Prisoner of War

The High Prince of Hoshido has been captured by Nohrian Forces. Having recently lost their Queen, Hoshido is in shambles. Recognising that it is his duty to step up and do what's best for his kingdom, Second Prince Takumi chooses to take Ryouma's place as Nohr's bargaining chip.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“Have him sent to the Northern Fortress,” said Marx, not raising his gaze from the reports on his desk.

He was much too busy to be troubled with such an insignificant task. And—closer to the truth—the entire ordeal reminded him of Kamui’s own arrival all those years ago.

*My brother was a spoil of war,* he thought, clenching his jaw. *And now this Hoshidan Prince being sent to us as what? A peace offering?*

There was something unsettling about the way Kamui—and now this Prince Takumi—was being treated.

*As though they’re less than human.*

Marx swallowed his worries and feigned disinterest.

“Is that wise, My Lord? Sending the Hoshidan to stay with his brother? They could be plotting—,”

“Kamui has proved his loyalty to Nohr,” said Marx, feeling a prick of annoyance rise in his chest, “there is no reason for worry. And no reason to question where his loyalty lies. He is with Nohr.”

And that was dismissal enough.

Even so, Marx couldn’t help but wonder what sort of future was in store now that a Hoshidan Prince arrived.

*I pray they treat you kindly,* he thought.

It had been different with Kamui; he had been no more than a boy and hardly the type to cause trouble.

But this new addition to the small company at the Northern Fortress—this Prince Takumi—he was more than capable of bringing disaster.

Takumi was in enemy territory. Farther into enemy territory than he had ever been before.

And it was terrifying.

“When I first saw you,” said the Nohrian sitting across from Takumi, “you sure were running that pretty mouth of yours. So what’s happened now? Cat got your tongue?”

The Hoshidan Prince didn’t raise his gaze.

They were in a carriage together, this Nohrian and Takumi.

Destination unknown. Fate unknown.

Everything very much unknown.
“You don’t even want to ask where we’re going?”

The archer moved his wrists against their rope bindings. They were tighter than was probably necessary.

His right arm ached from where the bone had been broken.

It was still on the mend, thanks to that blonde girl’s stave, but the pain shot up his arm whenever Takumi moved it a certain way.

*Useless for now,* he figured.

Takumi glanced out the window, feeling the foreboding darkness of Nohr weighing down upon him.

“I don’t care where we’re going,” the prince said finally.

“At last, he speaks!” said the Nohrian with a smug grin, “I was beginning to think you’d lost your tongue. And that’d be a shame indeed. What will we do if we can’t hear your lovely little voice?”

“You could introduce yourself,” said Takumi solemnly, ignoring the Nohrian’s comments, “that’s customary in Hoshido, exchanging titles.”

“Well, Hoshidan Prince,” said the Nohrian, “you’re not in Hoshido anymore, in case you’ve forgotten. But I’ll indulge you and play your little games; anything to keep you happy in this miserable place.”

Takumi frowned but said nothing, still waiting for an introduction.

Then again, he didn’t particularly care if he got one or not.

It was simply something to do in the agonising time that it took to arrive at…wherever they were going.

“I’m Zero,” the Nohrian said finally, “the most vulgar scum in all of Nohr.”

He said it like it was something to be proud of. Takumi would have scoffed had the circumstance been different.

“However,” said Zero, preening, “I’ve made a nice place for myself as a retainer to Lord Leon.”

This was an interesting bit of information.

“Oh, that catch your attention?” Zero asked, sly smile tugging at his lips.

Takumi snorted, “Hardly. I’m surprised you’re a retainer, that’s all. But I don’t know what I should’ve expected. It’s only natural for that magic-user to have a *simpleton* for a retainer.”

“Magic-user? You speak of Lord Leon,” said Zero, refusing to rise to Takumi’s jab.

“He has a peculiar tome,” answered Takumi with a half-shrug of disinterest, “it caught my eye earlier.”
“The Brynhildr,” Zero agreed, “a fearsome thing with fearsome power. Admittedly, however, I suppose I would question its power; after all, it’s only a book. But I’ve seen its power for myself already. And that’s enough for me.”

Takumi glanced out the carriage window again. A castle was coming into view.

“And not to mention,” Zero continued, more to himself than to Takumi, “a tome named for such a legendary creature. Valkyries don’t exist in this realm but what fearsome power they’d have if they did. And Brunhilde, that beautiful monster of a woman…”

He shivered and a noise of pleasure escaped from him into the air at the mere thought.

“It’s the perfect name for a tome belonging to my lord,” Zero finished.

“That castle, that’s where we’re headed?” asked Takumi, changing the subject.

“The Northern Fortress,” Zero supplied easily, “it’s where Lord Kamui has resided for the majority of his life here.”

Takumi blinked, finally turning his gaze upon the outlaw.

“Kamui didn’t live with his… with the others?”

For some reason, Takumi couldn’t bring himself to call the Nohrians Kamui’s “siblings.”

*Maybe it’s because… he’s my only hope in this doomed place.*

*But… He’s probably not even here. It’d be natural to separate us.*

*I’m such an idiot. Such an isolated idiot. Just a stupid chatterbox insufferable isolated idiot…!*

Zero shrugged, “I don’t know the details about Prince Kamui, I’m afraid. You’d have to ask those cute retainers of his. What were their names? The rosy-haired clumsy one, oh she’s entertaining.”

Takumi remembered her. Felicia was her name; she’d been with Kamui at the impasse.

“But that silver-haired butler… Joker, yeah, what a looker, wow,” Zero added with an approving nod.

He paused for a moment, gathering some unspoken thoughts.

“But for the most part,” the outlaw continued, “I’ve come to understand that Lord Kamui and his retainers reside here. His siblings often come to visit him when time allows. Similarly, myself and Odin have accompanied Lord Leon here a few times in the past.”

“I’ll actually be here with Kamui?” Takumi wondered aloud, surprised.

*Do they think I’m not a threat?*

That of course, was a bit insulting; he was the Second Prince of Hoshido, wielder of the Legendary Fuujin Bow.

*Fine then.*
Let them underestimate me.

Zero snickered, “Don’t think your brother will save you. I doubt he even knows that you’ll be here.”

The outlaw’s words rang true, only adding to Takumi’s worries.

“You’re brother,” Zero had said.

He’s not my brother, Takumi thought, wanted to say, wanted to shout.

Since the beginning, Takumi had been so very angry with Kamui—he still was—but the more he thought, the more he realised Kamui may be his only hope.

Even though it was he who got me into this mess, the Hoshidan thought with a heavy frown.

“If it eases your worry,” said Zero, “Lord Leon has been assigned to interrogate you.”

“That doesn’t ease my worry,” answered Takumi.

The outlaw shrugged, “I would be thankful that it weren’t Prince Marx. It was Lord Leon who caught me when I broke into the castle. And he was meant to execute me.”

“And yet here you are,” said Takumi.

