, then sat down in one of the vacant seats, resting his sword to lean against him. “What is it?”

“Ziegler’s work.” Reyes held up a cylinder of his own as he sat beside Gin. “Nanotech.” He flicked the cap open, then pulled up his shirt and jammed it into his side with only a slight wince. There was a hiss from the cylinder, then Reyes’ face relaxed. “A little injection of nanobots to help patch up injuries. They work fast, can patch up open wounds. Takes a little longer for broken bones and the like, but they’re magic on bullet holes. The doc’s saved our bacon more than once with these beauties.”

“Kind of only s’posed to use them in medical emergencies, boss.” Jesse had his hands on the overhead rails, leaning forward with a mock supercilious expression.

“Cyborg nearly broke my goddamn rib,” Reyes growled, rubbing at his side. “That’s an emergency.”

Gin felt simultaneously pleased, and oddly hollow. ‘Cyborg’. First ninja, now cyborg. More words to describe what he was to these people, words that didn’t sit right with him at all. He grimly flicked through his visor, looking for instructions on how best to inject himself, trying to figure out how he was supposed to fix himself if he was coated in carbon fibre. Gin flicked the cap off, readied the applicator, felt the plate near his neck retract on his mental command. He jammed the applicator into his faux-flesh, and felt a tingle - warm, familiar - then he sat back and watched as the medical alert in his visor turned green and vanished. Aches in his side were easing. His vision cleared. He didn’t feel dizzy anymore.
The doctor was a miracle worker. She really was.

The bruising on Reyes’ face was already going down, and he rubbed at his side with a pleased look before pulling on his hoodie again. “You didn’t really answer my question before, Wolf. You feel better?”

This wasn’t just about the bruises. Gin took a slow, deep breath before nodding.

“Great.” The Commander fixed his beanie, then rose and locked up the medical cupboard.

Gin heard footsteps, and looked up to see other agents filing in, some with bags they secured away, others coming in just as they were. They took their seats on the opposing row in the Orca, some in their own world, some laughing, joking, others giving Gin a nod or a thumbs up.

Jesse plonked himself in the empty seat to Gin’s right. “So, about the Blackfish joke…”

“I got it already.” He waved a hand, focusing on Reyes. “What is going on?”

Reyes shrugged, grinning, then greeted the pilot, before moving to talk to one of the other agents.

Jesse grinned as well, recovering quickly from the outrage of being shut down over a bad joke, and nudged Gin’s shoulder. “You might want to strap in. Seatbelts are here an’ here…”

“Seatbelt?” He could feel the aircraft thrumming beneath him, the engines warming as the pilot performed the pre-flight check.

“Man,” Jesse laughed. “I wish I could see the look on your face right now.”

Takeoff was careful, an expert manoeuvring through well-lit tunnels to a doorway that opened out over a tarmac. Gin’s view was restricted by what he could see as he leaned forward to peer towards the cockpit, but he could see blue sky ahead. There was a dip, then the press of G-forces that forced him back. God, how fast were they going?

The exhilaration was only intensified by the fact that he was out. He was out of that prison and he was going somewhere. Anywhere. He was out!

Reyes unbuckled from his seat and stood up to stretch, rolling his shoulders. “Yeah, so,” he turned to Gin with another shrug, “Sorry I didn’t say anything. But I figured it would be more fun this way.” He opened one of the lockers, starting to gear up with what was within. “It seemed a bit unfair that you were all dressed up and had nowhere to go. Fortunately, I just happened to have a recon mission on hand. I think it’ll suit you just fine.”

“I mean,” one of the other agents - Mosswood? It was Mosswood - chimed in, grinning, “We could probably use you along on this one. It requires subtlety.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Reyes hefted a grenade launcher from a nearby holster, resting it against one shoulder. His voice dropped to a low, dramatic growl. “I’m super subtle.” And then he winked, flourished the weapon, and put it away once again.

Laughter. Camaraderie. Gin sat in silence, trying to process all of it, of this odd warmth and welcome from these strange people. “I am going into the field,” he managed, eventually.

“It’s just for recon,” Reyes had almost finished gearing up, looking a lot more imposing in the various pieces of armour, a lot more like a soldier. “And I think it’s a far better way of finding out if you can handle being out there.” He paused, then moved over to Gin, lowering his voice. “You’re
one of my people. I look out for my people. You know?”

Jesse squeezed Gin’s shoulder.

Gin sat quietly, hands on his knees.

It was a few hours out before he roused again. The agents had left their seats, four were playing poker on the cold metal floor, others were going over their guns or armour; Parabola was braiding and unbraiding her hair, Jesse was fidgeting, muttering about needing a smoke. Reyes was napping, beanie pulled down over his eyes, hands pillowed behind his head.

The companionable silence was broken by a short chime, then the pilot leaned back. “Reyes?”

“Yeah?” The Commander didn’t move.

“Got a call coming in for you, sir.”

“Yeah?”

The pilot glanced over her shoulder. “It’s the Strike Commander, sir.”

Other agents glanced over. It was like they were trying to be subtle about their eavesdropping without trying hard enough. Even Jesse leaned forward in his seat a fraction too much to be casual.

Reyes grinned, sweeping the beanie back into place, sitting up, turning the motion into a fluid and casual roll to his feet. He moved towards the cockpit.

Gin watched, hands curling slowly into fists.

“Reyes here.”

The voice through the radio from this distance was small, tinny, and it took Gin a moment to calibrate the helmet to hone in on the sound, to listen in properly. “… –riel, but I would have thought you wouldn’t go this far.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Jack,” Reyes leaned against the pilot’s chair.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Tracker readout’s pretty damn clear.”

Gin stiffened where he sat, hands clenched tight in his lap. They had a tracker on him? They’d been following him, spying on him? They didn’t trust him, after all he’d given them, after all he’d promised?

Reyes snorted. “What do you want me to do, turn the ‘fish around and bring him back?”

“That would be a good start.”

“He’s ready for field work. Just give him a chance. And hey,” he leant forward, leaning on the console, speaking directly into the comms, “If anything goes wrong, Jack, it’s on me, alright?” The grin was showing in his voice, but then it faded. “You know I’m a good judge of character. Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

There was a long silence, then a very weary sigh. “I do trust you, Gabriel. But you know we have…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He leant back from the terminal, rubbing the back of his neck, his other hand
on his hip. “It’s on me, Jack. Same as always.”

The Strike Commander gave a gruff chuckle, then his tone turned clipped, severe. “But when you get back, we will be discussing--”

Reyes immediately leant forward again. “Chhhhhkkk, we're going into a tunnel, Jack, chkkkkkkkkkkkkttt. I’m losing you, chkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkttt." He flicked the comms off. The pilot offered a high five, and he took it.

Genji actually laughed, even if it was a mere bark of it in mild incredulity. The sound was thankfully lost in the collective rippling chuckle between the rest of the agents, who all got back to their idleness.

The Commander wandered over, holding the handrail overhead as he looked down at Gin. “I’m going to get flak for that,” Reyes grinned. “But I know Jack. He'll get over it. When it’s the right thing to do, he always gets over the details.”

“You should not make such trouble on my behalf.” Genji rolled his shoulders, feeling a significant knot of tension there.

“Nah.” Reyes shrugged. “I'd rather Jack was mad at me. He and I can talk things out, smooth things over. You, you're...”

Gin remembered the cold office, the harshness of those blue-grey eyes, the mouth in a thin disapproving line. “A problem,” he finished the sentence for the Commander, his amusement vanished.

“Well, yeah.” Another shrug, another careless grin. “But you're my problem, kid.” He gave Gin a brief playful swat to the shoulder, as he moved past to lie back down where he was before. “And I take care of my problems.”

Jesse gave Gin a thumbs up. One of us, he mouthed, tapping his spurs against the ground musically.

Gin snorted and swatted the hands away.

“Might as well get some rest,” Reyes stretched, beanie down over his eyes again. “It’s a long way to Japan.”

Gin tensed once more. The inside of the aircraft felt chill, all of a sudden. Crisp. “Japan?”

“Yeah. Japan.” Reyes lifted the edge of the beanie with his thumb, uncovering one eye, leaving the other covered. “Recon work, like I said. Need to put down some new bugs, speak to our contacts, get the ear to the ground. You can handle that, right?”

In his mind’s eye he saw the view of the valley in the dark, the castle on the hill, the city lights gleaming, the compounds that stood guard around that city, the mountain that watched over everything. He saw home. He saw the home he had lost, that had been taken.

He saw the shadow there, that man-that-was-a-shadow in his memories, waiting for him.

He could feel the ceramic plates in his spine realigning, could feel the throwing stars in his arm rotating in place as they readied themselves, could feel the weight of the sword across his shoulder, the hilt against his neck. He didn’t move, but inside of him the gears and plates and pistons and whatever else made up his body readied themselves to leap, to strike, to run. A puff of steam vented from his shoulders, compensating for the motion-in-stillness.
He was very calm when he finally managed to talk. “Absolutely.”

Notes:

- I was in the process of struggling to decide how to structure this chapter when the Retribution news broke. Once again, there was perfect timing with Overwatch’s lore, helping fill in gaps I was struggling with, and also giving me more material to work with. (I’m also quietly pleased that they showed Gérard almost like I had described him in the previous chapter). While I do apologise for not posting this chapter when I promised I would, it seems that being busy with a new job and struggling with writer’s block was beneficial overall for the narrative. It did present a challenge in terms of timeline, but I managed to reorganise what I had already written and planned around these lore changes, without sacrificing anything in my original intentions (one of the biggest challenges was finding a way to rewrite the mission to Hanamura, as a significant portion of what I had written ended up being almost exactly how the Retribution mission turned out to be, which was equal parts unsettling and amusing). Hopefully, the next few chapters will be much more smooth and coherent now, as well as being much easier to write at speed. I thank you for your patience and your input.

- However, I am ignoring canon in a certain regard. The fact that Genji’s full name is on the declassified files from Retribution does not sit right with me, nor with the background created within this work of fiction. This decision was made out of respect of future characters and their stories/lives (such as Hanzo and Sombra) and lore as well as ‘current’ events within this story. There will be further discussion and delving into this decision and its effects in the next few chapters, but I do not believe that the name ‘Genji Shimada’ would have ever been released, not even within classified files.

- Genji’s reaction to Jesse was partially inspired by his HotS reaction to the Pandaren. Sometimes, he is quick witted. Other times, he needs to stop and state the obvious.

- Thanks again to TurretMaker for the translations in Swedish, and for the concept of Genji as a toy/decoration on a shelf.

- Reyes’ use of the grenade launcher references the canisters across his chest, seen in almost every skin, from the fact that the original character design intended him to use that weapon instead of dual shotguns.

- Referring to the Orca as ‘Blackfish’ was an idea borrowed from Coelasquid, who writes the comic The Punchline Is Machismo. I have leaned heavily on, in particular, her interpretation of Reyes’ sense of humour.
Chapter 17

They played music over the intercom as the destination grew closer. Songs with stomp-and-clap rhythms to them, songs that had all the agents bobbing their heads or tapping their toes in time, or shouting along with. Hard songs, loud songs, songs that sounded like the march of the cheerfully angry. Songs Gin didn’t know, but still found himself almost - almost - moving in time with the rest of the people in the aircraft. He’d liked songs like this, back then. Back when he was still himself. He liked the songs this loud. He’d liked music that psyched him up.

One of them caught his attention, amongst all the stomping and Jesse’s loud voice right in his ear. Amongst all the noise, the lyrics pricked at what was left of Gin’s conscience. *The son of a yakuza. The son of a - I’m so sorry.* He listened more intently, and found that those weren’t the words at all. But he’d heard what he had been meant to hear.

He tightened his grip on his ōdachi.

They were going to Japan. He couldn’t stop thinking about that. Couldn’t stop imagining the look on the man-in-shadow’s face when Gin stepped forward, sword drawn, and did what he hadn’t done that night in the dojo.

There would be no apologies for that.

He didn’t look out the window as the Orca landed. All Reyes had said was ‘Japan’. But of course it would be Hanamura, the second those doors opened. It was Hanamura. Where else would it be? He waited as the other agents unbuckled and stretched and made their way outside, before he did the same and followed, his hand grasping his sword in the middle of the sheath.

The view was all wrong. They were on the northern side of the valley, the Mountain off to the right. Gin frowned, the disorientation lingering, until he picked out the massive compound of the Oka branch nearby, the sprawling gardens, the sloping roofs, the sturdy modern apartments encircling it like fingers of a hand. Then he could get his bearings. There. The castle stood toy-sized in the distance, surrounded by the city. The lights from the city were so bright that only a handful of stars shone from above to try and challenge them.

His chest ached. He was home.

The home that he had been running from, the night he was cut down.

“Issat Mount Fuji?” Jesse rested an elbow on Gin’s shoulder. “The actual Mount Fuji?”

Gin grunted.

“That’s so cool. Hold on,” he fumbled in his pocket for a phone, “We gotta get a picture of this.” His arm wrapped around Gin’s shoulders and pulled him in for a selfie.

Gin continued to stare towards the distance. He could get there, easily. Numbers flicked across his vision, the mechanics and software joining in the mental calculations. As long as he maintained a certain level of speed, he could reach the castle within two hours. Shorter time, if he pushed himself.

“Shit.” Jesse mumbled at his phone, “Can’t hardly see it. We’ll have t’ get another shot in the mornin’.”

Gin shrugged the arm off his shoulder.
“Alright, team, enough gawkin’.” Reyes clapped his hands together. “Everyone inside.”

Inside? Gin turned, pulling away from McCree, taking proper stock of his immediate surroundings. It was a school. An old school, fenced in by chain links and warning signs, pock-marked from bullets and burned by incendiary rounds. Gin knew where they were: this was the lip of the valley, the last place the invading omnis had been able to get to before they’d been repelled, pushed back, detonated. Another piece of Japan left to fall to ruin and to be ignored as everyone got on with their lives. It was a good hiding place.

But it wasn’t ruin. Not all of it. The Orca had touched down in the open inner courtyard, but now as Gin watched he saw part of the ruined school shift forward, the walls and roofs slowly moving, extending, wrapping around the aircraft and shielding it from sight. Changing the look of the building, but only slightly. From a distance, through the shadows and the placement of the rest of the ruined walls, nothing had changed.

Gin looked back to the chain link fence, the visor enhancing, zooming in on where the poles touched the concrete walls. Scorch marks. He’d seen that before. He knew what it meant.

The agents trooped inside, in twos and threes, chatting and laughing. Gin set his sword on his back, waiting to hear the sheath click and lock against his shoulderblades, before he moved forward. He had to move quickly to catch up to the Commander.

“How long have your people been here?”

Reyes shrugged, carelessly. “Long enough.”

Gin narrowed his eyes. The inked skin on his back itched beneath the faux-flesh. He remembered the camera he’d found in the castle, and wondered how many others there had been.

The interior was not ruined. It was secure, soundproofed. Classrooms had been converted, to a command centre, to a room filled with security displays, to a massive recreation room, to sectioned-off bunks. There were other agents here, too, moving to embrace or high-five the arrivals, or simply nodding as they moved from one task to another. Overwatch’s symbol - only inverted, with a red instead of orange - marked many of the security cameras, computers, boxes, and internal workings.

“Alright, gang,” Reyes called out, and every head turned. “Unpack, get comfortable. Sleep off the jetlag if you have to. If you don’t, you know what you’re doing, so get to it.” He paused and gave Jesse a vague motion of the hand, pointing him to one of the far rooms. The cowboy saluted, then jogged forward, spurs ringing. Reyes rolled his shoulders, his blasé orders given - remarkable, how quickly and gladly everyone moved to obey - then turned to Gin. “You, follow me.”

Gin did so. The inner workings of his arms ground and pivoted, seeing as he had no muscles to tense. The fact that everyone was so calm and relaxed only made him feel that much more alert, that much more ready to move, to go, to do something.

The Commander lead him into one of the readout rooms, and motioned to a chair.

Gin looked at the chair, then back at the Commander.

But the Commander was already moving over to the console, adjusting the screens that lined the back wall. Blank holofields illuminated with paused videos, with images, with folders of text files, with websites and clips from local news outlets.

“A lot’s changed while you’ve been in rehab,” Reyes was saying, as the room lit up. “We’ve had people here keeping an eye on things, double-checking all that information you gave us, keeping tabs
on the Shimadas and their business. But we really need an insider’s eye on things here. You might be able to spot something better than we can.”

Gin looked at the chair, then at the screens, then back at the Commander. The tenseness in his arms had reached a point where it felt like parts of him were about to split or snap or come uncoiled. The joints in his spine clicked and adjusted as he stood there.

“You have brought me to Hanamura,” he said, slowly, carefully enunciating each syllable, “To read?”

The Commander raised an eyebrow. His expression seemed to lose a little of his friendliness. “This is your first time in the field, Gin-Roh, so I’ll let you in on a little Blackwatch secret. We don’t go into things blind. If you want to be an agent, you’re going to have to step back a little, assess things, get a sense of the bigger picture. We’re fortunate that we have the luxury of time, that we don’t have to make spur-of-the-moment decisions, that we can analyse the data we have and take things slow.”

Gin’s hands balled into fists.

Reyes’ eyes flicked down, then up again. “Gin. Your uncle’s compound is a stone’s throw from here. You can see the castle if you look out the window. I know this is your home. I know you’re anxious to get out there and be proactive, but you need to trust me. Sit down,” he patted the chair, “Look things over. Get your bearings. Catch up on what you’ve missed. In the morning, there will be plenty to do.” He didn’t wait, like Morrison waited, to see if there would be a ‘yes sir’ or if Gin would move to obey. Reyes just patted the chair again, then walked out.