The corner of Zero’s mouth twitched upwards in to the beginnings of a smile, “Here I am indeed. He spared me, you know. Maybe you’ll get lucky and he’ll spare you too.”

“I doubt it. I’m a Hoshidan. And a Hoshidan Prince at that,” Takumi said, “there is no place in Nohr for someone like me.”

And then after a moment of silence he added: “Not that I want there to be.”

“Even if you say that, Kamui is living proof that you’re wrong,” Zero said quietly as the carriage came to a halt.

“A word of advice,” said Zero quickly, sitting up straight and leaning to whisper conspiratorially to the prince, “Lord Leon is not unreasonable. Perhaps you can sway him with your feminine charm.”

“My feminine wha-?”

But the outlaw was already stepping from the carriage, preparing to transfer Takumi over to whoever had reign out here.

Out here in this desolate space where the Northern Fortress was the only building for miles.

Out here in Nohr, surrounded by Nohrians—by enemies—with no chance of escape.

I’m stronger than this.

Takumi closed his eyes and took a steadying breath as though that would be enough to ease the pain in his head.
The stress is getting to me...

And then in his mind he said it again: No, I’m stronger than this.

“Alright, let’s go,” said Zero, offering his hand to the prince.

Takumi refused the help and got to an awkward stand, fiddling with the bindings once more but to no avail.

He was a bit grateful (though he’d never say) that Zero continued to accompany him. Though the outlaw was a walking innuendo, he didn’t make any move to assault the prince or overstep any boundaries.

And that made him a decent creature in Takumi’s mind.

“I’m surprised,” the prince admitted as he trailed after Zero towards the fortress entrance, “I thought surely your lord would be here to give me a warm welcome.”

“All in good time, little Hoshidan Prince,” was Zero’s answer.

That didn’t make Takumi feel any better; he was sorry for having mentioned anything at all.

As he followed Zero into the foyer of the castle, he couldn’t help but wonder if Kamui would really have no idea that he was here.

Surely, surely Kamui would know, wouldn’t he?

The Nohrians couldn’t keep Takumi a secret—stowed away from Kamui’s eyes—not forever. Eventually Kamui would learn of Takumi’s presence and then-,

And then what?

He didn’t know. Would Kamui be willing to help him?

“I regret to be the one to inform you,” Zero said, drawing the prince’s attention once more, “but you won’t be residing in the jailing cells. Pity, really, I would have loved to spend some more time with you.”

Takumi was relieved to hear this. But at the same time, he felt worry shoot through him; he hadn’t even considered the possibility of being held captive like any other ruffian.

I hadn’t even thought that I would be jailed like some sort of...

He had almost forgotten the reason he was here.

“Your private chamber is this way,” the outlaw said, gesturing for Takumi to follow him.

The archer had no choice but to trail after him.

If the prince had intended to sneak away and find Kamui, he was going to have one hell of a time.

The Northern Fortress’s layout, as far as he could tell, was something akin to a labyrinth.
And Takumi admittedly had a horrible sense of direction.

Zero opened the door to the room and Takumi felt a knot form in his stomach. The space was cramped and dark and the prince could scarcely tell the difference between this and a jail cell.

“It’s private,” Zero said, as though answering Takumi’s unspoken question.

The prince blinked, still shocked into silence.

“Lord Leon asked for you be away from the other prisoners,” the outlaw provided with a shrug, “you’d have to ask him why though. Perhaps he’s already been swayed by your beauty.”

Takumi snorted, “I bet.”

Footfalls sounded down the hallway, heavy armour clicking against the stone flooring and Zero gave Takumi a slight push into the chamber.

He struggled over to the small cot and sat on the edge of it, feeling sick worry crawl its way up his throat. Zero hovered close to him, callused hands unwinding the rope bindings only to replace them with metallic shackles.

The outlaw hooked the left shackle to a chain that sat to the side of Takumi’s cot. He left the other wrist alone, assuming that there was no point shackling a broken arm.

He’d be right about that…

“Apologies,” Zero whispered.

It was so quiet that Takumi wondered if he had just imagined it. He wouldn’t have been surprised; his head was still pounding just from the stress of it all.

“My Lord Leon,” Zero greeted, attention moving effortlessly from Takumi to the Nohrian Prince.

Takumi hadn’t realised that the dark knight had arrived. Panic settled deep in his heart and the Hoshidan balled his hands into fists, annoyed at his own fright.

“Zero,” Leon returned, alto voice heavy with irritation.

The wielder of the Brynhildr.

Zero had mentioned the prince’s legendary tome earlier but only now was the reality setting in.

*He’s my Nohrian counterpart,* Takumi realised. And then after a moment he thought: *I need to be careful with this one.*

He considered Zero’s advice.

*I’ll do whatever I have to. As long as I can escape this place. As long as I can find Kamui and get away from here. As long as I can return to Hoshido.*

“Everything is as you’ve asked,” Zero supplied quietly.

It brought Takumi out of his thoughts and back to the present.
Zero sounded so very submissive but something about his tone made Takumi wonder how much of his servitude was genuine.

“I’d expect nothing less,” said Leon curtly.

“Is there anything else-?”

The Nohrian shook his head and put a gauntleted hand to Zero’s arm, a dismissing movement if ever Takumi had seen one.

“That’s all,” Leon said, “thank you, Zero.”

“Anything to please you, My Lord,” he answered before slipping away.

Takumi took in a breath to gather himself as Leon stepped further into the chamber. The Hoshidan could barely see him in the dim light.

_I’m stronger than this._

“Prince Takumi,” said Leon finally, settling his chestnut gaze upon the Hoshidan, “how I’ve waited to see you.”

Leon studied him for a few moments, eyes cold and scrutinizing. Takumi hated the way that gaze made him feel.

He jerked his wrists and the movement made the chains at his side rattle.

Leon smirked at him.

“So then,” the Nohrian Prince said, “you must know why I’ve come.”

Takumi held his gaze without faltering. Although, Leon’s words confused him.

_Not that I’d let him know that, of course…_

Zero had mentioned an interrogation but Takumi had no idea what an interrogation would be for.

_What can I tell them that they don’t already know? And besides, my presence here is enough to keep Hoshido at peace._

_I’m a living bargaining chip._

Left alone with Nohr’s volatile Second Prince, however, made death seem rather…imminent.

_Or, I’m a living bargaining chip for now, at least._

Leon frowned a bit before coming to stand before the Hoshidan Prince, pointedly looking down at him.

“Tell me the High Prince’s weakness,” he commanded quietly.

His tone was icy and demanding and Takumi was taken aback.

Not only by the power in Leon’s voice but also by the question itself.
He wanted to know Ryouma’s weakness? For what purpose?

“Ryouma’s weakness?” Takumi said aloud, finally voicing his confusion.

Leon nodded as though this were an obvious question, as though Takumi should have expected this. Although in truth, the Hoshidan hadn’t known what to expect in the slightest.

Leon didn’t seem to have recognised that fact quite yet.

“Is that his name? Prince Ryouma…” mused Leon, “yes, tell me how to best him in combat.”

“I-? I don’t know-,” said Takumi.

And he really didn’t. He was struggling to keep his composure.

The Second Prince of Nohr seemed much more interested in a battle of wit than a battle with blade and this was enough to keep Takumi on his toes. As much as he hated to admit it to himself.

...In the past when he was young and foolish and oblivious, Takumi had tried to best Ryouma with the katana.

But it had been obvious that Ryouma was too powerful, had too much skill, and that Takumi could not match him.

That’s why I chose to take up the Fuujin Bow, he thought.

The memory came unbidden and Takumi frowned; it was not often that he found himself thinking of the past.

Especially with Ryouma, before we…

“Do not lie to me,” said Leon with a venom that forced Takumi from his inner thoughts, “it is not going to benefit you to lie to me, Hoshidan.”

“I’m not lying,” answer Takumi, feeling his defences leap at Leon’s accusations, “and I have a name.”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Leon hissed, bending to take Takumi’s chin in his hand just because he could, “tell me what you know or I’ll keep rooting around in your head.”

Rooting around in my hea-?

Takumi blinked, suddenly wondering if his headache was not the result of stress but from some foreign magic sinking its teeth into his consciousness.

“Even if you claim not to know his weakness,” said Leon, “your memories speak something different. Tell me the truth.”

His memories?

Takumi didn’t want those being available and open for his enemy—his polar opposite—to see as he
pleased.

The archer mentally clamped down, walls coming around his precious memories to fend off Leon’s attack.

The mage grunted in obvious annoyance.

“It isn’t like you have the capacity to keep me out,” Leon said with a confidence that Takumi didn’t like, “I’ll find my way back in eventually. You can’t hide from me.”

“Bite me,” hissed Takumi.

He had decided he was going to be civil, taking note of Zero’s advice. But this arrogant boy—this Prince Leon—was absolutely atrocious.

The unnecessary display of his power was sickening.

Takumi would never have displayed his talents so carelessly and definitely not simply to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies with no intention of acting upon it.

That was much too cowardly an act. His actions would speak for themselves when they were needed.

No need for someone like me to abuse my power, he thought.

Leon snorted.

“You’ll tell me eventually,” the dark knight said, “but if you refuse to tell me now, I will pry the answer from you.”

“I’m telling you,” said Takumi as truthfully as he could, “I really don’t know his weakness.”

The memory of his childhood, when he’d chosen to take up the Fuujin Bow, resurfaced in his mind and Takumi let out a hiss, slamming down another layer of stone pillars in his mind.

“Get out of my head!” he spat.

Leon took his hand from Takumi’s chin and ran his gauntlets through the prince’s hair, metal claws tangling up in Takumi’s thick mane.

He yanked on the ponytail pointedly and Takumi swallowed his cry of pain.

“Just tell me,” Leon hissed, “it isn’t so hard. Why are you protecting him so?”

“He’s my brother,” said Takumi, “even if I did know, I’d never tell you. Unlike you Nohrians, our family bond is stronger than silver.”

Leon snickered, smug grin of poison playing at his thin lips.

Takumi felt a wave of uncertainty pass over him.

“Oh? And is that why my precious Kamui chose to side with us instead of you?”
The Hoshidan didn’t have an answer for that.

“He betrayed us,” Takumi said lamely.

The response was sour on his tongue and he felt the hollowness of the claim.

“No, he isn’t nearly as petty as you make him out to be,” said Leon, breath hot against Takumi’s skin.

The close proximity made the Hoshidan Prince nervous and he swallowed his fears, worrying suddenly if he could keep anything—memories and feelings alike—out of Leon’s sight.

Leon tipped his head to the side, “Why won’t you tell me, Hoshidan?”

“It’s Takumi, thanks for asking,” Takumi said, “my name, that is.”

The Nohrian shrugged, “Didn’t ask.”

There was a moment of dead silence before Leon spoke again, voice only a hushed whisper: “It’s a lovely name though, I’ll admit; Hoshidan names have always sounded lovelier to me.”

Taken aback by the compliment—was it?—Takumi blinked silently, temporarily swallowing back the insult that had risen to his tongue.

“You’re almost lovely too,” said Leon, “now that I’ve gotten a better look at you.”

Takumi had no words for that.

Not that it would have mattered, seeing as Leon leaned in, gauntlets still tight in the Hoshidan’s hair, and kissed him softly.

The dark knight traced the curve of Takumi’s full lips in an attempt to encourage the archer to part them and let him deepen the kiss.

Takumi drew backwards, head hitting the cobblestone wall behind him, and fear teared up in his amber eyes.

Leon frowned a bit at him.

“You could become my Hoshidan consort,” the dark knight said quietly, “and then I wouldn’t have to keep you locked up in here like an animal.”

He looked so serious that Takumi couldn’t help but snort, “I’d never sink so low.”

The prince sighed and tipped his head to the side, studying Takumi from a new angle.

“Do you not understand the position you’re in, Prince Takumi? You are a Hoshidan—an enemy of Nohr—sent here to keep the peace. You’re nothing more than a sacrificial lamb.”

“That’s not true-,” said Takumi defensively.

But the words fell flat.
Leon seized him in another kiss, more dominating and commanding than earlier. Takumi bit his lip viciously in an attempt to part them.

It separated them nicely, which was all that Takumi had wanted.

“Feisty,” Leon whispered, wiping his thumb across his bottom lip and smearing the blood across it.

Takumi let out a low hiss in warning.

“You pretend we’re on even ground here,” said Leon, “but you don’t seem to grasp the situation. I’m free to do whatever I please to you. No one will question me. You just seem like any other Hoshidan dog to the others. Nothing like the alleged ‘Second Prince of Hoshido’.”

“I could take you here and now,” the Nohrian whispered, taking a sick pleasure in Takumi’s shiver, “I could strangle you if I really wanted. Though I think I prefer to watch you bleed out, watch the light fade from those lovely eyes of yours, hm?”

Leon shrugged and stalked away from him, pacing the room as though contemplating his next move.

“You’re fate is entirely in my hands,” the dark knight said, “so do try to behave yourself.”

Takumi narrowed his gaze.

Some part of Leon’s words had obviously gotten to him.

Zero was right.

“Say, are you a virgin?” asked Leon.

Takumi blinked, cheeks flushing in disbelief at the Nohrian’s blunt phrasing.

“Well, are you?”

The archer glanced at the floor, trying to formulate a proper answer. And better yet, come up with a reason as to why Leon would be asking such a crass question.

What’s his goal…?

Takumi closed his eyes, brows furrowing against the sudden ache in his chest as his memories came flooding back to him…

…Ryouma’s hands caressing his chest, the press of the High Prince’s lips upon his throat, the whispered reassurances and compliments in the dim-lit dawn…

Ryouma…oh how I miss you…

The Hoshidan clenched his hands into fists at his sides, trying to reel in the sudden emptiness that was blooming in his chest.