Gin watched him go, then looked up at the holoscreens. He stood there, for a long while, in silence. He was aware of the motion and conversation and busyness of the safehouse around him. The images before him swum, blurred; his visor sifted and sorted for him, finding very little of immediate interest on the display screens. Nothing at all about who he was here for.

His limbs itched. His neck hurt. He rolled his head, listening to a few unsatisfying grinding sounds as ceramic plate rolled between carbon bearings.

There was a corridor that lead to a door, a door to stairs, stairs to the roof. Gin’s feet barely touched the ground.

The night air was still, and slightly warm from the heat of the day. Clouds were rolling past, in the distance, mild and harmless, enough of a threat to the weather to make the coming sunshine all the sweeter. Gin crouched on the roof’s edge, thinking a single thought to make his shell’s colouration shift dark enough to make him invisible against the night sky. He stared fixedly across the distance.

The visor pulled the castle into view, hauling it across the distance and making it seem as though he stood inches from its walls. It looked like he remembered it, but nothing like it. There were cars parked in the streets, blocking traffic. There were lights hanging from every tree, every wall. And he could see there were people there, people in traditional dress swaying or lounging or sprawled on clan-coloured rugs. A late night picnic under the cherry blossoms.

Gin let his vision pull back. Something told him his quarry wasn’t there. Instinct, yes, a gut feeling, as well as a knowledge that the-man-in-shadow hated parties, hated music, dreaded all kinds of socialisation. He wouldn’t be there.

So where would he be?

Gin turned his attention to the Oka branch compound, his vision zooming forward on certain details,
sharper than a hawk’s. It was easier to peer down into it from up here, to see the guards, the dogs, the lights, the walls. It seemed to be sleeping, for now. All at peace, all at rest.

The other compounds would all be the same, Gin thought, tapping his thumb with restless energy against his own thigh. His uncles would either be at business elsewhere, or sleeping safe and sound within their own compounds. But where would Gin’s quarry be? The Yōzei compound was too modern, too close to the city; it would be too uncomfortable to sleep in. Would the man even be able to sleep, if there was a disruption to his castle? Probably not. But where would he go?

Vents at Gin’s shoulders puffed steam, releasing some of the building tension, as he lifted his head and looked towards the heart of the city. Specifically, to the towering apartment building where dragon banners flew.

Block 27.

And he saw, as he zoomed in, that there was a light on, on the top floor office.

Father’s office.

The vents puffed again, then locked closed. For a moment, there was no sound, just the rushing of wind and the artificially-steady pounding of his heart. Gin crossed the distance, keeping to the shadows but leaping, diving, streaking his way forward like some furious bird of prey. He felt weightless. A readout in the corner of his vision counted down as the distance closed, closed, closed.

A leap, and he landed and clung to the side of the building. Hand-over-hand, he climbed, as he’d been taught. It was easier now, with no fingernails to break, with gravity-dispersers in his feet and knees. He was faster. He was stronger. He was angrier. Hand over hand, avoiding the windows, avoiding the cameras, climbing and climbing and --

He froze as he passed the fourteenth floor. Movement, out the corner of his eye, from the building across the street. He glanced over, momentarily distracted, one hand leaving the building to reach for the tanto across his lower back. But it was just a koinobori. Two of them: a black koi, and a red koi beside it, their tails caught and flickering in the exhaust of an air-conditioning unit, almost twisted inside out.

Black, for the father. Red, for the firstborn son. Or for the wife, depending on how traditional you weren’t, in which case, blue for the firstborn son. There was no blue koinobori there, fluttering from that window. Just the black and the red.

Was it that time already? Had it already been a year?

Gin let go of the tanto, and kept climbing. Black and red, black and red. The colours burned into his mind, as he climbed, as he neared the penthouse. When he closed his eyes, he saw the colour pulsing across his eyelids. Shadow and blood.

The light was brighter. Gin risked a brief glance over the rim of the balcony, visior snapping and locking the split-second look as a photograph, so he could lean back down and analyse what he saw. Someone was sitting at the desk. The glass obscured the silhouette but it had to be him, it had to be, who else would it be?

_Sell him. Sell him. Sell him._

He closed his eyes. Black and red.

_Sell him. Sell him. Sell him._
Black and red. He opened his eyes.

It should be in the castle. It should be on the dojo floor, there should be thunder and howling winds. It should be tomorrow; it should be the right day, the right evening, for history to repeat itself. But one day early made no difference to Gin. He was tired of poetry, of dramatic irony, of fucking 
stories. He was barely human anymore. His dragon was gone. He was going to kill the man here and now.

He heard the balcony door open, and his body moved on instinct. A handhold here, and here, and he vaulted over the balcony towards --

“Oh, god, you scared me.” The man barely caught his cigarette carton, only one or two of the sticks spilling out of his fingers and hitting the floor. “Why couldn’t you have used the service elevator, knocked on the door? You know that’s what you were told to do.”

It was the wrong face.

What? Gin had frozen where he’d landed, confusion pulsing through his mind, slowing his arms, his legs, his body. He felt like he was struggling through a snowstorm, though he was standing still. This wasn’t who he was after. Who was this? Who?

This wasn’t the man.

He breathed heavily through his nostrils, looking Gin over critically. “… You’re not what I ordered.”

Kill him. The pulse continued in Gin’s ear. Just as loud, just as dark. Kill him.

“I specifically requested a female.” The man stabbed Gin’s chest with his finger, then flinched, shaking his hand out from the pain where flesh and bone had struck metal. “And why are you armed?”

Gin didn’t even move. He didn’t feel like he could.

A curiosity and dawning realisation rose over the man’s expression, as he stroked his hand - now like a caress - over Gin’s armoured chest. “… ah. You’re not from the Riverside. You’re the new prototype from Koshi.” His hand moved down, and he hummed as he rested his palm against Gin’s stomach.

The man looked familiar, but Gin was too confused to place the face, to remember the name. It took effort enough to step back, to avoid the unpleasantness of being touched by a stranger; he flinched, regardless.

Kill him, the pulse demanded. It throbbed in Gin’s head, hissing, growling, beating like a drum.

The man drew back his hand quickly, his expression shifting from thoughtfulness to harsh and imperial in less than a heartbeat. “Your master’s a perverse bastard, but you really can’t argue with his results. Look at you, you almost look human.” He stepped back, putting a cigarette to his lips, lighting it as he looked Gin over again. Slow and languid, though the eyes were keener now. “Too human, if you ask me. You’re obscene, more than most machines I’ve had the misfortune to lay eyes on. You look so… urgh. I shudder to think what Koshi’s done with you, that disgusting omnifucker.”

As though he had not just said he had ordered a ‘female’ to sneak in and visit him; the hypocrisy was rank. But in that moment, Gin finally recognised the man before him. The facial hair and hairstyle was new, a distinct mimicry of the ones preferred by the Shimada elders, but the man before him was
certainly not of that most noble bloodline.

Hokusai Masaru.

He looked quite comfortable in that expensive suit.

Masaru flicked ash from his cigarette, giving one last lingering look over Gin’s body, before he blew out a plume of smoke, and turned aside. He slid open the balcony door again, and stepped through. “Well? Hurry up and come inside. I have work for you to do.”

Gin, feeling numb, feeling adrift, silently followed. His feet made no sound.

He’d seen Masaru in too many places. After the fire that killed seven people. After drinking with Alexander. At the Prime Minister’s son’s wedding, where he stood in shadow, working through a cigarette in impatience. The man smoked so casually now, blowing another plume through the immaculate office. A plume of smoke in mimicry of a dragon, in a true dragon’s old den.

And he had also been in the meeting room, with a handful of other branch members. Playing with his lighter. Smiling through his fangs.

The shrine to Akane was gone, replaced by a drink cabinet. The shelves had been rearranged. If this had been Goro’s office, then there was little to show it had ever been. Only the Shimada banner, the flag hanging from the wall like some historical relic. Gin paused, looking around slowly, feeling his guts clenching in unease. Confusion.

Only his heartbeat, loud in his ears, made any sense at all.

Kill, kill, kill.

Masaru sat down behind the desk, flicking his cigarette into a crystal ashtray, missing the target but ignoring the mess he had made. The scattered ash, the end that glowed like an ember on the glass. “If we’re going to employ omnics, I want them to be able to follow orders. I know you come with pre-programming, but I need to know exactly what that is.”

Gin’s vision still swum around the edges. Father’s computer had been accessed while he was in hospital. Someone had tried and tried and tried to guess the passwords. There was a new computer here now, sleeker and more modern and less obtrusive in the illustrious space. The old one was gone. Just like the shrine.

“I also want you to know I expect nothing but loyalty to the Shimada name. You’re fortunate to be here, you know that? You could have still been sifting garbage or cleaning sewers, or whatever you were doing before Koshi found you. You have a new purpose now, and you will serve the Shimada name, and you will serve me, with unwavering obedience.”

He noticed the smouldering cigarette butt, now, and idly flicked it into the ashtray.

“If I ever have reasons to doubt your gratitude for this illustrious new future, I will have you scrapped.” He snapped his fingers, smirking. “Like that. No matter how pretty you look, or how fearsome those weapons are, you are scrap on two legs. Your life only has meaning through your loyal service.”

Masaru shouldn’t be here. This wasn’t even a man. This was but a shadow, in the shadow of a man. He had no right to be here. Why was he here?

*Rumour has it there’s some foreign money involved in his ascension.*
Someone had put him here. Someone had given a little snake the power of a dragon.

*Kill him.*

He was here, when someone else should have been here.

*Kill him.*

So where was the man Gin had been looking for?

*Kill him!*

Where was the Dragon who was *supposed* to be here?

“Do you understand?”

That was Father’s chair. There was a stranger sitting in Father’s chair, wearing Father’s clothes, styling himself in Father’s image, wearing the Shimada crest like he had been born into this role, like he belonged here. Smoking the brand the Shimadas liked, leaning back in the Shimada chair, dressed in a suit with the Shimada crest, letting his eyes wander possessively over a subject in his kingdom. He was sitting there like he owned this place.

But that was Father’s chair.

The pulse had been ringing in Gin’s ears, louder and louder to the point where it had been screaming at his senses, blocking out everything else, even thought. He only noticed, now, because it had suddenly stopped. He only noticed now, because of the sheer silence in the room, of the silence of the world outside, through the open glass door. Though the wide-mouthed gape of Hokusai Masaru, who made this little sound, a rasp, a gasp, a slight choke that preluded a scream, as he stared down at the blade buried in his gut.

Gin freed a hand from around the hilt of the ōdachi, and drew the tanto from his back. A swift strike, just as fast as the first, and the man’s throat was slit. The tanto withdrew easily; it took some wrenching to pull the second blade back, given it had pushed all the way through the snake, through the chair, into the wall behind him. It was a very long blade, and it was not meant for thrusting, but this was not the first time a blade had been used improperly.

Under the shell, under the faux-flesh, there were lines of burning agony. Even where there was no flesh to register the pain, he felt it. He felt his scars throb.

Gin stepped back, the blade following, and he watched the man’s eyes. They were wide and white as marbles, rolling, even as the man slumped forward onto the desk. The air smelled dark with copper, and there was this strange wet slither of a sound, a whisper as the body expelled blood and organs and life itself. Everything was amplified by Gin’s helmet. Everything echoed off the bloody blades he held, one in each hand.

But when the echoes faded, there was nothing left. Just silence.

In another time, another place, a father might have rested a hand on the son’s shoulder, and whispered ‘well done’. A child, become a man, putting blood on his blades for the first time. There might have been polite applause. The dragons might have rumbled their approval; from above, the black would have bared his teeth in hungry pleasure.

But there was nothing now. Nothing but a void in his chest where the dragon would have been, nothing but a hollow where once grew the need for father’s approval. It was an empty, vacant space,
and in that space, nothing echoed. And that *nothing* echoed loud indeed.

The space was folding inwards. Imploding.

He wiped his blades clean on the Shimada flag, sheathed them, leapt through the door, climbed down the building, and ran. Ran as though his life depended on it. With every step, the rooftops and ground and electric cables beneath him were crumbling, snapping, collapsing. Hanamura was disintegrating behind him, falling into a great chasm that was trying to consume him, too. He ran, feeling his ghost moving faster than his body could keep up with, sensing the stars above were winking out, that the sky was peeling back, that everything was being eaten by the darkness.

He made it to the ruins of the school, and as he made it back to his perch on the rooftop, he looked back over his shoulder.

Hanamura was still. The city lights burned steadily, and the rare stars above them. Every building was in its place, every road and powerline and flag was in its place, everything was secure and nothing was collapsed or ruined.

*I see. I see. … Just me, then.*

He started towards the stairs. All the lights were out, and it was dark. There was nothing in the shadows, until - suddenly - there was, and Gin recoiled as he felt a hand on his shoulder, a hand that spun him around and pinned him against the wall rather than let him stumble and fall.

Reyes stared into the visor, eyes steady. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he let go, his arms folding. “I brought you here,” he said, his voice low, and steady, and he wasn’t angry, he was just disappointed, “Because I thought you were ready for active duty. You just proved me wrong.”

Gin immediately stared down at his own feet.

“I told you we’re here on recon. I told you we have eyes on the Shimadas and their holdings. And I asked you, with the kind of respect you show someone you trust, to do one simple thing for me.” A pause. “Was it a mistake to trust you? Was I wrong about you?”

Gin’s throat felt red-hot, sealed shut. Eyes still on his feet, his shook his head. His neck felt stiff. Rusted.

Black and red. Black and red.

The Commander said nothing for a long moment. Long enough that Gin could feel the world turning, could feel the cracking and churning of the earth below him, as though that void he’d felt was still chasing him, still hounding him, was threatening to bring the building down over him, over Reyes, over everyone. But the fall never came. His scars burned him.

“I’m not going to ask why.” The voice was softer, as shadow and pain required. “I know exactly who you were looking for.”

Gin tried to swallow. The pieces of his throat did not work together to allow it. Flesh and biomesh weren’t cooperating.

“He’s not there.”

Now, now Gin could look up. Behind the visor, he felt panic. Panic, only because fury would not come. Fury was far from him in this moment, blood too lukewarm to burn with rage or freeze with icy clarity. “He’s not?” His voice sounded like a croak, like a child desperately trying not to cry, like
a kicked cur.

“No. He’s not.” Reyes’ eyes narrowed slightly. “A fact which you’d be well aware of, if you’d done what I asked.”

Gin felt the cracks in the stone and concrete, felt them snapping and snarling up through his legs like vines. Plunging into him. Tearing him open. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

He just killed a man, he hadn’t even meant to, oh god, *oh god*, and the one he had been looking for wasn’t here. Was gone. Was lost. But if he was gone, what then? What did that mean for Gin-Roh? He saw a vision, a blurred vision in his mind’s eye, a little boy running through the dark calling a name, a name that buzzed like static, that could not be spoken aloud, not even in his thoughts. Not even in his silent imaginings. Was that all that was left?

He’d killed a man. His scars were burning. His face. His legs. His gut. His heart.

There was a soft buzzing. Reyes continued to hold still, staring, but eventually he unclipped the communicator from his belt, sliding his thumb over the glass. “Reyes here.”

Morrison’s voice came over the line, just loud enough to fill the space between Reyes and Gin. “I saw the safehouse is on lockdown. What’s going on?”

The Commander never sighed, never flinched, never broke contact with Gin’s own gaze. “Head of the Goro branch was assassinated. The Shimada network is on alert.”

At the other end of the call, breath was sucked through teeth. Then a low grumble of a sigh. “How many times have you said you hate it when I say ‘I told you so’?”

“Jack,” the Commander said, firmly, “It was Shimada infighting. Nothing to do with us.”

Gin’s head was pounding. He imagined he could taste blood.

“But,” he continued, “We’re going to relocate to Kyoto, just to be on the safe side.”

Morrison gave a short sigh. “Gabriel…”

“I know my job, Jack. I’m not putting my agents at risk. I won’t have any of our surveillance be traced back to us. We’re laying low and then getting out, before one of their people stumbles over something incidental.”

“And you’re sure Genji had nothing to do with it?”

Reyes stared Gin down. “Absolutely.”

Gin dropped his head once more, staring down at the cracks that weren’t there, at the parts of him that hadn’t disintegrated or been torn apart. Shaken, aching, ashamed.

He couldn’t stop picturing the way that Masaru had died. The way his eyes had been so clear.

“I’ll keep in touch, Jack. I’ll call you once we’re in Kyoto; forty-eight hours, at the least.”

“Understood. Be safe.”

“You know you don’t have to worry about me, Strike Commander.” Affable, for a moment, though there was surely no smile on his face or in his eyes. Reyes ended the call and put the communicator back onto his belt. And he waited. Saying nothing.
Gin felt the trembling echoing void growing and growing around him, inside him, felt metal and bone alike become as brittle as glass.

“Genji.”

A name that had no meaning, not anymore… except here, in this valley, on these winds, in the shadows of the mountain, in the stories he had told to him. Gin lifted his head.

_I killed a man today._

Reyes’ eyes searched through the glass of the visor, narrowed against the low blue illumination. He could see Gin’s eyes from here. And whatever he saw made him pull back, grim, but without judgement.

“Get some rest, agent. Lockdown will drop after twelve hours. After that, we’re packing up and heading west.”

The apology was right there, but it weighed so heavily on his tongue. He couldn’t say it. Gin couldn’t say a damn thing. He just watched as Reyes turned away and descended the stairs, and he stood there, still and alone in the stairwell, in the dark.

The only light came from the door behind him. Gin made it through, barely, out into the night, back out onto the rooftop. There was the city. There was the mountain. There was his home. And, in the distance, Block 27, and the dead man in his father’s chair.


No. No, it wasn’t good.

He toppled forward, pitching onto the rooftop as the hollow within him finally caught up to him. He felt his spirit being torn from the metal and plastic that housed him, felt his flesh burning where wires and scar intermingled, felt his gut constricting, felt his throat burn with rising vomit that he barely had the strength to swallow back down. It burned. His body thrashed and spasmed on the ground, flesh and blood pulling in disgust away from metal and electricity, and from itself.

He was twisted over onto his back, caught in helpless seizure as he stared up at the stars. He didn’t see the light and darkness overhead. He saw only Masaru, saw the detail of that moment so keenly, so perfectly. Saw the cigarette butt in the ashtray, saw the split second of smugness turn to shock as the blade drove into him, just below his sternum. Gin could feel the weight of the blade in his hands, the momentary resistance of bone before it gave way and how soft the flesh felt against steel, how easily the blade had kept going, until it hit the wall behind the chair. Blood. The smell of it. The sight of it. The way the light in Masaru’s eyes faded. The shock, the pain, the slow rising emptiness that took the place of everything that had been there moments ago.

He’d never killed a man before.

Gin tried to sob, but his throat clenched and he was choking on his own breath, his jaw locked tight behind the mask. There was pain in his mouth, from where he’d bit down on his own tongue, but the hot blood had no taste. No taste at all.

He’d killed a man. And it had been _so easy._

It was sunrise before the seizure stopped.
He watched the sky turn all those different rising shades of grey. Grey, then purple, then orange, then blue.

The sound of traffic and public transit and the dull growl of airplanes and other sounds of civilisation thrummed through across the distance. Nearer, closer, birds called and cooed and chirped. The wind hushed through trees and power lines.

He didn’t bother trying to sit up. The Commander had told him to rest.

‘Rest’. Not ‘sleep’. Nothing could make him sleep. He didn’t sleep. He didn’t need to. Not then, when he was flesh and blood, and certainly not now.

Plenty of time to feel himself lying there, crushed, collapsing, breaking, hurting. Hurting, all over.

He’d killed a man.

God.

He’d killed a man.

Eleven hours and twenty minutes after the lockdown had been announced, he forced himself to stand, to climb down those stairs, to rejoin the cluster of agents and be ready for evacuation. People were staring. He could feel the eyes on him. He did not meet anyone’s gaze. He didn’t say a word.

Reyes gave the orders. The building was locked down, equipment hidden in the walls. Agents dispersed to hide in the woods, or to head out in civilian attire, disguised as tourists to catch the train. It took time, a long time, a lot of terse communications back and forth, a lot of caution, a lot of distraction.

Gin didn’t go anywhere. He did his best to remain in Reyes’ peripheral, as some kind of guarantee that he wouldn’t disappear or cause trouble. The Commander seemed to appreciate it, but even so Gin felt like baggage, like he had no place here. He was dead weight, and more trouble than he was worth.

He was one of the last to be evacuated, as the shadows grew long over Hanamura, the sky reddish-gold with sunset, and he and only a handful of others were swept into the Orca, to take the more direct route.

“Hey.” Jesse nudged him as they sat down. “You okay?”

Gin buckled in, and leaned his ōdachi against the side of his face. Everything hurt, as though thrashing around on the concrete overnight had left him bruised. Everything, even the metal, even the carbon fibre shell. Even the mask, where the sword rested against the metal plate, ached.

“Gin, buddy? You okay?”

“… Mm.”

There was no music on this flight. The pilot had to focus on flying below radar, manoeuvring through the ruined part of the country, trying to keep out of sight. But there was only so far they could travel without risk, and at one point there was no choice but to set down in the forest and wait for the darkness to get deeper, for the night shift to take over at the various military installations across the country.

Some of the agents curled up in their seats or on the floor of the Orca. The pilot put her feet up and
pulled the brim of her beanie down over her eyes. Reyes stayed hunched over a datapad, flicking through readouts and occasionally murmuring orders to the agents checking in.

Gin got up, leaving his sword in his seat. He needed some air. He tapped the button for the exit door to open, and waited, watching the doorway slowly extend down into a ramp.

“Don’t go too far, Gin-Roh.” The Commander’s voice was hard.

Gin looked back over his shoulder to see those dark, stern eyes watching him. He gave a meek nod, then stepped down onto solid ground. He could feel Reyes’ eyes on him, even after he had walked deeper into the forest.

He felt naked without the blade at his back.

This was not the forest where he had found the deer. This was not the forest he had played in, when he was young. This was outside the valley. This was not territory he was familiar with. He stood in the darkness, digging his toes into the soil. It felt wrong. His whole body felt wrong. It wasn’t his body, and it was wrong.

He felt naked without the blade at his back.

Gin walked over to the nearest tree, and began to climb. Movement, action, that made sense. Nothing else did. He climbed until he found a branch that would support the weight of his body, and sat. Legs swinging, face turned towards the sky. He could see more stars here, far from the city. He let his concentration drift, letting the visor pick out the shapes and names of the constellations overhead, idly aware of the time and date and temperature and the record of his pulse that flickered as readouts in the edges of his vision.

If those things were right, then it was him that was wrong. All wrong. Out of place.

You killed a man. The thought clawed at him. You’d come here to kill a man, but you killed the wrong one. You killed someone, for the first time ever. How did it feel?

Gin lifted his left hand, and stared at it. There was no scar there, across the palm. There was no flesh, either. And there was no blood on the blade, on either of them. There was nothing left of the lesson, no sign of his decision. There was nothing left.

The one who killed you showed no hesitation. Now you know what that feels like. Now you know how good you are at it. Don’t stop now.

He felt sick. He felt like he might fall from the tree. He felt like, if that happened, he wouldn’t stop himself from landing on his head.

Gin’s vision cleared, as he realised just beyond the sight of his hand, he could see someone approaching. The movement was cautious, and the steps were light, but now and then there were soft metallic chimes to follow each footfall. Spurs.

Gin let his hand drop, glowering down like a hawk on a perch.

“Howdy.” McCree held up a cigar as he leaned against the tree opposite. “Mind if I smoke?”

Gin remembered the way Father had pitched into the gravel, the pale hospital room, the snarling on the balcony. That was the way Sojiro had died, the smoke in his lungs. Or maybe it was the stories that killed him, the curse of his name. Fuck. Let a man have his vices. A man chooses how he dies.
He gave no reaction to the man below, who took it as permission. Gin heard the lighter click a few times until the flame took.

The sound of the lighter. Masaru had played with his, as he’d casually suggested killing a dragon if it should be unruly. Click, click, click. Gin felt tremors at his elbows and spine, felt his body beginning to seize up again as he saw Masaru’s wide-eyed visage in his mind’s eye, and remembered the weight of the blade in his hand and how easy it had been to stab him, to slit his throat.

_The human body is so fragile._

The smell of smoke drifted up through the air. “… you alright, Gin?”

He wasn’t. But he didn’t say so. Couldn’t say so. He managed a ragged noise, something that sounded more like metal scraping on metal rather than a grunt or a cough. Disgusting. Vile. Horrific. Agonising. He hated this body. He hated that there was nothing left of him.

What _was_ left was killing him.

Just like he’d killed Masaru.

The trembles were getting worse.

“… I mean, are you _really_ alright?”

Gin pushed himself out of the tree, landing with knees bent and joints lighting up as they distributed the weight of his landing with a dull, almost inaudible hum. He made no impact. No sound.

“Why,” he asked, as he rose to his feet, “Do you keep asking?”

Jesse flicked ash from his cigar, shoulders rolling in a shrug. “Guess ‘cause I’m worried ‘bout you. I mean, what are friends for?”

“We’re friends?” The words had come out quicker than he had meant them to, and a good deal more bitter. The anger and pain was bubbling, overflowing, dripping down his chin like black bile, like the blood of a stranger. … he was imagining it. Nothing felt more real.

Jesse looked hurt, for a moment, before his lips pulled sideways in a casual grin. “I mean, yeah. I like t’ think we are. We’ve had some good moments, right?”

Annoying. Annoying and loud and so American, so constantly in his way or making a nuisance of himself. There was a dead man in his thoughts, there was blood on his sword, blood on the Shimada flag, blood on his hands and conscience and a dead man’s last gasp echoing through his mind. His body was bruised and aching all over, from flesh to faux-flesh to metal, he’d been torn away from his home yet again, and this American, this annoying, noisy --

_You’re so noisy._

Everything went white for a moment, went still. Masaru’s wide eyes no longer stared back each time Gin blinked, the ache in his joints fading. He remembered home. He remembered holding onto a rope of hair, safe in an embrace. He remembered sweets and starlight and black and white movies. He remembered sweets, snatched from the kitchen. He remembered the dollhouse full of beetles. He remembered dramatic readings from the books. He remembered all the time he had run and run, chasing and being chased, playing instead of focusing on chores or training, turning mischief into a game for two.
You’re so noisy.

The memory of that voice was clear, even if the face that spoke it was shrouded in shadow and static. He saw the way the frown turned grudgingly to a smile.

Noisy. So noisy. Like a sparrow.

And then it was gone. It was gone, and Gin felt even colder from its absence.

Everything was gone. Home. The dragon. His own body.

But the American was noisy. Gin knew exactly why.

The pain resurged, and he felt his knees buckle. He sat, heavily, leaning against the tree beside McCree, and stared up at the leaves and branches and the occasional flicker of starlight. He wiped his chin - there was no blood or bile there, of course, the mask covered his mouth and chin, of course there was nothing - and he breathed. Low and pained, each breath a sigh.

Everything hurt. Everything was wrong.

Jesse was looking at him, intently. Worried.

It was a while before Gin could speak. “I do not understand your patience. I am a stranger to you.”

“You were hurt. You were hurtin’.” He shrugged, as though it were self-explanatory. “I managed t’ made you laugh a few times.”

“Is that all you want? To make me laugh?”

“To make you glad you lived, sure.”

The subtle jabs and challenges and the high scores. The ridiculous drawl. The stupid shawl. The way he’d covered for Gin’s desperate desecration of the kitchen during Christmas. And all the bad jokes. Just, the worst jokes possible. Gin was beginning to understand.

Bakaero. Boke.

Gin looked down from the sky and stared at his own hands. They weren’t shaking, as they rested on his lap. “I should not have survived what happened to me.” He looked at the cowboy. “What happened?”

“You know, it’s the strangest thing.” Jesse took another pull of the cigar, blowing smoke over their heads. “It was jus’ supposed t’be recon work. But someone snuck onto the property, an’ I couldn’t get away. So I hunkered down t’wait, lookin’ for my opportunity to skedaddle.”

Gin remembered climbing the wall. He remembered the two guards he found in the closet, unconscious and muffled with duct tape.

“And while I was hidin’, I heard the sound of fightin’ goin’ on. Metal on metal. Yells. Then screamin’. Sobbin’. An’ then the storm kicked up somethin’ fierce. Thought it was going to tear the whole place down. So, of course, I had to go see what was happenin’.” He flicked away ash from his cigar. “I found you.”

Gin tried to imagine what he would have looked like, to an outsider, in that very moment. He remembered the mangled hand, the gaping hole in his stomach, the way his knee and leg bones had torn through his skin. The ache throbbed in his circuits now, reminding him of the pain, though it
was distant. Ghostly. He would have looked like a pile of meat, he decided, absently, or like roadkill.

“My hand to god, I thought the building was gonna fall down over us with how much it was shakin’. I couldn’t just leave you there. I had one of those nano-injectors, slammed that into you to try t’ stop the bleedin’. Then I scooped you up an’ ran.”

Jesse’s action and Angela’s medicine. Both of them, with a hand on his heart.

“We didn’t have a medic. It was a recon trip. But I knew we had more injectors back at the ship…” He stared out at nothing for a moment, taking a deep breath, losing himself in the memory. His free hand clenched into a fist. “You lost a lotta blood. Boss radioed Manila, while I just…” He paused, lost for words, then extended his free arm. With the cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth, he rolled up his sleeve and bared the inside of his elbow. There were soft, circular scars in the crease, there. A year old. “Universal donor, y’know?”

Gin stared at the marks, uncomprehending. And then understanding completely.

So this was how a dead man on Angela’s operating table could have so much blood left in him.

Something snarling and outraged curdled in his gut, over where the sword had been driven into his belly. American blood. American blood in your veins. Disgusting. But was that any worse than being an eta?

Gin shook his head to clear the thoughts. “What about…” The name caught in his throat. He couldn’t say it. “You didn’t see anyone else there? You didn’t see who had… killed me?”

Jesse shook his head, plucking his cigar from his teeth and gesturing a small circle with the glowing red tip. “Honestly? No. Storm was ragin’ somethin’ fierce, but you were alone. They couldn’t’ve been too far, though. Another reason t’get outta there in a hurry. Didn’t wanna face that kind of a monster.”

There was pride. There was anger. There was bleak, quiet despair. A monster.

Sou.

The sword had been raised. It had come down again.

Sou.

A monster.

You’re a monster, too. Son of the dragon. It’s in your blood.

“… so. Yeah. Angie was posted in Manila, some kinda peacekeepin’ thing. We kept you alive as best we could, but I guess it was really all the doc t’ thank for savin’ your life. Though, I mean, I won’t be ungrateful if you wanna thank me right now…”?

Gin shoved the cowboy with his shoulder, snorting. “Bakaera,” He said, quietly. But this time, he meant it. He meant it how it was supposed to mean. Now that he understood.

Jesse chuckled, and continued to smoke.

Gin left their shoulders pressed together. A moment passed. Another moment. Gin lost himself in thought, in the tumult of guilt and pain and anger, of the haze between memory and imagining. He watched the smoke’s gentle coil and billow through the air, and wondered if the only thing keeping
him anchored was the gentle pressure of the cowboy’s shoulder against his own.

Foolish.

Yet, was it? He was adrift. Leaving his name at the altar, turning from it. And now he was like a wave, buffeted and dashed this way and that. *Ronin*, he thought, mirthlessly. *Hungry, with an empty bowl*. But there was nothing to fill the bowl with, anymore. Except…

He’d killed a man. Bloodied his blade on one, had ended his life instead of putting him in the hospital. And there was a hunger, still, for more. For more blood. Perhaps Father would be proud of him now.

“Y’know,” Jesse’s voice roused Gin from darker musings, “I’ve always wondered ‘bout the whole thing your family had goin’ on. All the castles, the banners, the rules, the swords. I mean,” he snorted softly, gesturing to himself with the last half of his cigar, “I ain’t really one t’ talk, but… seems a bit old fashioned. I mean, I know you had that Lamborghini, and your folks didn’t shy away from guns an’ hackin’ an’ hoverbikes. So why all the traditional stuff?”

Gin cleared his throat, feeling the tubing bobbing and shifting in his neck. Talking was painful, a reminder of another part of him that was missing as his voice was forced through artificial vocal cords and out into the filter of the mask he wore. But as long as he talked, he didn’t have to think. “The Omnic Crisis was a devastating blow to the country. Millions of people were killed, and vast swaths of land were made to be uninhabitable. People were panicking, suffering, lashing out. The government was insufficient in maintaining order. When people are afraid, they reach for anything that will comfort them. Anything that will make them feel safe. For us... it was *yamato-damashii*. The heart of Japan, the spirit of the country. Traditions, customs, history. The one thing that had made us strong, despite everything. We had our past. So we reached back, clung to it, built a new future on it.”

His fists clenched in his lap, and he wondered if he still had his sense of taste, would these words taste like lies? Like a fairytale told to children?

“Many criminal families, who had the infrastructure already in place, rose up like the *daimyō* of old. Protecting their territories, dealing and warring with others. The government subsidised these families, legitimising them, in exchange for fealty. The emperor would rule, like always, but the country was a *shōgunate* once more.”

He remembered a dying man in a white hospital bed, wheezing about his empire. It wasn’t about the valley. The valley was the heart of it, but there was more than the valley. It was a shadow Gin had refused to acknowledge, until this moment. A shadow he had run from. An avalanche.

Jesse was still listening.

Gin swallowed, moistening his throat, feeling the uncomfortable shape his neck made beneath the faux-flesh. “The Shimada Clan rose to prominence faster than any other family. Not even the family of the Prime Minister succeeded as they had done. The Shimada Clan claimed their ancestral home, the valley in Shizuoka prefecture. They rebuilt and renamed the city there, turned the golf courses into orchards, planted rice on the slopes on the mountain again, and it gave people purpose, security, hope. The Shimada Clan...” He had to stop. To close his eyes and sigh, to give his stomach time to cease feeling bitterly pinched. “…they were organised. Heavy-handed, perhaps, in their dealings, but it was an example of strength that many attempted to follow, and that all of Japan acknowledged. They succeeded where others failed, and in a matter of decades. It was said that the Shimada Clan could control dragons, could change the weather, strike down their foes, change the course of the future, which is why they grew to be so powerful.”
“Magic dragons?” Both of Jesse’s brows raised towards his hairline. “You believe that?”