When Takumi opened his eyes, remembering his present predicament, Leon was staring wide-eyed at him.

He realised, suddenly, horribly, that Leon had seen everything, glimpsed his past in his memories.
They were far too intimate to be shared, let alone with the enemy forces.

*And this prince most of all…*

“Go ahead,” said Takumi, deciding to initiate the conversation to spare himself some shame, “tell me how disgusting I am for my intimacy with my brother. Put that sharp tongue of yours to good use, Prince Leon.”

The Nohrian stepped up to him, uncharacteristically quiet and lacking his usual biting replies.

Takumi felt another wave of uneasiness pass over him.

Leon put his gauntleted fingers to a place against the Hoshidan’s neck.

“You like it here,” he said softly.

He moved his hand and put his fingertips to another place at Takumi’s throat, “and here too.”

Leon proceeded gently, hands sliding down the archer’s shirtfront, pressing the fabric against his nipples.

“And especially here.”

Takumi hissed and moved to dislodge Leon’s hands from their grips. Even beneath his heavy layers, the archer could feel himself hardening at the tender touches.

Even if it wasn’t Ryouma doing the touching, his body remembered the feelings and was responding to them.

*Despite the fact that this is… that this Nohrian…*

He clenched his jaw.

Leon turned away and quickly shed his gauntlets and gloves so that his pale hands were naked in the dim light.

He turned and gently cupped Takumi’s face, hands surprisingly warm against his skin.

The archer resisted the urge to lean into the warmth.

Then Leon readjusted, deciding to take a seat at Takumi’s side and dropping his hands into his lap idly before continuing.

“It would be hypocritical… if I were to insult you for your actions with your brother,” said Leon, voice barely audible.

If Takumi hadn’t been watching the Nohrian’s lips as he spoke, he would have been confident he’d imagined Leon’s reply.

Leon reached over and laid his hand atop Takumi’s wordlessly. Whatever vicious insult Takumi had been intending to let loose dissipated on his tongue as images flooded into his mind.
Not so unlike Takumi’s own experiences, the memories—Leon’s memories, he realised—were of himself and Marx, equally as intimate.

*Mores alike than I care to admit,* Takumi thought to himself.

And then, of course, he felt a sense of overwhelming shame at having had the thought in the first place.

“But none of that matters now,” said Leon, who didn’t seem phased by the memories he’d shared, “because Marx is busy with his own agenda and I with mine.”

Takumi was preparing a response, feeling an uncomfortable sense of camaraderie with the Nohrian Prince when Leon leaned in and kissed him forcefully, tongue pushing between his lips to explore the Hoshidan’s mouth.

It was an invasive movement, much more aggressive than Takumi had expected.

But Leon didn’t seem to mind Takumi’s surprised gasp, simply swallowing up his moan with a satisfied noise.

When he withdrew, Takumi’s face was flushed in the dim light and his breath came out in a heavy pant.

“I’ll offer again,” said Leon, sounding very serious as he got to a slow stand, “submit yourself to me and you won’t have to stay here.”

Takumi closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, “It would be kind to say that I appreciate your offer. So… I appreciate your offer. But there’s no way in hell I’d ever accept.”

Leon shook his head and his icy rage returned as he schooled his features; whatever memories the pair had shared earlier were of no importance now.

“Then I suppose I’ll simply take what I want. I didn’t think it would come to this. But King Garon was right, you do need to be taught your place, Hoshidan Dog.”

And Leon did not waste any time undoing the layers of Takumi’s foreign garb, fingers nimbly pulling the fabric free piece-by-piece.

He had no trouble with the tassels and clasps, unwrapping the archer as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

As it was happening, Takumi—feeling more powerless and ashamed than ever—couldn’t help but think that Leon was taking the very essence of his being apart piece-by-piece as well.

Worse still was the fact that Leon knew exactly where to touch and exactly what to do to reduce Takumi to a needy mess.

He proved it as he bit down at the archer’s neck, rough enough to leave a mark before caressing the welted skin with his tongue.

Takumi shivered at the loveliness of the feeling and then hated Leon all the more for it.
“I’ll have you begging to take me,” the Nohrian promised coldly, “so try to remember that I offered you an alternative.”

Takumi snorted, hoping to keep up his façade of superiority.

Leon shrugged and moved to take one of the Hoshidan’s nipples between his index finger and thumb, rubbing the pink nub until it pebbled beneath his touch.

“N-no-,” Takumi hissed out as Leon ducked his head to suck at the other, mouth latching onto the perky bud.

The dark knight moved to clench the entirety of Takumi’s breast in his hand as he sucked at the other, tongue massaging the sensitive skin.

“St-op-,” the prince whispered.

Leon hummed in acknowledgment but did nothing to slow his actions, intent on doing as he’d promised he would.

Takumi curled forwards over himself as though the cramped space would force Leon away. But his hot breaths against the dark knight’s neck seemed to only fuel him.

When Leon finally pulled back, glancing into Takumi’s face to judge his reaction, the Hoshidan couldn’t help but let out a relieved sigh.

_He’s stopped, thank the sweet Dawn Dragon…_

Leon, mistaking the sigh to be one of disappointment rather than relief, shot him a smug grin.

“You want me to keep going, Prince Takumi?”

The archer took a steadying breath that did nothing to steady him whatsoever.

Leon kissed him again without preamble, with an angry sort of passion that Takumi was beginning to hate.

It reminded the prince of Ryouma and that made it all the worse.

“So what do you say?” said Leon when he pulled back, separating the line of spit between them with a quick lick of his lips.

His breath was hot against Takumi’s mouth and the Hoshidan attempted to hold back his shiver.

“Will you beg for me now?”

Takumi shook his head and then, gaining a bit of confidence said: “No. Not for you. Never for you.”

Leon smirked, “Is that a challenge, Prince Takumi?”

The Hoshidan Prince found himself swallowing his confidence and whatever hopes he had of escaping along with it.

Leon nudged his way between Takumi’s legs, taking a comfortable perch there as he put his hands
atop Takumi’s so that the archer could do nothing against him.

Leon leaned in and tipped his head to the side so he could press a hot kiss against the archer’s neck.

“D-don’t-,” whispered Takumi.

But even as he said that, he’d already adjusted his head to give Leon better access.

The Nohrian took full advantage of that, taking his sweet time drawing his teeth over Takumi’s skin and then sucking sweetly at any place where he chose to make a dark mark.

The memories of Ryouma came rushing back suddenly and Takumi thought for a moment that he could just pretend, just pretend it was Ryouma’s heat against him, Ryouma’s caresses, and Ryouma’s tender touches.

And then, as though breaking some unseen spell, Takumi felt hot shame flood his insides.

*To compare Ryouma to this…to this boy who calls himself a prince would be…*

It was too cruel.