He remembered the little glowing breeze that used to perch on his shoulder, trying to steal his potato chips, chirping and purring in his ear. “I used to.” He pulled away from the grief, trying to focus on telling what he knew, what the cowboy wanted to hear. “Dragons or no dragons, yakuza or daimyō, the Shimada Clan succeeded in giving Japan the very model of security it craved, proof that the past was the best guide for the future.” He sighed, closing his eyes and resting his head against the tree trunk. He felt exhausted. Too tired, perhaps, to think, or at the very least to delve too deeply into his own thoughts.

Jesse hummed thoughtfully, grinding out the stub of his cigar in the dirt. “Y’know, I do gotta ask one thing.”

“What.”

“You been fakin’ not knowin’ English this whole time?”

Gin grunted. Exasperated, but inwardly pleased for the distraction.

“I mean, I get it, you don’t wanna talk, but now I know how well you can, y’know I’m gonna --”

“Jesse! Back to the Orca, now!”

Both Gin and Jesse scrambled to their feet, alarmed by the volume and tone of Reyes’ voice over their comms. Gin’s hand went behind his back, closing around the tanto, and with but a thought and a blink, his visor set to scan the trees, sight piercing the darkness and looking for threats. Black and green, his sight cut through the evening, but saw nothing but trees and insects and an owl swooping off overhead.

“Yeah, Boss! Comin’!” Both safeties were off, unclipped with a flick of the thumbs, and he started to run back the way they had come. Gin followed close, hand still on his blade. It had been so quiet here. What threat could there be?

What ghosts had he stirred up, talking about the past?

Jesse lead the way into the ship, where Reyes and the pilot were bent over the communication screens, listening and watching several reports. There was a babble of voices, agents checking in and giving status updates. The other agents were buckled into their seats, silent, staring. Staring at Gin.

“We have to find Gin.”

“Uh.” Jesse glanced over his shoulder, puzzled, then back at Reyes. “He’s right here, Boss.”

Reyes straightened up, turning sharply around. His eyes were hard and sharp, his face pinched with a tension that made him look leaner, fiercer. His gaze landed on Jesse, then slid sideways to where Gin stood just behind him. For a moment, he hesitated.

“Where have you been?”

“I jus’ went out for a smoke, Boss.”

“Not you,” Reyes snapped. “Him.” He pointed a finger at Gin, stepping forward, seemingly filling the space as he did so. He was not a large man, but he had presence. “Where have you been?”

Gin felt a shudder through his spinal plates, felt his armoured shell tightening around him with a soft
hiss of steam.

Jesse looked at Gin, then back at their commander. “With me. We just sat an’ talked.”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent, boss.”

Another moment of hesitation, and Reyes lowered his hand. “The whole time?”

“My hand t’ God, boss.”

Gin looked between the two men, and to the communications array lighting up the cockpit. They were talking about him, around him, not to him. But he was not given the opportunity to remain out of the conversation for long. Reyes took another step forward, this time his gaze focused intently on Gin’s visor. Peering in through the blue glow behind the glass.

“Gin. Did you go back to Hanamura?”

“Boss,” Jesse blinked, “That’s hours away. You think he could really make it there an’ back in half an hour?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Reyes said tersely. He didn’t even blink, staring Gin down.

Gin returned the commander’s gaze. “I did not go back to Hanamura. I have been here.”

The commander continued to stare at Gin, face hard, eyes flicking back and forth as though attempting to read the expression behind the mask. Eventually, he leaned back, setting both hands on his hips as he frowned out at nothing.

Seized by a sudden unease, Gin blinked his way through the menus on his visor readout, connecting as Torbjörn had explained. The internet was awash with several news alerts from Hanamura, and Gin flicked hastily through them all. Video and image overlay showed a police cordon, a line of men and women in dark suits, a car dented and grounded from the force of having someone thrown violently down onto it, with a red smear trickling down the broken windshield.

“What happened?” He asked, quietly, wondering if the mask could disguise the sound of the growing fear in his voice.

“Someone attacked Shimada Castle,” Reyes said, turning away. “I thought it was you.”

Jesse looked between Reyes and Gin again. “Why would you think it was Gin?”

Gin half-listened to the newsreaders murmuring in his ear, cycling now through social media for on-the-ground footage and photographs. There was a photograph of the overcast night, the billowing cloud of an incoming storm rising over the valley.

“Just a hunch,” Reyes said, returning to the cockpit. “Glad I was wrong.”

Gin pushed forward, all the screens in his visor display closed and pushed aside, so he could focus on the screens in front of him. “Show me. Show me what you saw.”

“Gin.”

“Show me!”
Reyes glanced to the pilot, then gave a small nod. The screens shifted, the majority now showing scenes from the interior and exterior of the castle. “We still have most of our cameras in place,” he explained, arms folded as he watched Gin closely. “Though after this I think we’re shutting it all down. Just in case.”

Walls and paper screens were shattered. The gravel was carved in swaths where footstep and drag-mark had cleared it. One of the cherry blossom branches had been broken from the tree and now lay on the stairs. Roof tiles had been swept in a line from the main portion of the roof. A cluster of Shimada hirelings were sitting, dazed, being interviewed by police and their superiors, most of them bandaged or splinted or otherwise being seen to, in terms of medical attention.

There was an arrow embedded in the wood of one of the walkways.

The world went quiet. All sound just faded away, except for the slow, rhythmic pulse in Gin’s ears, and a low hum of white noise. The light from the screens faded, all images faded. Gin’s eyes were fixed on that arrow, that single arrow. His mouth felt dry. Time froze, for the moment, the instant familiar and frightening.

Your sword. You need your sword. You are empty without it.

He roused as the whisper caressed his spine. “The aftermath was not what got your attention, commander.” He forced himself to look away from the arrow, to focus on Reyes. “Show. Me. What. You. Saw.” His fists clenched, creaked, the parts groaning against each other.

Reyes’ eyes were still dark. Measuring. Weighing. Gin felt himself on the scales, and he didn’t care. He had to see. He had to know.

“Show him,” Reyes told the pilot.

The screen changed. It was before the destruction, now. The interior of the castle was pristine, as he remembered it. Men and women in suits patrolled, a quiet night of guard duty. Then a ripple of tension, and they left their posts, drawing their weapons. A shadow had vaulted the walls, and was moving through the grounds. Too fast to see, avoiding the cameras as though he knew they were there.

Gin leaned closer to the screens, filling his vision, trying to see, trying to confirm…

It was a split second. The shadow was not a shadow, not in his imaginings and memories, but for once, on screen, it was a man. Swinging a bow like a baseball bat, hard enough to send a wallside guard over the edge (down to the car that would break his fall) before turning back to survey the guards below shooting at him.

His hair was cropped short, as though it had only recently grown back from a close-to-the-scalp haircut. His face was bare, smeared with mud, his eyes wild, teeth bared in wolflike fury. He leapt down and the guards were thrown, dragged, beaten to the ground in a handful of seconds, and was once again a blur that the cameras could not capture.

But the face was familiar. Familial. Unmistakable.

It’s him.

It was him.

Gin’s chest contained a roaring fire. He was choking on it, down to his marrow, squeezing it in his clenched fists, gritting it tight between his teeth, trying to keep it from escaping. But the longer he
held it, the more his body clicked, and pieces snapped and ground and twisted, and puffs of steam rose from his shoulders and down the back of his spine.

It was him.

The screen shattered, sparking, between his hands - he’d gripped the edges of it, at some point, as he had leaned forward - prompting a yelp from the pilot. Gin didn’t notice, didn’t care. The world was being blotted out to his senses. His heart was pounding in his ears, his breath harsh and loud and amplified by the mask.

The mask. A thought, and he turned it off. Holding the sound inside.

It was him.

The mask was turned off, no longer broadcasting his voice. But his furious howl was clearly too loud to be restrained by mere metal and carbon fibre.

It was man who had killed him.

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Notes:

- I’m So Sorry by Imagine Dragons has had a particular resonance for me in regards to Genji’s Blackwatch days.
- Koshi as a name was borrowed from the robotics company Nachi-Fujikoshi.
- Heroes of the Storm flavour text confirmed that the Shimada Clan used hoverbikes.
- And now for a long-promised explanation. In looking for the best possible place to base Genji’s story, based on the views from the Hanamura map of the position of Mount Fuji, I came to the conclusion that ‘Hanamura’ - Flower Village - was placed in Shizuoka prefecture. In particular, the city of Gotemba seemed to be the perfect stand-in for the city, given the proximity to the mountain and the direction of the sunlight. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, various landmarks such as Taiheyo Orchard (currently the Taiheyo Golf Course), the Peace Stupa built by the Nipponzan-Myōhōji-Daisanga, the bridge district where Genji took Sophia shopping, and even the shape of the valley itself are all direct links to a Gotemba that would have survived the reshaping in a wartorn Japan. An additional pair of details that sealed the concept of Gotemba as Hanamura surfaced in my research: first, Gotemba’s symbolic flower is the sakura, and secondly, the city emblem looks remarkably like the Overwatch symbol. Both of these facts were coincidences that I couldn’t possibly ignore or discount.
- I have updated the tags from a ‘wall of text I added to each time I added a chapter’ to just a simpler collection of general themes. I may or may not change my mind about this.

Apologies that this latest chapter took so long to come out. Between a serious case of writer’s block, work, NaNoWriMo, and the holiday season, I wasn’t really equipped to continue here. But I will do my best to have the story written at a more regular pace from here on out. As always, your comments and suggestions are welcome.
Chapter 18

It had been a long time since he had dreamed. He didn’t think he was still capable of it, with all those wires in his brain. But he dreamt he was back in the castle. It was just like he remembered it, just like it had been captured on all those postcards. Everything was pristine, every stone in the garden, every sakura petal suspended in the air. The sky was a strange ashy white, but he did not look at it; the view of the mountain was obscured, but his focus was on the timber and stone of his childhood home. What need did he have to look any further?

The nightingale floor did not squeak or sing under his passage. That was strange. But then, you need feet to walk, and he had none.

Someone knew he was coming, regardless.

“Boy.”

He saw the shadow behind the sliding door ahead of him, and his heart skipped a beat. He knew that shadow, though the smell of the once-familiar cigarettes seemed stronger. Darker. Hungrier.

He should answer. But he hesitated.

“Boy,” the voice came again. The shadow moved, reaching. A hand slid the door aside.

Gin reeled back, crying out in alarm, unable to tear his eyes away. A shadow wore a ruined human shape, black scales showing through ash where flesh had once been, shattered bone making up the shape of skull and ribs and arms and legs. The thing that looked like Soujiro stepped forward, breaking, broken, shedding coiling smoke and flakes of burnt human flesh. “Boy!” Broken, blackened teeth were bared, and behind them the dragon’s fierce fangs pushed forward. “Boy!”

The boy retreated, hands that were not hands outstretched before him, trying to ward the spectre away. “I’m Genji,” he pleaded, hoping, praying, that his father would recognise him. “I’m Genji, I’m Genji, I’m Genji.”

But there were no father’s eyes, just hollow sockets in a fragmented skull. Behind them, the dragon’s black fire flickered in fury. “Boy!” A clawed hand, wreathed in ash and gravedust, grabbed Gin by the throat. “Boy!” The spectre howled, pulling him closer, both sets of jaws opening wide to reveal the swirling, cloudy, ashen void within. “BOY!”

“No!” He kicked and struggled, desperate to breathe as he was drawn in. “I’m Genji!”

His own scream woke him.

The shadows of the room cleared instantly under the sharpness of his gaze. He knew where he was, and it was not the castle. He kicked again, only to remember he had removed his legs before he went to sleep. The throbbing, itching feeling of his toes was just an illusion, the throb in his calves just the mind playing tricks on him because they were not there. Just like the nightmare, it was all just a trick of the mind.

Sentimental little child. That’s how you died last time, remember? Leaving your name behind, then trying to scream to the one who killed you that you hadn’t. Your past is dead. As dead as you are.

Gin spat onto the sheets, cleaning his mouth of the dream’s lingering miasma, before he reached for his swords, for the *tanto* under his pillow and the *ōdachi* that had been laid out beside him, to
reassure himself they were still there. They were, and that was comfort. Comfort in the way that the sight of his own arms were not. He raised those arms over his head, and stared at them. They were bare, ugly things without the coverings of faux-flesh and armour plating, all wires and ball joints and segmented parts. Disgusting. He felt dizzy, dehydrated, and without the faux-flesh to moderate his body temperature for him, he was freezing. Small wonder he’d had a nightmare.

He hated sleeping, and not because of old habits. It was so painful now, to lie and be still, to have his whole weight pressing down onto his spine and the ghost of the tattoo, to have the reminder of the weight of his body in metal and plating. That was why he removed so much of it, why he went to bed in pieces rather than in whole. The new body they’d gave him alleviated one kind of suffering, but granted him a different one.

He spat again, as he rolled to his side, grabbing for where he’d left his legs propped against the nightstand. The left leg first, the larger and heavier, sending a bolt of disorienting force through his pelvis and up his spine, as wires and nerve endings alike reconnected with the idea of the limb being physically present. He rubbed at his hip socket, teeth bared in a snarl, before sitting on the edge of the bed and reaching for the second. It was easier to connect this one, to the socketing mid-thigh, but there was still that sharp, full-body jolt of pain.

Pain? No, not really. But it was easier to call the sensation ‘painful’ than to consider what else it might have been. To feel the ghosts of dead muscles suddenly wrenched aside and rerouted into metal and carbon fibre, to feel electric pulses rather than the flexing of muscles. To feel that reminder that humanity no longer had sway in six-sevenths of his body mass. It wasn’t pain. It was just… a feeling.

A shitty feeling.

He sat there a moment, staring down at the floor, down to the smooth plastic sheen of his artificial feet. These should make a sound on the nightingale floor. They should. But he’d been without the prosthetics in the dream. He’d been quite comfortable without them.

What had he been, in the dream? Just a floating face?

Gin pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the splayed, sagging faux-flesh suit draped over the chair, and the silver gleam of the armour plates and helm on the dresser. He left them, and crossed the room in a few strides with bare, clacking-and-clicking limbs. The bathroom door slid open with a pneumatic hiss, mimicking the steam from his vents and bare inner workings.

As soon as he crossed the threshold into the dark room, the skeletal face in the mirror appeared. Gin’s heart no longer skipped a beat to see it, knowing now that it was just another trick of the mind, but one he was far more comfortable with. In the dark, his reflected face took on a kabuki quality. A mask, an oni mask. He’d always liked the theatre.

He took a moment to just stare at the monster in the mirror. To relish the sight of it, before he turned on the light and saw the ruin of his face. To see the scars left by the sword, and the burns from the ‘we have no medic but we have dry ice and we know how to do a blood transfusion’-attempt to save him, to keep him from bleeding out, until they could get him to the doctor who would save him. It was a disgusting face. He hated it. He’d much rather see a mask.

Gin’s lips - the upper real and scarred, the lower replaced by black biomesh - twisted sourly as he leaned forward. He pulled at his cheeks, and what little flesh remained around his lower face. Between the ruined skin, hair still tried to grow, still insisted that all was well and nothing had changed; as if the phantom pain and indignity of metal wasn’t enough, now the fragments of his normal body were reminding him of what had been stolen from him. He’d never been able to grow a
beard, not like Father, so he had kept his face smooth, pristine, boyishly charming. There was nothing smooth or pristine about it now. Nothing boyish, nothing charming, either.

And worse, his eyebrows were growing back again. Stubborn as weeds.

“Tch.” He picked up the razor, leaning over the sink to begin scraping between the scars and biomesh, scraping away the scraggly strands of dark hair. Spots of red appeared as he nicked the edges of the scar tissue. Pain, real pain and not the phantom aches of limbs severed a year ago, was welcome. He ignored the blood. Once he put the suit and helm back on, no-one would know. He could feel himself bleed at his own leisure.

It had been the eyebrows that had given him away. The distinctive Shimada brows, the family features. The image captured on Blackwatch surveillance may have been blurry, but the stranger’s eyebrows were the reason Reyes - who had seen behind the mask before - had assumed that it was Gin in Hanamura.

You took my life. You took my body. And now I can’t even have a face, because you have it. You took everything from me.

I’ll find you.

I swear to god, I’ll find you.

And I’ll make you pay.

The razor shifted, and he began to scrape over the shadows and stubble of his brows. Pulling at the skin first one side, and then the other, carving the hair from his skin. No hair on his hair, on his brow, on his cheeks or lip. Just scar tissue. His reflection was hideous. Not even human. Nothing about him was human anymore, except the blood from the nicks of the razor.

It was good to bleed. To still feel something real.

He washed his face. He dressed his wounds. He turned out the light. The oni reappeared, hovering in the dark, skin bone-white and eyes gleaming red. Gin felt the apertures in his irises shifting, sharpening, focusing, and the red gleam in the demon’s eyes matched.

“You took everything,” it whispered, as Gin did, a reminder of who he - they - hated and why. Its mouth was full of fangs, and its eyes gleamed in anticipation. Gin stared at it, as long as he could. And then he turned away, closing the door behind him.

But even still, he felt it watching him. Growing, waiting, just beneath his skin.