As Leon kept Takumi busy with his mouth, he took his hand from atop Takumi’s right—his arm was broken anyway—and instead slid it into the prince’s waistband.

Leon was pleasantly surprised to find Takumi’s cock hard and eager for his attentions.

“With that monster of a brother, I would have expected a bit more stamina from you, Prince Takumi,” he whispered, voice mocking.

Takumi jumped at the sudden warmth around his dick and Leon couldn’t help but laugh against his skin.

“Sensitive here, are you? That’s good. I like that.”

Takumi tossed his head back and closed his eyes, straining against his binding as Leon folded onto his knees and pulled the archer’s trousers down, exposing his cock.

The air was frigid and cool and the Hoshidan Prince let out a hiss at the uncomfortable chill. But it was quickly replaced when Leon slipped his mouth overtop of Takumi’s dick.

The Nohrian gave it an experimental suck just to test Takumi’s limits.

“No-,” the archer began, voice feebler than Leon had expected, “please-.”

Yet he rocked his hips all the same, body desperate for Leon’s sweet heat to stay enclosed around him.

Takumi jerked when Leon took him deeper and the Nohrian Prince had to put a hand to the base of his cock just to keep the archer steady.

And, perhaps more importantly, to remind him who was in charge.

*We wouldn’t want you to forget that you’re the prisoner here, now would we?*
Takumi bit his lip until it bled, intent on keeping any pleasured noises from reaching Leon’s ears. But even with his attempt, the prince couldn’t keep his moans from slipping between his bruised lips as Leon took his cock as deeply as he could.

The Nohrian’s nose pressed against Takumi’s silver hairs and when Leon moaned around the archer’s dick, it sent waves of sweet vibration through him.

“D-Dammit-,” Takumi hissed, feeling the pleasure coil tightly in his groin.

He tensed as the waves of his orgasm rose up unbidden. Takumi’s hands twitched uselessly at his sides and he let out a groan, unused to such helplessness.

“I-, please, I-,”

He was well-aware that his pleading was anything but dignified.

But at this point, Takumi was finding it difficult to do anything to defend himself from the Nohrian between his legs.

*I can’t-, but I... I have to be... No, I-, I’m stronger than this.*

Gods, he didn’t believe it.

Takumi came with a cry and Leon seemed to have no trouble with the load. He swallowed it down easily and raised his gaze as he pulled away from the archer’s groin.

One of his bare hands curled around Takumi’s softening cock, stroking it into hardness again and the archer let out a small whine at the over-attention.

Leon licked his lips and straightened a bit so that he was level with Takumi, leaning in to kiss him deeply. The dark knight kissed him hard enough to make Takumi taste his own essence and the archer had to divert his thoughts elsewhere.

“Tell me the High Prince’s weakness,” Leon said, voice husky and raw from his previous endeavours.

“I-, no, I-,” Takumi shook his head, letting out an exhausted exhale.

Leon withdrew completely then, frustration finally in plain-view.

He turned briskly on heel, gathering up his gauntlets in his arms and clasping the Brynhildr to his chest tightly.

“I don’t know why I bothered; this journey was a waste indeed. Shame.”

He paused and took in a breath; the icy mask he wore had returned once more.

_The interrogator._

That was what his blank expression reminded Takumi of. Coming back to the present, he hurriedly closed his legs as though that would be enough to hide his shame in remaining so naked and open in Nohr.

Leon cleared his throat though his voice was still husky when he spoke:
“Zero will attend to you if you require anything of great value. My elder brother, the Crowned Prince, will arrive in a week’s time to get the answers I need from you.”

Leon turned on heel and swung one of his hands daintily, as though he were waving a small farewell.

The chain that encircled Takumi’s left wrist shattered to pieces, splintered by roots that had seemingly materialised out of thin air.

“There’s really no point in keeping that on, I suppose,” Leon commented to himself, brushing the cover of his tome off with his hand.

“If you do choose to accept my offer…” he began and then, as though thinking better of it, snapped his mouth shut and briskly exited.

Takumi sat in the darkness alone until he couldn’t hear Leon’s footsteps anymore.

When he was sure he was alone, the prince hurriedly drew his garb closed once more in a practiced manner without much thought.

“I really don’t know Ryouma’s weakness,” he said into the blackness.

The archer shook his head and closed his eyes, leaning backwards slowly to rest his head against the stone wall. He was displeased at being left in the darkness, alone to mull over the previous events.

He had a week before he would have to face the Crowned Prince.

Marx, if Takumi remembered right.

* I wonder what sort of tactic he’ll take. Surely one a bit different than Prince Leon’s… *

Even so, Takumi couldn’t help but recall the memories that Leon had fed into his mind. Something about the relationship between Leon and Prince Marx was so intrinsically like Takumi’s own relationship with his brother that it frightened him.

* We’ve been enemies for so long, Nohr and Hoshido. *

To think that his Nohrian counterpart—his enemy—would have ended up in such a similar relationship with his elder brother was bothersome.

Takumi shook his head and let out a weary sigh.

* Prince Marx. I wonder what he’s really like. *

Leon’s memories hadn’t exactly painted the Crowned Prince in a simple light.

He seemed much more complicated than he had whenever Takumi had thought of him in the past; his judgment was getting cloudy suddenly.

It had been easy to look at the Nohrians as enemies—that was what they’d always been—but now,
something had changed.

Takumi wasn’t sure what, exactly, but he found himself unable to compare the heartless Crowned Prince Marx in his mind with the tender elder brother that Leon had revealed to him.

It had been so obvious through Leon’s memories that Marx cared fiercely for him.

Something about that knowledge made Takumi’s heart hurt a bit, though he’d never say.

*He must care fiercely for Kamui as well.*

And if that was true, if Kamui had only ever been exposed to the tender elder brother Marx, then it didn’t seem all that strange that he had sided with Nohr. The realisation frightened Takumi.

He assured himself that it was just the darkness, playing tricks on him and making him think strange things.

But his revelations begged the question: “Where does that leave me, in all this?”

*I guess I’ll have to wait and see.*

So Takumi readjusted in the narrow cot, moving to massage his aching arm and especially tender wrist from where the metal shackle had chaffed against his dark skin. He had only just gotten used to the ache of his right arm and now his left was giving him trouble too.

*I’ll be lucky if I can ever shoot an arrow as well as I did before all this...*

But the archer felt it was necessary to focus on something else, even something as miniscule as the dull pain in his arm, or how he was going to wield the Fuujin Bow when he escaped, anything, just to distract him from the previous engagement.

He didn’t want to remember the gentleness of Leon’s attentions and how it reminded him of Ryouma’s soft caresses.

*He played me, that mage... Greatest Mage in Nohr, yeah maybe, but only because he’s a manipulative cheat...*

Takumi sighed again and willed the gaping emptiness in his heart to subside.