Gin dressed himself, and the motions were smooth and practiced. First, he pulled on the faux-flesh, sealing it in place, pinching tight the edges until they fused, a complete suit with no seam. Then, he attached the various plates on arms, legs, chest, and shoulders. Finally, he pulled the helm over his head, and he shuddered as he felt the clicks as it connected to his spine and equalised the pressure within the exoskeleton and under the faux-flesh. He blinked in the glow, as the visor lit up with the vivid green of his amplified vision. He stretched, rolled his shoulders, then lifted his arms to stare at them. The carbon fibre plates were still dark as shadow, but the faux-flesh beneath he changed to the default tone. It looked - almost - like musculature, skin and ropey sinew that clung to his body and hid the fact that over eighty percent of him had been replaced. It made the others more comfortable, to see an imitation of flesh. It only reminded him more of what he didn’t have.

He reached for the jumpsuit, then, the garish orange thing with Overwatch’s white and black throughout. It felt restrictive, and redundant to be wearing clothes when he was already wearing a
layer of rubbery biomesh as well as the layers of carbon and metal plates. But it was necessary. The bright orange was a promise: he would not sneak off, he would be obvious and obviously remaining here, until ordered otherwise. It was a promise to Reyes, and to the rest of the team.

He had been here so far. He hadn’t run off. He had stayed, and he had done all the reading that they asked him to do. He had done his best to prove himself a worthy Blackwatch agent.

But it was beyond frustrating that there was nothing to learn. According to everything they had found in Shimada records, Sojiro’s scion had vanished into thin air. It had been that way for nearly six months, now, and not even the most dedicated tracker had any clue as to where he had gone. The clan had moved on without him, the branches taking and consolidating and claiming, just like they’d wanted. They’d spent a small fortune on bounty hunters and security experts, and lost quite a bit of face, but there was nothing that could be done. The man had vanished.

Only to come back, to strike at the castle, and then to vanish again.

Gin had read and re-read everything, from official news reports, to intercepted Shimada missives, to information fed to Blackwatch by rivals and spies. Gin had even considered his own personal plan to flee into the forests - as if that plan had been stolen like everything else Gin had once called his own - but scouts that had followed his suggestions found nothing.

Both of Sojiro’s sons were ghosts, it seemed.

Gin waved a hand, and the meeting room filled with a light-blue glow, the walls covered in holographic projections of the files he had read and re-read over the course of the last week. It was fruitless, of course it was. But something had to give him a clue. Something had to give him some kind of an answer. A lead. Something, anything, so that Gin could track him down.

**What are you looking for?**

*I know what I’m looking for. Where the fuck is he?*

He swiped through the data, bringing up the latest Shimada reports. Weeks of hunting, searching, offering rewards, and the clan had nothing. There were names of underlings being chastised and punished for their failures. There were minutes taken of a hasty meeting in the Sadaakira compound, as one uncle quietly blamed another for what had happened, and business arrangements were made in secret and shadow. Cousins sent to spy on one another. Even a desperate plea to their friends in Sèvres, a request which had seemingly been ignored, or perhaps just unanswered for the same fucking reason that the request had been made in the first place.

No-one knew anything.

Gin swallowed back the growl of frustration. He would keep looking. He would not go into this blind. He would find his answers. In the meantime, there was enough data here to feed back to Overwatch about the Shimada Clan’s criminal activities. The safehouses of Kyoto, Tokyo, and Hino made sure to feed everything out this way, to Fukuoka, and the same was sent back. It was a network that acted as a hive of information-gathering activity. Soon there’d be enough to shut the Shimada Clan down for good.

In theory.

But what would remain, after the dragons lost their heads?

There was a small message blinking in Gin’s visor, a nagging feeling in his subconscious to match. He focused on it, reading the warning without any particular enthusiasm. His blood sugar levels were
dangerously low, and he needed to deal with his dehydration. There was a temptation to ignore these warnings, but... He pressed a hand to his chest, to where the machines inside him beat and guided his pulse, beneath the bright orange of Overwatch’s colours. He had committed to this. He had made a deal. Vengeance was not yet within his reach.

He shut down the data projection, and returned to his quarters.

Doctor Ziegler had a very strict diet regimen for him to follow. He sifted through the stockpile that had been prepared according to her instructions, carefully measuring out spoonfuls of powders from each canister into the mug that awaited him. When the mug was a third full, he carefully cradled it, and stared down into the powder. His basic biological needs were a humiliation, now. He would add boiled water to the powder, stir it to a slurry, and down it until his stapled-together stomach ached. Meals were a ritual he no longer found joy in. Another thing taken from him.

He prepared his ‘breakfast’. He drank. He went back to searching for answers until he couldn’t take staring at nothing any longer. He trained, forcing his body through its paces, so he would not forget how to strike when the time came. He kept himself in dull, repetitive routine, killing time, waiting for something to change.

When they brought him back to Switzerland, they made preparations for an upgrade. They asked him how his current body felt. He told them, dutifully, offered insights into what was not fast enough, how he could not reach or bend or turn in certain ways. He did not mention the seizures he had suffered in Hanamura. He did not mention the pain that buzzed and burred at all hours, that never left him, that made it hard to rest, to sit still, to sleep.

No-one asked him about Hokusai Masaru. They listened to the Commander, who told them again: Shimada infighting. And that was that.

You were going to assess if Gin-Roh was ready for field work. Is he?

I don’t know, Jack. Give me a few more months, then I’ll know for sure.

The death was forgotten. Gin cleaned his blades every night, regardless, until it stopped bothering him. Until the seizures didn’t shake him each time he remembered the man’s face. Until he could go through a day without thinking about it. It took less time than he thought.

Does it get easier? He asked Reyes, one time, when they were alone between missions. Does it get easier, to kill?

It does, Reyes had told him. There had been something in his eyes, some kind of warning, some kind of advice, but he’d just patted Gin on the shoulder and walked away. Whatever he had to say could wait for some other time. Gin didn’t press, didn’t pry.

Gin had been raised as an assassin. For all that he’d honed his skills in play and harmlessness, he was an assassin like the rest of them. A killer. Blackwatch needed operatives like him. And as long as he stayed in the shadows, he could see more of the Shimada clan and their allies than they would ever see of him.

The Mark 23 upgrade dealt with his fatigue and power issues, fitting him with power cores at his major joints, adding an extra layer of the bio-engineered musculature that bonded flesh with metal. His hearts were patched up, too, a fresh layer of flesh on the first, which beat steadily, and replacements of parts to the second, to the glowing core that controlled the nodules at each of his limbs. One heart beat while the other thrummed. Not that he felt either of them, anymore. Not that it
mattered what the hearts might have told him. He could move faster for longer. He could spit in the face of gravity’s whims, clinging to walls and ceilings, leaping higher, falling softer and without sound.

He was an engineering marvel. He was ninja. He was a monster. He was a blade drenched in blood.

But with every day that passed, and every mission he was sent on, there was still no sign of the man he needed to kill.

Until Children’s Day.

There were more cameras at Hanamura Castle, this year, following Shimada Clan movements. There had been a change in the guard, an increase in security; it was seen, it was noted. Blackwatch was watching.

Gin watched, too. The cameras caught only blurs, the assailant too fast and too wily to be seen. But it was what was unseen that took Gin’s breath away.

There was a storm, in the night. A great wind had passed through the ancestral castle, drawn out of nowhere. He watched men fall, knocked aside like dolls, thrown from rooftops, one even carried a great distance as though carried in the jaws of some massive beast. Just the wind, though, just the wind, otherwise something would have been seen on camera. Just the wind, pulling the unfortunate fellow one way, then the other, then to tug at him before throwing him far, far too far.

Cameras could never capture the wind. The dragons had always been unseen except to the eyes of those who could call them.

God.

Fuck.

His dragon had not merely been lost, released by the breaking of a vessel. It had not been taken. It had been stolen.

The man had two dragons, now, while Gin was left to drown in the void that had once harboured his soul.

The man had stolen his dragon.

“We only just finished that upgrade,” Torbjörn muttered, his voice warped and distorted from the other side of the glass. “ Couldn’t he have been a little more careful out there?”

Angela’s voice carried the no-nonsense, no-patience tone it had on busy days. “Let us focus on being productive, hm?”

“All I’m sayin’ is, I don’t think he appreciates our hard work. All he does is run headlong back into danger. The kid has a death wish.”

“That’s… not true.”

Gin exhaled noisily, wheezing, the ghosts of his limbs floating around him. Bubbles rose from the gaps along his jawline, and out from the oxygen mask affixed to his face.

Death wish.
He had the same dreams as before, when they first put him together. Voices like avalanches, rumbling stone, low echoes through distant caverns. Snow, deep snow, so cold, so white it might have been flakes of ash. Flecks of dust suspended in a sunbeam, and his brain picked out the same constellations from them before they all went dark. The sea washed all of him away, yet held him in place.

And while he floated, weightless, dreaming of rising bubbles and seaweed drifting around his face and chest, he thought he saw his mother. It would be a fitting fate, wouldn’t it, to drown with her? To share her death? Maybe to find out, once and for all, if she had been proud of him? Disoriented, dazed, he tried to call to her, to the woman in red, to the woman lost at sea. But when the bubbles from his cries rose to the surface, he saw it was Jesse, warped and distorted as though through a fish-eye lens. The red had been his kerchief, stretched like a grin. His hand was raised, pressed to the glass.

“I’m here, buddy.” His voice was distant, but unmistakable. “I’m here. Y’ain’t alone, promise.”

Gin tried to respond, but all he could do was blow bubbles through the tubes that extended from his throat. He couldn’t wave, couldn’t put a hand on the glass to match where Jesse’s hand was. Not until they put him back together. Not while he was little more than a floating torso.

He wasn’t drowning. He was alive. Alive and in pieces, ready to be reconstructed.

But Mark 24 wasn’t ready yet, there were still tests to run, still materials that needed to be sourced, still so much more work that needed to be done. And he was fresh from surgery, shaky and wobbly as a newborn after a near-death experience. They put him back together with his prototype, the red-and-black, the ugly bared ball-joints, the pieces and fittings that Torbjörn had mockingly referred to as ‘bargain-bin omnic’. They had no choice - until they were certain that Gin was not suffering any longterm damage from what he had just undergone, they could not patch him straight back into what had broken.

Baby steps.

The engineer glowered from under his bushy brows. “You’ll get the next upgrade when I’m sure you won’t just throw yourself in a blender or something.”

“Torbjörn,” the doctor was terse. There were shadows under her eyes.

“I can’t die,” Gin said, focused intently on the internal readings, locking his limbs to prevent the pain from showing in shakes or spasms. “I won’t.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” the engineer scoffed, stomping angrily out of the ward.

Angela waited until he was gone, before giving Gin a mildly-accusing look of her own, before leaving to resume her other duties. He wasn’t her only patient, but he was clearly the one who tested her patience the most.

“… Doctor…”

“Get some sleep, Gin. Give your body time to acclimatise to the downgrade.” And the door closed.

The room was empty, at last. Gin bowed his head and stared at the sheets. Everything hurt. Everything echoed in that void where the dragon had once been.

He clawed at the faux-flesh, at the body that pretended it was his, until it hurt in ways he could control.
The light passed over his eyes. He didn’t blink, didn’t flinch, letting himself be blinded, let the afterimages burn and linger.

The woman hummed softly, almost laughingly. “Fascinating.” She swiped the light across his eyes again. “Pupil dilation is normal, as far as I can see. But I honestly can’t imagine why the irises would have changed colour like this.” She put the light away, and made a note on her datapad, long nails clicking over the slick plastic surface. “Perhaps it’s a side-effect of the damage you suffered on your last mission. Merely cosmetic, though, as far as I can tell…”

Gin rolled his shoulders. “Are we done?”

“Not quite,” she gave him an amused look, sweeping back a loose strand of her flamebright hair. “I still have plenty of questions for you, Agent Gin-Roh.”

He gave an irritated sigh, feeling his breath fogging up the inside of his mask before it was vented out along his jawline.

“So huffy.” The new doctor’s amusement only grew. “Well, if I had your medical records, I wouldn’t need to poke and prod so much, would I? A pity they seem to have all gone missing. There’s no way of knowing exactly what she did to you. You know, it’s not like Angela,” she stressed the word, “To lose track of her work. She’s usually quite particular about storing backups…”

There was an intense look in her mismatched eyes. An all-knowing look, and a smug, expectant silence. Gin stared the woman down - up, really, given how she towered - and said nothing.

Doctor Ziegler was busy. The attack in Rome had filled many beds… and even more coffins. Gérard was lucky to be alive. But while that small fact was something to be thankful, it also meant Gin’s own checkups and medical assessments had to be outsourced. The doctor that Reyes had scooped up earlier in the year had settled in quite well within the Blackwatch hierarchy, despite many of the agents saying she gave them the creeps.

As long as Doctor O’Deorain gave him a clean bill of health, Gin didn’t care about her personality quirks. He just needed to get the Mark 24 as soon as possible. The downgrade was humiliating, agonising. He felt half of himself. Less than half. A seventh. He was hideous like this, his incompleteness visible to the world. At least with the full mask and exoskeleton of a proper upgrade, he could imagine himself whole, project an image of normality, pretend he wasn’t broken and ruined. But like this? With tubes and wires exposed, with the core bold and gleaming red in his chest like a target? Disgusting. He was disgusting.

“Are you going to tell me anything?” The doctor waited a moment, but only smiled when the silence stretched out. “That’s fine. I can extrapolate. I’ve enough from the bloodwork and the employee files I have access to. And you’ve been breaking a lot of records on the treadmill, lately.”

Yes, going nowhere. He knew that. He’d been running in circles for months. A couple of years, by now.

“… plenty of data to work with, even if the depth is lacking.” She put a hand to her chin, stepping back to look at him. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t it a cultural faux-pas to wear something that is crossed right-over-left?” She made a sweeping gesture over herself, then gestured to the implanted core, his second heart. “Seems like that would be something you might have mentioned.”

For a moment, Gin remembered the pain, the way the sword had driven down on him, through him,
slicing flesh and muscle and bone. Left-to-right. How Angela had worked to put him back together, how Torbjörn had engineered something to replace what was missing. How the prototype body sat embedded in his chest now, crossed right-to-left with the secondary heart as its off-centrepiece, metal and bioflesh cinches holding him together. If this was a costume, it were one only a corpse would wear.

Near enough. Six sevenths of one.

He stared at the doctor’s mismatched eyes, knowing his own were a dull gleaming red, to match his core. Maybe she would flinch.

But she just smiled. It was a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes, no matter how wide it went. “Your injuries must have been severe if you didn’t say anything. In too much pain and desperate circumstances to make things have a proper cultural aesthetic.” She hummed thoughtfully, tracing a left-to-right motion in the air, before bringing her hand to her mouth. Hiding the teeth that showed as her smile widened. “I imagine that’s why your aureola ended up near your armpit, there.”

Gin raised a hand, self-conscious, then scowled and let it drop. It wasn’t his real skin. It was the skin he wore like a shirt. And it was his fault for botching the last mission so badly that his faux-flesh hadn’t realigned properly when they patched him up.

But it didn’t matter. He’d have his upgrades soon enough and his imperfections could be hidden. As soon as he was cleared by Doctor O’Deorain, at least.

“You’re a man who prefers function over form. I can understand that, even if I disagree. Whatever works, hm? Now, one more thing…” She moved a little closer, datapad idly held in her gloved hand while the other reached for him. “If I were able to get a scan of your brain, I might be…”

Gin felt her fingernails brush through his hair, and his own arm raised up to push her hand away. It wasn’t a light slap, he could feel her suck breath through her teeth from the pain as she stepped back. “How fascinating. You’ll flinch when I play with your hair, but not when Doctor Ziegler does?” She rubbed her forearm, smiling still.

Gin felt his eyes narrow. He didn’t know why he had struck so quickly, why he had moved out of her reach. There was a rumble in his throat, a sound barely-repressed: a growl. He swallowed it down, unnerved. But then, perhaps he was just sick of all these foreigners poking at him. All that was left of the Mark 23 were the upgrades to his brain and spine, and he wanted to keep them. They were his; they were him.

God.

Fuck.

Doctor O’Deorain smirked, then looked down to make notes at her datapad, tapping something out for her own benefit. “Well, if you won’t let me get a proper scan of your brain and everything that has been done to it, I will have to insist on a little more bloodwork. Hopefully your previous nutritional deficit has been…”

There was an interruption. Reyes’ voice emerged from the headset on O’Deorain’s desk and on the comm unit in Gin’s ear simultaneously. “Agents Moira and Gin-Roh, grab your stuff and get to my office. We’re checking out. Five minutes.” And with a click, there was silence once more.

The doctor glanced back, frowning, then looked at Gin with an eyebrow slightly raised. “Not even a hello. Charming man, wouldn’t you say?”
Gin slid down from the examination table and made to leave.

“It’s always such a pleasure to have conversations with you,” the doctor called after him, before the door slid closed.

He did not carry much. He did not need much. He would take his swords, and nothing else. If he needed anything, he could borrow something from the other agents; Jesse was usually good for whatever Gin needed. It was strange that Reyes did not say where they were going, but such short introductions had happened for previous missions, when speed was of the essence.

His reflection in the mirror was demonic, for a moment, until his newly-reddened eyes focused and he saw himself. Obscene, the exposed metal and plastic taking up so much, with his faux-flesh arm and shoulder emerging from it like a drowning man emerges from the sea.

He had to go outside like this.

The mere thought made a shiver spill down his spine-plating, to ripple outwards like a hundred tiny grasping hands. Clawing, pinching, scratching, and his ghost spasmed in the exoskeleton, as though trying to writhe away. He turned his head, looking away as he reached for his blades.

The doctor was at the office before him, leaning against the wall. Her wild hair was swept back neatly under a beret, one that bore the same symbol emblazoned on Gin’s chestpiece; she wore some kind of fitted chestpiece of her own, a high-collared wrap-around pack linked with tubes to her arms and wrists. She nodded as Gin approached, and it was the first time he hadn’t seen her smile. She seemed grim, and motioned for him to enter the room before her. He did so, sparing her only a momentary suspicious glare.

“He won’t talk.” Jesse, already in the office, was standing with his thumbs hitched into his belt and a faint haze of cigar smoke around his head. He and Reyes were both staring up at the wall of datascreens, vast images of a man in a suit brandishing a glass of wine, a map of some landscape marked in dots and crosses, a picture of a various waterside architecture, gondolas being poled by men in straw hats and striped shirts. Largest of all, a closeup of a man’s face. Beard, undercut, cybernetic enhancements showing at his temple and over the bridge of his nose, and a banner overhead: ‘High-Priority Target’, ‘Location: Venice, Italy’.

“He will.” Reyes turned away from his desk, a swipe of his hand cutting the images from the wall and letting the room fill instead with a dull red haze. He glanced over his shoulder. “After he sees what he’s up against.”

Jesse half-turned, seeing the doctor and Gin standing in the doorway behind him. He was tense; he chewed his cigar, rolling it from one side of his mouth to the other, before turning back to Reyes. “You got it, boss.”

“We got it,” Reyes corrected. He turned to face the three of them. In the deep shadows of the room, his face seemed older. The shadows under his eyes were deeper, his wrinkles and scars more defined than Gin remembered. “You ready to go, doc?”

“As ready as we can be, I think,” the doctor said, brow furrowed. “Are we going to be briefed on what’s going on?”

“On the way,” Reyes said, almost curtly. “Gin, you ready?”

Gin gave the barest of nods. Italy. He remembered Italy. He’d never been there, of course, but there was a bridge. The bridge deal. Something about his parents negotiating it together. Lost in thought,
he turned to follow Jesse and Doctor O’Deorain out of the office, down to the hangar. His thoughts were as vile as his body, echoes of what had been, what should have been, tempered by the throbbing, burning ache of his ghost struggling in this incomplete metal shell.

... twenty fucking years of negotiations... fucking foreigners! ... I can’t face her... I know you’ll make her proud. Surprise them. Surpass them. It throbbed, hissed in his ears in time with his breathing, with the dual pulses in his chest. Surpass them. Surpass them. Images of the Italians on the steps, staring in envy and surprise at his car, at the daughter of their boss skipping out of his embrace. At the shadow standing on the steps, the hate seething out of that man-who-was-a-shadow-in-Gin’s-thoughts, of the sword in that man’s hands as he sliced downwards and cut Gin’s chest open. His heart burned at the memory, the fire eating into his flesh. Surpass them. Surpass them.

Doctor O’Deorain laughed at something Jesse was saying. Gin’s thoughts were disturbed like muddy water, and he tried to focus. But the buzzing in his limbs kept tugging him off in tangents.

Italy. Hadn’t he wanted to go there, once? When he was younger and his face had made people swoon, turn to him like flowers to the sun? When they were so desperate for his approval?

I know you’ll make her proud.

But now his body was a tattered flag, a ruin. As broken as the rusted Bastion he had hidden in during the rainstorm, long ago. He was hollow now, more metal than man. What was crouching in his chest now? Now that there was no dragon there? Just his ghost? Lonely, agonised, suffering, hungry.

I know you’ll make her proud.

But then, the doctor’s smirk. You’ve been breaking all kinds of records.

I know you’ll make her proud. It was father’s voice, but there was something wrong with it. Gin couldn’t place it, but it made the itching, painful crawling over his body worse.

Fuck, he hated this downgrade.

The Orca was there, polished and sleek. Nothing like a sportscar, but it wasn’t a treadmill, and that’s all that mattered. Gin broke into a sprint, swerving around Jesse and the doctor, making for the open hatch. The sooner they flew, the better. He hated waiting, hated standing still, hated not having answers, or a target.

But now there was a target. A high-priority target, at that.

His eyes flicked to the left, out of habit, trying to bring up the images he had seen. But, no, he wore no visor today. His helmet had been shredded in the last mission, ruined beyond repair. He had no way to look back on what he had seen in that room, no way of bringing up that man’s name. No name? It didn’t matter. He’d be briefed on the flight to Italy.

Gin rested his swords on his knees as he buckled up, then took the moment to half-draw the ōdachi, to see his reflection in the metal. His eyes gleamed red, catching the light like a wolf’s in the shadows. ‘Just cosmetic’, the doctor had said. But human eyes shouldn’t reflect light like this. He looked like the oni in the mirror.

Surpass them. The whisper sank teeth into his heart.

The doctor settled into the seat beside him. Gin was content to pay her no mind, losing himself in the pulse in his ears, the imagined taste of copper on his tongue, the readiness to kill, to add more digits to his body count. He was content to ignore her completely, just as he always ignored everyone on
the flights out.

But there was a light coming from her hand. He glanced sidelong, head turning slightly. Gleaming, yellow, flickering in particles that - from this close - felt familiar. It was being vented from some kind of dispenser in her palm. It danced like a flame, like snowflakes, like ash.

The doctor caught his glance and smiled in that self-assured way. “Just a little something I’ve been working on.” She wiggled her fingers, sending up a soft plume from the gold. Then she raised her other hand, and there was an orb of not-light there, something dark and viscous, but it rippled and let off a plume in the same way the light did. “Want to know what this does?”

He said nothing, staring her down. She wanted to speak, she didn’t need his involvement. But for once, it seemed like she wasn’t going to indulge herself.

“Tch. You’re no fun.” She flexed both hands, and the tubes in her chestpiece drained, the flickering, smoky light fading from her hands. “That’s fine, I’m sure a practical demonstration will be more than enough.”

Reyes strode aboard, dropping his hood down over his face, murmuring to himself. “… rules that Talon doesn’t play by…”

Gin blinked slowly. Talon? It took a moment for him to reconcile past and present. He had known the name in his childhood, those middlemen, who helped coordinate the Shimada Clan’s dealings with various European centres, their friends from Sèvres. Hanamura had been a small valley, and he had been mistaken. Talon was more than middlemen. If anything, the Shimada Clan was a small offshoot of their grand design. A thought which made the still-loyal core of him burn in anger. Anger? Anger. Good. Good, this was a good feeling. Aim him at the target. Aim him at Italy.

Italy. The bridge deal. The Italians. Sofia and her sweet cherry lip gloss. … Was it cherry? Or was that Nanako who wore the lip gloss? It was hard to remember. Their faces were all blurring together, featureless shadows, his memories a wall of figures and sensations. The past was so far away, now. He stared into the bared steel of his blade, and his eyes stared back. Were they his eyes? His eyes had never gleamed red. Red and black. Red and black. Red and…

“… Gin. Gin-Roh.”

“Mm,” Gin said, automatically. Refocusing slowly as he lifted his head. Reyes must have been speaking.

“You with us?”

“… yes.”

“Sure.” Reyes nodded, eyes dark and grim, but still capable of humour as always. “Why don’t you put that away for take-off, huh? Aircraft safety and all that.”

“Yeah,” Jesse drawled, hat pulled low, slouched in his seat as he readied himself for a nap, “Stow all y’luggage in the overhead compartment.”

Gin exhaled a growl, then tucked both blades in the holster beside his seat. Once he knew they were safe and would not rattle like a pair of bones, he sat back in his chair and folded his arms.

“As I was saying,” Reyes buckled himself in the seat opposite, “I don’t want this dragging on forever. Recon, grab Antonio, get out.” He patted the seat beside him, fixing Jesse with a meaningful look from under his hood.
The cowboy grumbled and folded one leg up over the other, his arms folded to match. “Got it, boss.”

“Pre-flight checks are just about done,” Fio called over the intercom. “Hope you’re all buckled in.”

Reyes tapped the panel on the wall. “Yeah, good to go here. Don’t spare the horses.”

“Copy that, Commander.”

Gin’s gaze moved from the cowboy to the doctor. Looking at her hands and the tubing in curiosity. The familiar feeling that had come from that yellow light… it felt like Angela’s work. He knew the feeling, intimately. But this made him itch in a way that Angela’s didn’t.

Doctor O’Deorain caught him looking, and smirked. With a flourish of her hands, the light and not-light coalesced in her hands again, her chestpiece humming as the tubes filled with sparkling fluids.

“Hey,” Reyes nodded his chin. “Stop showing off.”

“I’m proud of my work, Commander,” she smiled, turning her attention to him. “Aren’t you?”

His eyes - the shadows under them were so dark, when had the Commander last gotten some sleep? - stayed fixed on her face for a moment, before dropping down to stare at the light and not-light as well. There was an odd quality to his expression, and Gin couldn’t tell if it was just the shadows cast from the hoodie. His mouth opened, as though to speak, before he stopped and pressed his lips together in a thin line.

Just as he had when Gin had spoken to him previously.

“No, you’re right,” the doctor murmured, “I should save this for Antonio.” With a flourish of her hand, the not-light faded to smoke, dissipating. “And this…” She held up her other hand, bouncing the cool yellow in her palm, before clenching her fist so the fumes burst from between her fingers, “For your boys.”

Reyes said nothing. But he nodded at her, and sat back with his chin tucked to his chest. Arms folded, like he planned on getting some shuteye. Some well-needed shuteye.

Gin glanced between the two of them, then sat back and closed his eyes. As the Orca rumbled around them and took to the skies, he tried to sleep… or, at the very least, chased thoughts around and around in his head, while one leg bounced restlessly.

Italy. Talon. Antonio. Red and black.

Something went wrong.

It wasn’t obvious immediately. They managed to get in. They set themselves up in a safehouse. They got a listening device into Antonio’s office. They managed to get a hold of the schedule of the guards that patrolled the building, and their numbers. They even got McCree into one of Antonio’s favourite cafés, for an eye on the ground (for all the good it did them, except in Reyes’ case, a good laugh).

And all without Gin. Gin was asked to do what he had done before, to sit and look over footage and information, to look for details that others might have missed, to wait at the safehouse while the other three prepared the ground. Wearing an oversized hoodie so he wouldn’t be distracted by the sight of himself, Gin had done just that; he had equal parts rankled at the idea of being shelved and been relieved that he hadn’t been required to go out in public in his incomplete state.
So he watched security footage and assessed what the bug in Antonio’s office told him. Over the course of 10 hours, it was very little. The businessman seemed to enjoy the good weather, carrying out his business elsewhere. There was nothing to hear.

Gin also noticed that Reyes was exhausted. It wasn’t just concern about Gérard’s condition, or all those dead agents. There was more to it. He moved slower, rubbed his eyes and his neck whenever he thought he was alone. There was even one prolonged conversation with the doctor, around midnight.

Gin pretended not to see. Trying to focus on the task at hand, to make sure nothing went wrong.

But something did.

Sometime between leaving the safehouse and arriving at Antonio’s palatial place of business, the number of guards had doubled. The streets had been blocked off. Sweeping spotlights illuminated rooftops and alleyways. There was only a narrow window of opportunity to get inside, and even so they had not been able to do so without tripping an alarm, an alarm which had not been on the original plans or security detail.

Something had gone wrong.

*Kill kill kill kill kill.*

Gin lost track of the others, for a while, after the initial entrance. Split off from the others when he took cover. Sword in hand. Pulse in his ears. Footsteps charging down the hallway to him.

*Kill! Kill! Kill!*

There were more guards than there should have been. Body armour. Semi-automatic weapons. Well-trained. Organised. Red and black.

*Kill them! All of them!*

He hadn’t needed to move so fast and so sure in a long time. He had expected his wreck of a body to be nowhere near as good enough to survive. But it was. It could be better, but it was good enough to survive while all his opponents fell.

He had been a Shimada, after all.

They were well-versed in the arts of death.

Gin flicked the blood off of his ōdachi and sheathed it, as the last of the guards fell behind him, joining the pile that filled the antechamber. There would be more guards outside, but he could handle them. He could handle them if they came for him. His hearts were pounding and thrumming, and the pulse in his ear almost sounded like a congratulatory whisper. *No half-mercy, don’t put them in the hospital. Don’t let them live to regret it.*

He had no seizures or shakes, now. Just bodies on the floor and blood on his blade.

But something was wrong, and it was bothering him. Even the thrill of the slaughter couldn’t make him disregard the unease.

He rejoined the Commander, Jesse, and the doctor. Climbing the steps towards the office door, the strike team all assembled and ready. Reyes’ shoulders were tense as he led the way forward. Shotguns in hand, he shouldered the door open and took a second to survey the room before
entering. One gun rested against his shoulder, the other swung idly by his side.

There were no guards in here, Gin noted. No last line of defence. Antonio wasn’t even carrying a weapon.

“Good evening, Commander Reyes.”

Gin narrowed his eyes, brow furrowed behind the half-mask. Jesse hooked his thumbs into his belt and stepped forward, trailing the smell of his cigar and gunpowder. The doctor’s hands were clasped behind her back, and she moved primly and silently, looking carefully around the room as she entered. Gin followed them, chewing on the inside of his cheek, biting down, trying to taste blood. The flesh kept slipping out from between his teeth.

Kill. Kill.

Something was wrong.

Kill.

Antonio was a big man, a broad man, and he gave a short laugh in his throat as he watched the reflection in the tall windows behind his desk. “How will this look on the news? Overwatch unlawfully abducting a respected businessman?”

Reyes let the shotgun on his shoulder swing downward, joining the other to point down at the floor.

The Italian turned from the window, facing them, his gaze drawing slowly over the Commander, then the rest, one by one, though his gaze didn’t linger. None of them were important to look at, not to Antonio. He smiled, cocksure, arms unfolding to show his palms in a faint shrug. He did not give a sad shake of his head; he had no pity for anyone in the room. Anyone at all. He stood tall, lips curved in a smirk.

“Even if you take me now,” he said, voice a low smug purr, “My friends would have me released within the week. All these…” He raised a hand, gesturing at them, to the doctor in her tubed armour, to the cowboy, to the robotic ninja, to the man who once fought on the front lines of the Omnic Crisis, all of them in red and black, and he mocked them with a smirk, “Theatrics… have been a waste of our time.”

Gin’s eyes flicked from the businessman to the commander, then back again. The room was so tense that he was certain something would break, or bleed, the second anyone moved.

The commander gave a snort, a bare puff of breath; Antonio’s smirk started to fade, brows beginning to furrow.

Gin felt something break.

“You’re right.”

Jesse tried to move, to catch the commander’s arm, but too slow. The shotgun’s roar filled the room, punctuated by the sound of breaking glass and the splash as the body - missing most of its face and skull from the close-range shotgun blast - fell into the canal below.

Kill. The voice in Genji got louder, as though excited by the sight of the gore. Kill kill kill.

It must have been the breaking glass. Security alarms blared, the lights flashing red, deepening the shadows. The commander’s shotgun fell from his fingers, though his arm stayed outstretched
towards the gaping hole in the window; the man was frozen, staring out at the night.

But only for a moment.

“Reyes, what did you do?!”

Gin reached up for his ōdachi. An alarm meant the guards outside would come in. Maybe more would come. They needed to be ready. Ready to fight their way out. Get in, get Antonio, get out. As far as Gin could see, the plan had not changed. It is far better if those who insult you do not live to regret it. It was father’s voice again, but wrong, grating, bitter, pulsing in Gin’s veins. No half-mercy. Putting them in hospital will only make more trouble for you, in the long run.

McCree grabbed the commander by the shoulder, jolting him out of his statuesque pose, gesturing sharply the cigar and baring his teeth. “This was not the plan!”

Doctor O’Deorain moved behind Reyes, peering out the broken glass. She moved so smoothly, so silently.

Could Gin taste blood? Or was he imagining it, from the gunsmoke in the air and the sight of Antonio’s face being rendered to bloody, splattered splinters in that split-second?

The commander’s gaze rose from the shoulder that the cowboy had pushed, to meet his gaze.

“Well…”

A brief glance to where Gin stood. Then back to McCree.

“… Looks like we’re going with Plan B.”

Jesse bit back a curse, gritting his cigar back between his teeth as he readied his weapon.

Reyes squatted down to pick up his shotgun, his hands steady as he reloaded. His eyes were fixed and dark as he rose to stand again.

“First things first,” he said, striding forward, “Let’s get that door open.”

“You know,” the doctor followed close behind, “There is a perfectly serviceable boat out there on the canal. Just a short jump away.”

“Oh, yeah,” McCree sneered, “That’s a great idea. Take the easy way out.”

“It was just a suggestion.”

Reyes sighed loudly. “Someone, please, get started on the door.”

Gin followed in the wake of the bickering and bantering. Clambering up to the balcony to get a better view. The room had so many entrances. Service elevators, stairwells, windows… this was not a defensible position. Soldiers could come in from anywhere. No matter: regardless of where the soldiers came in from, they were going to end up in lifeless heaps on the floor. He drew his ōdachi and readied it. It felt good and heavy in his hands.

Kill, the voice whispered, and Gin nodded to himself.

“There, it’s done. Now we wait.”

Gin snorted as he paced the length of the balcony, using one of the dead soldiers as a stepping-stone.
“Patience is not my strong suit.”

“I suspect we’ll find something to occupy your time,” the doctor’s voice came from two places at once, from the main floor as much as from the communicator in his ear. It was unnerving. He growled and twirled his blade, just as the ceiling broke overhead and sent down a rain of glass.