*Let’s see how this Prince Marx compares. Surely he can’t be any worse than this.*
Beneath His Aegis

Chapter Summary

It has been a week since Prince Takumi arrived in Nohr. He's already met the cruel and cold Second Prince of Nohr: Leon. Bothered by Takumi's insubordination, Leon asks his elder brother, the notoriously vicious Crowned Prince, to deal with Takumi instead. The plot thickens as Takumi and Prince Marx begin to wonder if some darker force is at play, intending to sabotage Takumi's place in Nohr and force the kingdoms back into an all-out war. (Spoiler Alert: they're right).

Chapter Notes

///uh,,, there are brief mentions of the Awakening timeline in which Inigo and Lucina are siblings. (Also, Owain and Marc/Morgan are siblings but its not exactly relevant to the plot right now).

On the morn that Crowned Prince Marx was to arrive at the Northern Fortress, Zero was the one to wake the prince.

He was wrapped beneath his cloak in these quiet hours, as though that would be enough to distance himself from the tense aura that was swarming within the castle.

Zero had already seen Felicia trip over herself and knock both Joker and Lord Kamui flat on their faces.

“Lord Marx is arriving soon,” Joker had said, sounding irritated as always, “try to behave yourself, Felicia.”

“Oh, I’m sure it's alright,” Kamui had said, always jumping to the maid’s aid.

Zero had snickered to himself at their banter, but Felicia wasn’t the only one slipping up because of Marx’s impending arrival.

It’s everyone.

He had had a hard enough time rousing Lord Leon from his sleep, he couldn’t imagine what it would be like to wake Prince Takumi as well.

Good thing I’ve experience with this, he thought to himself, as he made his way to Takumi’s temporary quarters.

Were they temporary?

Zero didn’t know.
When Zero arrived, Takumi let out a small noise of discomfort and turned on his side, arm twitching in his sleep.

Having dealt with nightmares of his own, Zero was unbothered with having to lean so close to shake the prince awake.

Takumi simply shrugged his hand away and moved closer to the cobblestone.

*Lord Leon wouldn’t mind if I took some… liberties in waking the prince, would he?*

Deciding that he wasn’t too far out of line, Zero leaned in again and pinched Takumi right on the nose.

The result was instantaneous.

Zero figured he was rather good at rousing young princes from their slumber.

“Ryouma please, I’m too old for that now!” Takumi snapped as he swatted Zero’s hand away.

But his irritation wasn’t genuine and there was a small smile already gathering on the prince’s face.

Having never seen this playful side, Zero was temporarily shocked into silence, amazed at the transformation.

“You always were an early-riser, damn you…” Takumi muttered, but there was no venom in his voice.

“Hate to rain on your parade, Hoshidan Prince,” said Zero softly, wishing he didn’t have to break this perfect fantasy.

*He’s hardly conscious but he’s happier right now than he’s been the entire time I’ve seen him…*  

“But I’m not your big brother.”

As if finally coming out of his sleep, Takumi sat up and clapped a hand over his mouth, seeming to realise what he’d said.

“Good morning.  And welcome to Nohr,” said Zero with the smallest of teasing smiles.

There was something bittersweet in it, like he couldn’t quite force the playful nature to the forefront so quickly after just realising he’d ruined Takumi’s small illusion.

*I wish you would smile like that more.  Not that anything in Nohr will ever cheer you up like your big brother does… but even so, one can hope that maybe…*

The prince let out a sigh and sat up, stretching his left arm above his head, the right one hanging limp at his side.

Annoyed with the dual feelings rising in his chest—much too early in the morning to be dealing with such feelings—Zero decided to say exactly what he’d been thinking for an entire week.

*He’ll probably call me names again for this but… anything to get this pity out of my head…*

“I’ll admit, you’re more of an idiot than I thought.”
He took a seat beside Takumi on the cot as the prince gaped at him, seeming shocked at Zero’s bluntness.

*Which is surprising. Though, I suppose it should come as no shock, this would have happened sooner or later; it always does.*

Zero didn’t have need of feelings for a Hoshidan Prince; pitying him or finding him interesting would do no one any good.

*So I should stomp out this feeling before it blooms into something more troublesome. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience Lord Leon.*

Takumi snorted, and that brought Zero back to reality.

“You don’t even know me. So don’t call me an idiot, Scum.”

*There’s that familiar scowl and snappish tone. I was beginning to wonder where that rebellious Hoshidan Prince had gone off to…*

“Back to the name calling, are we?” said Zero, feeling oddly comforted by their back-and-forth.

And then he winced as he realised.

*No, he chided himself, don’t get attached. Don’t cause trouble for Lord Leon. No good will come from this…*

Even if he’d thought that, he said: “Fine by me, Prince Takumi. But I *did* try to help you back there with my advice. You must’ve thrown all of Lord Leon’s kindesses back in his face if he managed to get Prince Marx to come down here to deal with you.”

Takumi glanced away, squinting into the darkness of the dimly lit room.

He seemed bothered by something.

Zero wondered what had happened a week ago; Leon hadn’t been very helpful in supplying details.

*He left me like an unquenchable man in the desert, that cruel prince…*

“Your master is a liar and a cheat,” Takumi said quietly, earning a surprised blink—wink?—from Zero.

The prince paused, gathering himself, before continuing: “I have a newfound respect for you, but only because you’ve been his retainer for this long without completely losing your mind.”

Zero lifted an eyebrow in surprise, “Oh, a compliment! Colour me surprised. But do tell, what did Lord Leon offer you? You must’ve really upset him. He wouldn’t dare ask Prince Marx to come down here, what with knowing how much his big brother despises these sorts of things. Ever since Lord Kamui, that is…”

“I’m embarrassed to even recount the events,” said Takumi with an honesty he had not previously allowed.
Zero seemed off-put by that response.

*I’ve got to pry some answers from these silly princes…*

Takumi glanced over to study him. The outlaw had removed his cloak and cushioned it behind his head so he could rest comfortably against the cobblestone wall. Without his cloak today and Takumi realised he could see a stretch of scars across Zero’s bare arms.

He glanced away, feeling that it was rude to stare. Unable to find a more suitable distraction, the prince went back to the topic at hand:

“He-,” began Takumi softly.

And then, as though deciding to take a different tone, began again with: “Listen, uh-, is Prince Leon a very-, romantic person? No, maybe, is he a very… sexual person? …In your opinion?”

“No one is more sexual than me,” said Zero with deadly seriousness.

He seemed unfazed by the question.

Even so, Takumi couldn’t help but let out an irritated sigh.

“No, but in all seriousness,” said Zero finally, “Lord Leon is very close with his siblings. Though, admittedly, I don’t know much about his relationships with them. Or anyone. Except for one thing.”

Takumi glanced over at the outlaw, nodding for him to continue.

“I taught him everything he knows.”

Takumi frowned, “Everything? Because the events that transpired nearly a week ago…”

Zero returned the frown, curiosity eating at him though he’d never say.

“I suppose it’s fair to say,” said the outlaw, “that Lord Leon has always been quite creative; nothing is ever simple with him.”

Takumi felt icy shame flood his insides.

*Leon told him. He knows. Leon told him everything. He knows exactly what that prince did to me… and now he’s taunting me… these Nohrians… they’re all the same. I can’t believe I thought this one was any different…*

“Lord Leon is incredibly talented with the magical arts,” said Zero in a tone that suggested it was a secret.

But he was also changing the subject.

*Was I wrong…?*

“And this sets him apart from his siblings. He is so talented that they feel he can take care of himself.”

“So they dote on Kamui instead,” finished Takumi, suddenly troubled.
Zero nodded, “Yes. It often results in Lord Leon behaving in a strange manner to make up for these baseless insecurities of his; don’t fault him for it, Prince Takumi.”

“He violated me,” whispered the archer, finally able to speak it aloud.

He didn’t care to elaborate and Zero didn’t ask him to do so.

*Though I’m dying to know more,* the outlaw thought though didn’t say.

“I was just-, I was wondering if it was a-,”

*If this is just how he is…? How Nohrians are…? No, maybe not. This one seems… fine enough.*

“What? A normal thing? If there’s anything normal about my liege then I’ll be sure to let you know when I discover it,” remarked Zero with the smallest of sighs.

Takumi nodded and the pair sat in silence for a bit.

“I know that words mean nothing,” said Zero, finally breaking the silence, “especially from me of anyone, but I truly do apologise for Lord Leon’s behaviour towards you. You have had to bear the brunt of his anger, not only because you’re Hoshidan, but also because he is quite the insecure little lordling.”

Takumi closed his eyes and leant back, resting his head against the cobblestone behind him.

“He did make me an offer though,” the prince said softly, “Just like you said he would.”

“You denied him?” asked Zero, seeming intrigued.

*Is he going to elaborate… at last?*

Takumi was surprised that the outlaw didn’t know about the exchange; it meant that Leon hadn’t said anything about it to his retainers.

*Should I be relieved then that that prince kept his mouth shut?*

Even having thought it, Takumi was relieved.

*I thought that he’d…*

That he had told Zero about everything.

Deciding it was safe to elaborate, Takumi said: “Prince Leon said that if I became his Hoshidan consort, he would provide me with some freedom.”

And then, as if an afterthought, said: “as much freedom as I can hope to get in Nohr, I suppose.”

*Lord Leon said… what…?*

Reeling from this new information about the delicate situation, Zero stumbled over his words: “A-, he wanted you as some sort of… bed slave?”

Takumi could hear the confusion in his voice.
The prince offered an awkward shrug, wincing as pain vibrated in his elbow.

“I don’t know what any of this means.”

Zero sat for a moment, mulling over the new information before speaking again.

“I think perhaps,” he said, “he knew you would refuse.”

“Excuse me?”

The outlaw offered his own shrug, “Well, in my experience, though Lord Leon may have a high sex drive, he doesn’t often act upon it. I think that if you had agreed to his terms, he would really have no use for you.”

“Then why…?”

Zero shook his head, “Like I said: he knew you would refuse. I’m interested to see what sort of a game he’s playing, though.”

“Tell me when you figure it out,” said Takumi glumly.

“You’ll be the first to know,” Zero said as he got to a stand, pulling his cloak back over his shoulders.

He turned back, observing the Hoshidan Prince in the dim light.

*He looks so delicate…*

Zero had been joking earlier when he’d said that Leon had been swayed by Takumi’s feminine charm but there was something otherworldly and beautifully foreign about him.

*Not that I should be surprised, I’ve seen more than a few Hoshidans…*

“That reminds me,” said Zero, trying to remember what he was going to say, “there was a… strange order that Lord Leon gave to me…”

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and withdrew a thin slip of fabric.

“Kinky,” Takumi deadpanned.

The outlaw snorted at that and made his way back over to the prince, “I’m not sure what purpose it serves but you’ll want to close your eyes for this.”

The prince’s eyes fluttered closed and he sat there, unmoving, as he waited for Zero to slip the fabric across his face.

*Delicate, and so innocent,* the prince seemed like only a child now, as Zero watched him wait.

He didn’t flinch when Zero moved to set the blindfold against his cheekbones.

*He probably never expected this to happen. He’s just a boy who lost his mother. And a second prince, at that, never expecting to be in this sort of position…*
The fabric was cool against Takumi’s cheekbones and he was grateful for Zero’s mindfulness as the outlaw was careful not to catch any stray hairs as he tied the piece into place.

“Why a blindfold, I have no idea,” Zero admitted when he leaned back.

“You said Prince Leon didn’t act on his drives,” muttered Takumi.

“Oh, he doesn’t,” Zero agreed, “and besides, it’s Prince Marx who’s coming to see you today. I hate to admit it, but I’m as clueless as you are, Prince Takumi.”

The Hoshidan sighed, “There’s nothing to be done now.”

“Good luck,” said Zero softly before making his way out of the cell.

His voice had been so quiet that Takumi wondered if he had imagined it.

But he didn’t have much time to consider; the sound of harsh footfalls served as distraction enough.

*Prince Marx.*

*This is nothing compared to the horrors of last week.*

Takumi’s hands were shaking and he hated himself all the more for being afraid. He clasped them together in his lap and sat as straight as he could, drawing up his memories of how Ryouma always looked when nobles came to visit their court.

Thinking of Ryouma made the ache in Takumi’s chest worsen but he bit his lip and set the pain aside.

He took a deep breath and waited.

*I’m stronger than this.*

***

“This is simply unacceptable.”

That had been the first thing that the Crowned Prince had said when he’d seen Takumi.

Just when the archer was readying his reply, Marx came up to him, hastily pulling the blindfold from his face.

“What-?” Takumi began, but fell silent upon realising how close the proximity was between himself and the Nohrian Prince.

All of Leon’s memories came rushing back into Takumi’s head and he felt his cheeks heat.

*Prince Marx…*

This was the same Crowned Prince who Takumi had spent years hating, silently threatening, praying for his immediate demise.

But he was also Leon’s elder brother, who had a softer side. A softer side that Leon had felt it necessary to share with Takumi personally.
And now Prince Marx was close enough to kiss. He seemed displeased but Takumi didn’t feel that Marx was displeased with him.

“Walk with me,” said Marx in a voice that did not allow for any sort of resistance.

Confused, more than anything, Takumi got to a stand and stalked after the Paladin, surprised that Marx didn’t check over his shoulder to make sure he was following.

When Takumi could no longer keep quiet, he finally asked: “Where are you taking me?”

Marx clenched his gauntleted fists at his sides, seeming suddenly unhappy with the arrangement.

Feeling that he’d done something wrong, Takumi took a hesitant step back.

The memories of his interaction with Leon came rushing back and he had the urge to bolt, to hide, to get away from the Crowned Prince.