Something indeed.

Cacophony. Bullets flying. Yells. The echoing snarl of radio communication, shouted by the soldiers who charged: no prisoners. Take them out. Gin put his incomplete body through its paces, his heart pounding, his breath loud in the mask, in his ears, as he cut and killed and blocked sprays of bullets, sending them back to their owners in sweet, simple geometric arcs.

They were coming down the stairs. They were pouring out of the elevators. There were so many.

It took a lot of time and energy to have so many people armed and armoured so quickly, to have them suited up and ready to move in, in complete squadrons. They’d been ready for this.

Something had gone wrong.

Gin flicked blood from his blade as silence fell for a moment.

“I made a decision,” Reyes was saying, as Gin focused. “I’ll deal with the consequences.”

“Oh, like getting’ the four of us killed?”

Reyes rounded on Jesse, getting in his face the same way the cowboy had gotten in his not a moment ago. “That’s not gonna happen.” There was a pause, a moment of hard-eyed severity that made McCree shut his mouth.

Reyes was a good commander. You could trust him.

Clearly McCree was thinking the same thing, for a moment, before he remembered the shotgun blast and the broken window, and he turned away with a sneer.

If there was a moment to breathe, perhaps it was best to get some answers. Gin leant against a pillar, rolling his shoulders. “Who was Antonio?”

The other three looked at him in anything from surprise to incredulity to amused curiosity. It was Reyes who answered. “He’s an arms-dealer, with some other interests, more, and less, legitimate.”

Maybe he dealt in Shimada steel, Gin thought. And anything else that came over ‘the bridge’.

“Was,” the cowboy muttered under his breath.

Gin’s attention shifted. “Why are you so concerned about one death, McCree? It’s not the first time we’ve had to kill.”

“This was an execution!” The cowboy angrily stubbed out his cigar against the wall, dropped it, ground it under his boot.

“Dead is dead,” Gin shrugged.

“The door’s about to open,” the doctor said mildly. “Let’s step back from the blast radius, shall we?”

And then the cacophony began anew. Through the doorway and down a gauntlet of waiting soldiers.
Bullets flew, were deflected, were dodged, and there were soon more bodies on the floor. Gin heard McCree curse and call for the doctor, and in his periphery he saw a yellow glow; disoriented, for a moment, he thought it was Angela. But no, different doctor.

“Heard you troublemakers might need a ride,” Fio’s voice came over the comms. “Head for the art gallery, I’ll pick you up there.”

Art gallery. Something nagged at Gin’s senses. Something was wrong.

**Kill. Don’t think. Kill.**

There. A new target. A flare of red. He braced himself, seeing a slim figure in red with a long rifle, swinging away on a chain.

“Sniper,” the doctor called, as Gin felt a distant gaze lock on him. On him, because he was so far ahead, and out in the open like an easy target.

Ha. Not so easy.

Gin readied his tanto to deflect whatever shot came his way, while walking sideways for cover, looking for the best way up to the sniper. He had to get up there quickly, take her out. But before he could even assess the environment properly, he saw Reyes step out from the shadows, heard a single blast of a shotgun, and the sniper tumbled from her perch, bloodied and limp.

How had Reyes moved so quickly? Gin glanced back to see McCree and the doctor catching up, then back up at where Reyes was reloading. The commander was a man light on his feet, he remembered that from their spar. But that wasn’t just light, that was fast and quiet. Gin hadn’t even heard the man running, yet he’d managed to reposition in just the right moment.

The commander caught Gin’s gaze, and nodded.

Gin nodded back. **Thank god he’s on our side.**

Boats pulled into the canal, more soldiers disembarking to join the fray. As those on the boats lay dying, aircraft swept in overhead, manoeuvring like birds of prey into the narrow space, dropping more soldiers on top of them. Somehow, between the gunshots and the sound of men dying, Gin heard the doctor making some wry comment about the whole city being awake.

And there it was again. The sense something was wrong, crystalised. It was a beautiful Venetian night. They were at the rear of an opera house, they were heading through the arts district. But where were the people? The locals, the tourists? The people here for shows, the buskers, the vendors, the food-cart operators, the gondoliers in the river? Everything had been cleared. Everything had been locked down. The city was a combat zone; it had been ready to become one.

**Kill! Don’t think! Kill!**

Gin slid in behind a crate, taking a moment to breathe as the others reloaded. His body wasn’t itching or aching. As long as he kept cutting people down, maybe it would never hurt again. Weapons aren’t meant to be kept on shelves like toys. They were meant to be used. He was a weapon. He was a weapon, and he was meant to kill.

In an archway, Reyes set one of the shotguns down to rub his neck. The doctor leaned over him, and her voice was a bare whisper. “How are you feeling, Commander?”

“Fine,” Reyes said brusquely, his own voice barely on the comms, “No ill-effects so far.”
“Let me know if that changes.” She left cover, dashing after McCree, who was in the middle of a duck-and-roll duel with one of the last few soldiers.

Side-effects? Gin looked back to Reyes. But the commander was already moving ahead. It was all Gin could do to catch up.

There was a splash of red on the wall that caught his eye, between the thrown knives and collapsing bodies. Too red to be blood. It was the poster for an opera. A show on stage for all to see. Botsca in a ragged red dress, teetering on the edge of the castle wall, about to jump. Gin tried to remember if he could remember the story.

\textit{Kill}, the voice commanded, and Gin put aside his thoughts and did so. He followed the commander out the broken doors, and over the bridge, into the shadow of yet another descending aircraft. More soldiers. More noise. More death.

He felt the wash of nanoparticles over him, soothing whatever aches and fatigue were building up in his system. “You’re welcome,” the doctor called, jogging to catch up.

He was fine. As long as he kept killing, he was fine. Everything was fine.

Something new appeared. Someone. A woman’s voice crouching a wild, keening howl, and an exosuit that left a red afterimage in her impossibly-quick passage. One of the Talon soldiers still standing suddenly collapsed, split in two by a careless flick of an outstretched blade. There was blood, the smell of seared flesh, and the open wound smoked as the soldier collapsed in pieces.

“What in the goddamn--?”

“Less talk, more bullets, Jesse!”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice, boss!”

She moved like the perfect dance partner, dodging and weaving from bullets and thrown knives. She was fast, a blur of red, and the blades on her arms looked like glass. Molten glass, maybe; hardlight had such a vicious beauty to it, in this shade of scarlet.

“This one’s mine,” he heard his own voice, and it sounded wrong. Hungry.

Hungry was fine, nothing was wrong.

\textit{Kill}!

She laughed, loud and almost demented, as she sprung from her crouched, poised position, bouncing from wall to wall before charging along the courtyard, dragging those blades behind her, leaving behind scorchedark and plumes of sparks. She was on the doctor, swift and vicious, before O’Deorain could even turn to see. O’Deorain screamed as the blade plunged into her, and there was that smell of burning flesh again.

Gin charged, tanto in hand, roaring as he knocked the assassin aside, as kept charging, forcing her back and driving her into the wall. She continued to laugh into his face, even as he twisted the blade, until the sound hiccupped and burbled, and her desperate attempts to slash at and kick away from him turned weak and spasmodic. And then merely reflex, the last echoes of life in a lifeless body.

“You alright, doc?”

“I’ve been worse.”
Gin wrenched the blade free, and watched the woman collapse at her feet. “Some assassin,” he muttered, feeling disappointed. Cheated, even. Equipped so well, but the laughter, the mantis-like movements… it wasn’t right. She could have been so much more of a worthy opponent.

Well. It just went to show that Shimada training was second to none. No-one could beat him. Especially not now. And certainly not after he was back to an upgraded body. He would be unstoppable, then.

“Art gallery’s just ahead. Should be smooth sailing from here!”

There was an explosion. McCree and Reyes ducked for cover as heavy machine-gun fire tore down the avenue, and the doctor put her back to the wall with wide eyes. Gin mimicked her, though his eyes narrowed.

“You just had ta say it, didn’t you?!”

“I withdraw my previous comment,” Reyes grinned, terse but refusing to panic, “We are definitely not out of the woods yet.”

Noise. Bullets tore holes in the architecture, pocking brick and stone with craters that might have fit fists. Gin felt the doctor’s nanomachines washing over him in a vibrant gold glow, numbing the sudden burn from a few close calls. His blood was spattered on the street, and it was red.

Reyes cried out as the massive exosuit barrelled into him, pinning him against the wall, and Gin leapt onto the machine’s back to stab with his still-bloody tanto, jamming it into the heavy assault-unit’s neck. While the machine bucked and tried to throw him off, Jesse took aim at seams of the armour, and the doctor threw some kind of dark, coiling mass from her right hand. As the blackened energy neared the heavy unit, it latched on, and Gin felt the unit beneath him shuddering and spasming. Weakening. He stabbed harder, faster, wrenching off the unit’s helmet, revealing the face of the operator within. But Jesse was faster on the draw, and Gin felt blood and brain matter spatter all over him as the Peacekeeper boomed and the bullet found its mark.

“That was mine!” He snarled, as the heavy body collapsed to the ground, Gin still perched on its shoulders.

“I didn’t see your name on it, partner.” McCree tapped the brim of his hat. “Sides, you got the last one, the Knifey McKnifehands. I saw the big fella first, so by law of dibs...”

Gin flicked some gore at Jesse, who danced back out of the way with a click of his spurs and a disgusted noise.

The doctor sighed wearily then moved past to check on Reyes.

Fio’s voice came over the comms again, terse and distracted. “Picked up some company on the way in. I’ll try to shake them but it might take a little while.”

“No problem, we’re used to waitin’ around!” Reyes straightened up, rolling his head on his shoulders, jumping in place to shake the ache off as the golden light faded off of him.

“And gettin’ shot at,” Jesse added, as more Talon soldiers swept into view from across the bridge.

Reyes added that to the report. “And getting shot at!”

“You two are adorable,” Doctor O’Deorain rolled her eyes, as she once again tried to keep up with those who were running ahead.
A strange shudder passed over Gin as he entered the art museum. The towering pieces of geometric art meant *something*, something keen and important and… no. There was no time to stop and think. After the wave of soldiers descending from the ceiling was dispatched, another of those cackling, howling assassins bounced across the walls. Now that Gin had fought one, the moves were easier to anticipate. As she charged across the gallery, hardlight blades burning into the floor, he interposed with a spinning kick that knocked her into the passage of a shotgun blast. She screeched and staggered, only to crumple as Jesse slammed Peacekeeper down over her head, hard enough to make the helmet crack.

Gin threw a metal star into the narrow gap that appeared, his suspicions confirmed. The eye he saw, before the throwing star punctured it, was wide, wild, the pupil shrunk to the size of a pinprick. Those assassins were reliant on some kind of drug-induced psychosis. That explained the speed, and the laughter, the carelessness.

He sneered behind his mask. A lifetime of training would always beat a pharmaceutical shortcut. He did not look back at the lifeless body as he leapt forward, back out into the night air.

“We’re at the extraction point,” Reyes thumbs his comms, eyes skyward. “Where are you?”

“I’m just entering Venice airspace. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Gin leapt forward, balancing on one of the strings of hanging lights, before launching upwards onto the café rooftop, bare plasticised hands slapping against the stone as he vaulted over. It was a nice place, the table still set for dinner, for tourists that weren’t coming. He stood a moment, just staring at the place settings, before flinching at the sound of breaking glass.

Jesse was trying to kick a broken wineglass under one of the tables, and was studiously avoiding everyone’s glances.

“If you’re not coming soon, you may as well turn around.”

“Whoa,” the cowboy looked up, panicked. “Don’t listen to him! We’re gettin’ outta here!”

Reyes gave a ‘just kidding’ smirk, and for a moment it felt like old times, like any of the missions on the field. The jokes, the banter, the playful sarcasm. Gin was almost expecting to hear one of the pump-up songs playing over the intercom.

But instead, there was the hum of aircraft as more Talon airships honed into view overhead. And, across the water, more transports.

Jesse’s returning smile faded, turned into a scowl, and Reyes turned away to reload.

The cacophony began again, with greater intensity this time. It was as though Talon knew it was now or never. The Blackwatch strike team were sitting ducks on the café roof.

“Down here, c’mon!” Reyes leapt from the rooftop. Jesse followed, with Gin and the doctor not far behind. The alley was full of soldiers, but it didn’t take long to clear it out, to get a bit of cover around the corner, to throw a few bodies into a pile as a barricade.

“Sniper,” Gin warned.

Jesse braced Peacekeeper against his wrist, squinting one eye closed, and pulled the trigger. “I barely know ‘er,” he joked, as the lithe body tumbled from the rooftop to the cobbles.

“Charming,” O’Deorain threw a handful of darkmatter around the corner, tubed suit humming and...
“Boy,” Reyes snorted, shaking his head. “Talon’s sure got some fun little toys, huh? Snipers, assassins, heavies with gatling guns for arms…”

“Talon once tried to recruit my father.” The words escaped from his mouth before he could stop them. He wasn’t a Shimada, here. He was a stuntman. That was his cover story. But with one stupid impulse, the need to talk, the impossible-to-repress need to belong, he might have given himself away.

Jesse blinked in surprise; his reaction wasn’t something to worry about, he was trusted. The doctor arched a brow; hers was, she was not. 

Reyes cocked his head. This particular piece of information that hadn’t come up in the defection meeting, but he’d known about it in his oblique way. “He didn’t take them up on their offer?”

Gin frowned, and shook his head. Picking his words carefully, giving just enough truth without giving himself away. He’d already said too much. “He did not find them to his liking. Their aims did not… coincide… with his own.”

Gunfire and large numbers. It was time to move. They split up, Jesse and the doctor dashing along the waterside while Gin and the commander charged headlong into the approaching soldiers. The ōdachi was starting to get heavy, or maybe he was getting tired. By the time they made it to cover, he was panting. Reyes was watching him in concern.

Gin waved him off, and braced himself. But his thoughts were wandering. Goro had been younger, back then. A young and hungry dragon, too young to lead but too ambitious to ignore. Small wonder the foreigners had made their offer. Gin thought about the photographs of mother, the shrine in his father’s office. He thought about how much his father had hated foreigners - Americans especially - and how fervently he clung to yamato-damashii. The story he had told about Talon had been a short one, a brief footnote that didn’t even make it into the clan histories, an offhanded comment from a father about loyalty and picking your business partners with care. But had there been more to it, more that was never said?

The thought was bothering him. So much was bothering him, tonight. He was starting to itch again. 

Stop thinking and get back to killing!

That time, the voice was definitely not his father’s. But when Reyes spoke at the same moment --

“You know, your brother would have made a good agent.”

-- Gin didn’t register what was said to him. His thoughts were like tar. But when he lifted his gaze, he saw the doctor and Jesse in the doorway, watching, and Reyes looking at him, a smile slowly fading, it did. He heard it. He felt it.

Brother.

Gin was about to tell him he was mistaken. There was no brother. There was only a man in shadow, a blot in his thoughts, darker than night. In every memory, in every thought, there was a twisted, gnarled distortion that had no face, no name. Just darkness, and pain. That was no brother. He had no brother.

Not since the night he died.
A good agent…?

*You will never make me proud, sparrow. You could only ever make me laugh.*

No. Father never said that.

Father never said it. But it was true. It was always the man in shadow who was better. More trained. More respected. More loved. More of what everyone had wanted the son of Goro Shimada to be. The perfect son. The heir. The vaulted scion.

Maybe he *would* have been a good agent. He certainly would have been better than Gin. Because Gin was just a twisted wreck, one-seventh of a human, the rest of him was vile and broken and cobbled together and…

He felt a wave of pain wash over him. Keen. Sharp. Fiery.

Black. And red.

He was not in cover anymore. He was in the thick of the fight. Blades flashing, blood spilling hot against his skin - his faux-flesh, he didn’t have skin anymore, he was a *mockery* of himself, of *humanity* - and there were so many of them, so many, but he didn’t care. He gnashed his teeth and howled and cut and pivoted and *kill* slashed a man in half from shoulder to hip, kicked the body away and *kill* did it again, another body cut clean through the armour, the ribcage, the spine. He slipped on a puddle of spilled organs and a bullet meant for his head *kill* took out the agent behind him and *deflect* he brought up the tanto *dive* sliding forward and *kill* drove it into the gut of one of the agents then *kick, push, down*, he felt heat on his back and there were blades in his fingers that *throw* sailed up to blind a sniper to leave her reeling and vulnerable to *kill* a swift strike from his blade before he slid back into melee, a kick, *another*, another, a spinning slash to *kill* and *kill* and *KILL*.

Then there was pain, real and deep and visceral, as he found himself caught in the hail of bullets. His body ragdolled against the rough brick wall, and he barely caught himself from collapsing by one arm. Red trickled down his wrist, puddled beneath him. Whoever was in the heavy assault unit suit laughed, and took aim to finish him off.

*Boy’s got a death wish.*

Gin could feel blood in his lungs, both the real and the replacement. He was drowning in it.

“Clearing the area!”

Gin felt his world spin as he was dragged by his legs back into the café kitchen. Jesse’s panicked voice. “Don’t you die…”

*Die.*

“… on me, Gin, don’t you dare.”

“Did you get him?!”

“We got him!”

“Doc?!”

“I’m working on it!”
Gin rolled onto his side, shuddering as he felt the bullet holes mending, as he felt slugs of metal being forcibly ejected from his body, as he felt the blood being siphoned from his lungs and guided back to his bloodstream. The yellow light itched, in a way that Angela’s nanotech did not. But now, of course, he was itchy and aching all over.

Kill. Kill and get rid of the pain. There are plenty more of them out there.

“There’s another one of those things out there, Jesse, gimme a hand. Doc, you got this?”

“I have this!” She answered, eyes almost feral with intent, her hand outstretched over Gin. “Stupid boy,” she muttered.

*Boy.*

*Boke.*

Gin spat up a bullet. It rattled around in his mask, caught between metal and skin.

The sound of gunfire tapered off for a moment, as Reyes and Jesse came back around the corner. Gin wheezed and tried to sit up, but he felt so tired. So itchy. Everything hurt. He lay back down again, tucking his knees to his chest.

“Touchy subject.” Reyes’ face was, for a split second, twisted. But then whatever that expression was, it turned to concern. “Don’t do that again, okay?”

“Or,” the doctor said, mildly. “If you do, do your best to only get shot in the parts of you that are biological in nature. It’s easier to mend than metal or plastic.” She aimed her palm at him again, washing another spray of the golden light over him, before aiming it at the other two. Healing their injuries.

They were shadows looming over him. Like trees. Like memories.

“This is your fault, Commander!” Jesse shouted as he reloaded. “We had a plan! We could have walked Antonio right outta the city! I didn’t sign up for this!” He gestured at Gin, curled up on the floor.

Reyes bared his teeth, but his eyes held no aggression. He had no retort, no joke, nothing to say. Whether Jesse found some comfort in that, or if the commander’s silence meant he was just as frightened by this close call, it was hard to tell. But Jesse’s accusing finger dropped.

“Commander!” Fio’s voice called through the comms. “I have visual on your position! I’m coming in for a landing but it’s gonna be a little hot.”

Reyes leant out of the kitchen, then back in again as a volley of bullets peppered the stonework. “Yeah, no kidding.”

Jesse gave Gin a hand up. Gin took it, a hand pressing to his side. No wound. Not anymore. But he itched and his ghost no longer fit in this body. He needed to kill something.

“Get to the roof. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Yeah, you clearly have that covered.”

Gin picked up his blades. They were red with gore. He’d killed so many tonight. How many? He couldn’t remember. But there was always room for more.
The ground shook with a dull explosion. And then it shook again with the same.

“Two heavy assault units.” The doctor’s poise was rattled, fraying at the edges. “We need to get out of here. Now.” A third explosion, and the doctor paled.

There was the hum of a ship overhead, and for a moment all four of strike team tensed. More troops? On top of the three heavies?

But Fio called out to them, and the shadow lowering down overhead was dark and familiar in shape. “Blackwatch team! Get to the roof for immediate evac!”

“Up,” Reyes barked, “Now!”

A stun grenade. A coiling orb of dark fire. Two bloody blades raised to deflect and block. A hand up and tables flipped for cover. They bought each other time, and safety, though all of them were bleeding by the time the Orca lined up with the café roof. Talon was relentless. There were more troops coming in from the water, and clambering over the rooftops, and another dull explosion to say another heavy unit had dropped in.

Kill. Kill. Don’t disappoint me, just kill them.

No, he thought. I can’t die here.

For a moment, he wondered who he was talking to, and why they were so angry.

Gin threw himself into the open hold of the Orca, sprawled on the floor as a seizure took him. He bit down on the bullet so he didn’t bite off his own tongue, and tried to look exhausted rather than suffering. He felt Jesse crouching over him, calling for the doc, who came over to investigate if Gin had been shot again. Across the other side of the cargo hold, as the Orca peeled away and picked up speed, Gin saw Reyes watching the three of them.

It was so hard to tell what the commander was thinking, when his face was in so much shadow.

When the debrief came, it was not as a group. They were split up, made to be alone. Gin was left in the room with nothing to do but bounce his leg under the table and think. When Morrison and Lacroix came in, both were pensive and tense. Gin recounted the events as best he could, watching both men as he spoke.

“We were supposed to get in and out, unseen and undetected. Commander Reyes changed the plan. Survival became our primary concern.”

“Changed the plan,” Lacroix rubbed two fingers back and forth along the underside of his chin, lips pursed. “I thought you said you weren’t briefed on the full outline of the mission.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Then how do you know the plan changed?”

Gin frowned, thinking back to Antonio’s office. To that moment. But every moment is proceeded and followed by another. Something had already gone wrong. How far back did it go? When had the plan changed? “I suppose it might have been when Commander Reyes shot Antonio in the face and the alarms started to go off,” he said, dryly.

The Strike Commander folded his arms. Lacroix made some notes on his datapad.
It was a quiet few days, afterwards. He wasn’t allowed to see anyone else. The only medical
treatment he was given was a handful of nanotech injectors, which he didn’t need. He set them aside,
along with the bullet that he’d saved as a souvenir. He was left to pace, and exercise, and to think.
Chasing his own thoughts in circles, unless they let him loose.

Doctor O’Deorain’s laboratory was empty. Completely. No files, no equipment, no personal effects,
furniture draped in sheets. She was gone, and there was nothing Gin could find about where she
might have gone to.

He found Jesse, picking up more cigars at Requisitions. He tried to ask, tried to speak, but all Jesse
wanted to talk about was the aftermath.

“The whole world knows ‘bout us now,” his lip curled in a sneer. “Got our faces plastered all over
the international news. Which ain’t real great for any of us, really. Got plenty o’folks back home who
would’ve rather thought I was rottin’ away in some high-security prison, but hey, nothin’s better than
a snitch with a cushy government job, right?” He punched a wall, then nursed his knuckles. “… your
people’re probably puttin’ two-an’-two together, as well. It’s all gone to shit.” He shook his head,
then turned and stomped off. “I’ll be at the range if y’need me. I gotta shoot somethin’.”

Gin had stepped aside to let Jesse go past, frowning over the words. ‘Gone to shit’, but now? Had he
not felt it in Venice? Maybe Gin was wrong. Maybe this flurry of insecurity was all in his head.

One way to find out, and just one person to speak to. To get answers from. And he was not an easy
man to track down.

It was almost by chance, a slim chance, a window of opportunity. There was a shadow on the roof,
backlit by some floodlight. Gin had come here for silence and solitude, but this, this shadow, was
better than chasing his thoughts in a circle again. He pressed himself back in the doorway, watching,
unable to look directly towards the figure standing over the light, but able to see the shadow cast on
the wall. It was Reyes, unmistakably, sighing out a plume of smoke as he looked out across the dark
Swiss valley and the distant lights of the cities.

Gin rapped his knuckles against the doorframe.

Reyes stiffened, the dark hood shifting as he glanced over. “… who is it?”

“It’s me,” he said, before he remembered that this was not the Hanamura balcony, that he was not a
young man meeting his father. “Gin.”

“Gin,” Reyes nodded, and stepped away from the light, from the edge. “Hey. How you been?” A
moment of hesitation. “Is Jesse with you?”

“McCree? No.”

“Huh. Weird. You two are normally joined at the hip.” The commander gave a low, humourless
laugh.

Gin moved over to join the commander, but he did not have eyes for the view, for the many
mountains, for the dim stars, for the spotlight shining up in their eyes.

The commander was already staring off into the distance, face blank and unreadable.

The air felt weighty. It was as though there was not enough breath to draw for questions, or perhaps
it was Gin’s imagination. Perhaps he was chasing too many questions at once, and none would ever
be asked. Maybe the silence would stretch unbroken before he could even think of a way to ask even
one of his questions, to phrase the ‘why’ in a way that would be answered.

But it was Reyes who spoke first. “Sorry about what I said back there, about your brother.”

For a moment, Gin felt the red and black pulse in his vision, the memory of the shadow-of-a-man, the blank spot in his memories deliberately scratched out.

“That was shitty of me,” Reyes continued, “Almost got you killed. I should have known better than that.” He looked down at Gin. “I’m sorry.”

Gin frowned up at the man, then moved his head and shoulders in what could be a ‘no problem’ kind of shrug, though he felt it being anything but. *Ask, ask, now’s the time to ask. Ask what happened. Ask why it all went wrong. Ask why. Ask!* But his tongue felt too heavy. Weapons didn’t speak. That was not a weapon’s purpose. And the tar and static from thoughts of his own past were slowing him down again, distracting him.

Reyes was already looking away, eyes fixed on the darkness, on the horizon behind the mountains. The leather of his gloves creaked as he adjusted them, fussed with them.

“You don’t talk about it. I get it. But… you remember what I told you, when we first met? ‘Revenge is a good motivation to get up in the morning’.” He paused, almost looking down, but he kept his face turned away. Avoiding staring directly into the light. “It isn't good for anything after that, though. You end up just…” He shrugged, palms outwards, shaking his head. “Well, you get shot. You probably noticed that, given how many times…” He faltered. His hands dropped to his sides.

For a moment, Gin saw the same man that had been in Antonio’s office. The same staring pause out into nothing. And it was nothing; Gin’s eyes flicked out to try and see what was out there, but there were only distant lights, shadows, and the night sky.

His back itched.

Reyes took a deep breath. “Hey, Gin?”

“… yes?”

The commander’s eyes were screwed shut tight, the creases at the corners deeper, the bags under his eyes almost like bruises. The man was exhausted, and when he looked down at Gin he looked almost desperate.

“You get it, right?” His eyes sought out Gin’s own through the gap in the mask.

Gin looked up at him.

“You get it,” Reyes repeated, though there was less confidence in the question a second time. He winced slightly, hung his head, started to look away. But then he looked back at Gin, fervent once again. “You trust me, right?”

Gin nodded. “Yeah, boss.”

“… ‘boss’,,” he repeated, with a weak laugh, a tired exhalation of a sound that wasn’t amused at all. This time, Reyes did look away, arms folding, shoulders hunching.

Gin frowned. “Was I supposed to say ‘no’?”

Every little tic and movement, the way Reyes’ lips pressed together, the brows furrowed, the eyes
looking upward as though trying to find answers… it all told a story that Gin could not understand. From where they stood together, side by side, by the roof’s edge with the light shining up at them, it was as though they were standing on a stage. Gin had had this dream before, long ago, when the audience had been a sea of writhing scales. It was different now, but still the same. He was still standing on a stage, blinded by the lights, unable to see the audience, unable to see backstage, or to read the scripts the others held. He didn’t even have a script of his own.

‘You get it?’ What was he supposed to get? He couldn’t see. He didn’t know what to ask.

“You’re one of my people.” The words came slowly, almost reluctantly, as though the commander were tiptoeing around something unspoken, something Gin was supposed to already know. “I look out for my people. You know?”

Gin nodded. And waited.

Reyes struggled, mouth opening, pressing closed again, eyes shutting as he braced against something in his own mind.


Reyes looked down at Gin again. Gin recognised the expression on his face, and it hurt. It stung. Disappointment.

But it was a brief flicker, one that twisted to a half-smile, a forced look of relief. “Yeah. Thanks. That’s… that’s all I needed to hear.”

No. Gin balled his hands into fists. No, there’s more, what aren’t you saying? What did I do, what did I say, why aren’t you telling me? What have I missed? What’s going on? But nothing came out. The air was too thick to breathe, his tongue too heavy in his mouth.

“Jack didn’t give you too much of a hard time, did he?”

The conversation was moving on. No way to draw it back. Gin mutely shook his head.

“Okay. Well. I should head inside.” He patted Gin’s shoulder as he turned and walked away. “Good talk.”

Was it? Gin watched the commander go, feeling an unpleasant unease in his stomach. That same kind of feeling when he had learned his family was yakuza, the feeling of his world being unsafe and different, when what he knew was inverted. Or incomplete.

You can’t see a story when you’re in the middle of it. You can’t.

There’s ink on his back to prove it.

Gin looked out across the darkness, then down. Hissing softly as he looked directly into the spotlight, stepping back with a wince and a raised arm. Stupid.

He blinked afterimages away, turning aside to follow the boss inside. Thinking, belatedly, why there was no ashtray, and no smell of cigarettes.

He stopped, and looked back again, now that he was far enough from the spotlight that he would not be blinded by it. No ashtray.
He looked at the wall. There was his shadow, just like Reyes’ own had been, backlit and well-defined.

No ashtray. No cigarettes. But there had been smoke.

Gin shook his head, blinking tired eyes, trying to dislodge the fatigue and the dissatisfaction. Maybe he would join Jesse at the range. All this thinking was fruitless and painful, and it was getting him nowhere.

There were boxes in his room, deliveries of prototype parts. Pieces of armour to clip on and over his body, to give himself some vague semblance of completion while the Mark 24 was being worked on. They were bulky things, designed to change his silhouette. Gin fished them out of the boxes, one by one, idly reading the instructions Torbjörn had sent as he clipped them into place. Uneven. Heavy. A breastplate that enclosed him right to left like a crab’s shell. Large curved pauldrons that felt more like shoulderpads. Additions to his waist and hips that flared out like an imitation of a kusazuri. He scowled at his reflection, eyes gleaming that unnatural crimson, and thought about how ridiculous it all looked. As though he were an action figure receiving extra outfits to be dressed in: limited edition Gin-Roh samurai armour.

But at least there was a helmet. It was the only benefit. He tossed aside the pieces of his mask has he fitted the new helmet in place, feeding the wires that grew from the back of his skull into each of the ports within. It was comforting, almost, to have the world light up, to have his visor display time and temperature, to be constantly scanning for movement and changes in the world around him.

It told him there was to be a knock at the door, before the knock had even been initiated.

Gin fastened the strap under his chin, locking the helmet in place, before tapping the control panel. The door slid open, revealing someone in black and red. Another Blackwatch agent. Another part of the team. Gin-Roh hadn’t seen him since the man had been assigned to the Kyoto safehouse.

“Carver?”

The Englishman barely seemed to notice Gin’s new armour. “They’re shutting us down,” the agent said, terse, brows furrowed, eyes alight with a wild kind of desperation. “They’re disbanding Blackwatch, Gin-Roh.”

The visor displayed the uptick in Gin’s heartrate.

“Who is?” He asked.

Carver clenched both fists. “Who else? The Strike Commander. I heard him talking to Reyes. We’re getting shut down, and we’re all going to be reassigned.”

No. It was clear as crystal and sharp as panic. No.

“And on top of that, all our assignments are gettin’ called off.”

Gin-Roh shifted uneasily in the doorway, feeling the weight of the armour plates bearing down over his body. Unfamiliar, incomplete. A sensation made worse by the looming dread. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Uh, because of the intel work on the Shimadas?” He gestured with both hands. “All those months of recon work are going down the drain. If we don’t do something now, before we get shut down, it’ll all be for nothing.”
“We’re just… leaving it?” Incredulity. Pain. Confusion. Reyes, on the roof, not half an hour ago, asking if Gin trusted him. “Dropping it?”

Carver’s eyes were dark and his lips set in a thin line. “Not if we go right now. I got a bunch of us in an Orca, ready t’ fly. Figured I should come to you ’bout this first, seeing as your beef’s personal. You in? It’s now or never, ninja.”

He was not ready. His mind was reeling, confused, dampened. But between the fog, the idea that Overwatch would turn their back on their promise, after all these years of poking him, rebuilding him, using him, made him so angry that everything else faded to black. Hanamura. The Shimadas. Now or never.

He grabbed his sword and clipped it to his back, feeling the way his armour locked the weapon in place. A good suit, even if he hadn’t had time to get used to it yet.

“Ikuze,” he breathed, and steam vented from along his jaw.

Notes:

- This chapter was planned to be posted not long before Storm Rising was released. However, I realised that a major segment of the chapter needed to be cut, as it did not fit with timeline or characterisation properly. Perhaps I will post it later, as a deleted scene. In the meantime, Storm Rising closed a lot of open plot holes and provided a more cohesive whole to the story I wish to tell. I will not further jinx myself by saying I am completely ready to move forward, but I can say at the very least that my concept of the timeline is far more concrete. I also apologise for taking so long, but between my job being busy and my computer breaking down, I am glad I got this far. This chapter was also meant to end at a later point, but I felt it necessary to break up the chapter so as not to overwhelm myself or my readers. More should soon follow, as it contains a scene I have been excited for, since before this fic’s first chapter.
- It was pointed out to me by CaduceusGuard that work on a ‘biohybrid’ musculature has been developed in Tokyo [link], rendering much of my earlier descriptions and visualisations of Genji’s recreation more accurate than I realised. It is always fascinating to see life and art in tandem.
- It has always bothered me that in Genji’s Blackwatch skin, his nipple is nowhere where it should be. Who better to point out an anatomical flaw than a doctor?
- Also, the right-over-left design of Genji’s Blackwatch skin has long stood out to me as being symbolic in small ways, not just in a link to Hanzo’s base skin but in regards to the symbolism of how kimono are traditionally worn.
- Many thanks to this tumblr user who has coherently and comprehensively worked to collect and collate Overwatch lore. When Retribution originally came out, I had trouble finding the right words and connections for my misgivings about how things went bad, and this particular post helped me see the larger narrative picture. I sincerely thank Segadores-y-soldados for all their hard work in expressing and bringing to light so much of the lore, this fic would not be the same without their hard work.

End Notes
Genji, particularly DeathInverted, HighOnNoon, and TempestOfArrows, as well as TurretMarker, Somber_Dragon, and CaduceusGuard. More acknowledgements will follow.}

{{Any suggestions are welcome. More will follow, longer and more detailed as I explore the depths of this character and his story. Apologies in advance if my headcanons do not match up with yours, but please be patient as I continue to explain myself!}}

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