_They’re all my enemies… I can’t trust any of them. If that Prince Leon is capable of what he did to me… so is this one. They have the same blood…_  

Marx slowed his step and he glanced down, hazel eyes glassy as though he were haunted by what he’d seen.

It reminded Takumi of Ryouma which made it all the worse.

“It was not my intention to ‘take’ you anywhere,” Marx supplied simply, “you choosing to accompany me was your decision alone.”

When Takumi said nothing, Marx continued with: “to put it simply: your treatment has been sub-par, something unfit for royalty.”

Takumi blinked, silent for a moment.

He hadn’t know what he’d been expecting the Crowned Prince to say but that hadn’t been it.

“But I’m your enemy-!” he whispered, staring incredulously at the Paladin.

And then, when Marx had nothing to say, Takumi snorted, “Oh, I get it now. This is some new magic trick where you’re going to manipulate me.”

Marx frowned for a few moments and it was just enough time for Takumi to begin to feel shame for his harsh wording.

“It’s no trick,” said the Paladin quietly, “I cannot manage magic like Leon or my sister Camilla. No matter what side you’re on, royalty must be treated accordingly. There are standards and yours have been neglected.”

And then, after a moment, Marx bowed his head in a miniscule movement of apology that Takumi almost missed.

“I’m sorry,” said Marx curtly.
Something about the Crowned Prince’s apology only worsened the anger within Takumi.

*As if a mere apology can undo the damage you’ve already done…*

“So are you going to ask me the same thing, then?” asked Takumi.

Whatever memories Leon had fed him previously were forgotten immediately and replaced with an overwhelming sense of rage.

Prince Leon had forced himself upon Takumi and now Prince Marx was trying to clear the air by claiming that the Hoshidan’s ‘standards had been neglected’?

*Your younger brother put his hands on me, used his power to manipulate my memories, put his mouth against me-, and you-, you-,*

When Marx said nothing, Takumi proceeded with: “Prince Leon makes a mental attack and tries to pry the knowledge from my memories and when that doesn’t work he then proceeds to violate me-?”

He sucked in a breath and continued, far from over: “and then where does that leave you, Prince Marx? You’re making the logistical attack and when I don’t give you what you want, then what? Will you make a physical attack on me as well?”

The prince clenched his fists at his sides, feeling angry tears wet his cheeks: “Would it have been better to just submit to Prince Leon and become his damned consort? Would it have been better to throw away my dignity and pride to avoid being treated as your exotic whore?!”

The Paladin blinked, eyes widening in a sort of disgusted realisation. He opened his mouth to reply and then closed it without a word.

“Perhaps Prince Leon didn’t properly relay the information to you,” said Takumi, voice quieter now but no less venomous, “so I’ll tell you myself: I don’t know. I don’t know Ryouma’s weakness, any of his weaknesses.”

He paused, gathering himself, “You’d be better off asking Kamui for such information. But then again, I think Kamui serves as a weakness enough, wouldn’t you say?”

“I-,” began Marx, who seemed very lost for words, “I don’t care about Prince Ryouma’s weaknesses.”

He seemed genuinely confused and this gave Takumi pause.

He had gotten so angry—let that anger build over the week he’d rotted in that cell—and now he was taking it out on someone who apparently, had no idea what he was talking about.

The archer blinked slowly.

“Y-you don’t-, you didn’t send Prince Leon to recover Ryouma’s weakness? I thought-, what was the interrogation for?”

Marx ran a gauntleted hand through his blond curls, eyebrows knitting together in annoyed confusion.
“I was under the impression that Leon was coming to simply introduce himself properly. That’s what we were all going to do. Eventually we would have asked Kamui and Aqua to speak with you as well,” said Marx, more to himself than to Takumi.

The Hoshidan floundered silently for a moment.

Marx gestured helplessly, trying to explain himself, “I-, It would be customary to check on how you were adjusting.”

He seemed genuinely concerned, “I wanted to make sure that everything was alright between Kamui and yourself.”

“Lo and behold,” muttered Takumi, “you find my treatment sub-par.”

“It is disgraceful,” Marx agreed.

Takumi frowned up at him, “You’re not playing a mind-game with me?”

“No games,” said Marx.

And something in his voice made Takumi believe him.

“There’s a spare room you may use,” said Marx quietly as they came to the stairwell.

“I hate to ask,” said Takumi quietly as he mounted the first step, “but is that close to Kamui?”

“He lives down the hall,” Marx said simply, “so if you choose to speak with him, he’s quite close.”

Takumi nodded quietly and trailed beside Marx as they climbed to the next level.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” said the Paladin which surprised Takumi, “but I heard you were more…”

“I’m dying to hear this,” mumbled Takumi.

Marx waved his hand as though trying to grab the word he wanted out of thin air.

“…Talkative,” he said finally.

“Snappish, annoying, repetitive, insistent,” said Takumi, ticking a finger for each adjective, “so many words to describe the obnoxious Second Prince of Hoshido and somehow you chose ‘talkative.’”

He shook his head, a bit disbelieving.

“But you’re not exactly the way I thought you would be either, Prince Marx.”

The Paladin cracked a small smile at that.

“I heard I’m quite intimidating,” Marx admitted, “but I simply don’t know what to say sometimes; I don’t know how to put others at ease.”
Takumi snickered then.

“It’s a good thing you just have to stand and look nice at parties then, huh? Sakura and I always try to ditch when we have gatherings; we're just too anxious to speak to anyone properly.”

“Sakura?”

Takumi paused and the reality came crashing down upon him. He mentally scolded himself for being so open with an enemy.

And the Crowned Prince, no less.

“Sakura,” he said, suddenly hesitating, “my younger sister. She was a shrine maiden but she always felt helpless as a healer and took up the bow. She wanted to become a priestess so I thought I’d teach her a few things.”

There was a heavy silence and Takumi felt regret take root in his heart.

How could I be so stupid? Mentioning Sakura to a Nohrian… did that Prince Leon really mess up my mind so much?

“My youngest sister Elise,” offered Marx quietly, “she’s a troubadour-,”

“She’s the… the blonde one. With the twin-tails, right?” said Takumi suddenly, waving his fingers around by his ears, mimicking Elise’s hair.

Marx blinked and nodded, seeming surprised, “Y-yes, that’s her.”

“She was the one who-,” the archer shook his head, “sorry. Continue.”

She’s the one who mended my arm, he’d wanted to say, but for some reason, it seemed to intimate to say aloud.

Marx gave him a questioning look but then shrugged and continued with: “Kamui told me once that Elise came to him, confessed that she felt like a burden to our army. It was awful to hear that she wanted to fight, to willingly put herself in harm’s way. I wanted her to remain as a healer, to remain safe. But she wouldn’t hear it.”

He paused, as though struggling with the memory.

“It was Leon who convinced me. He assured me that tomes were a safe weapon of choice and that Elise had a natural talent for magic. So she decided to study it alongside him, planning to become a strategist.”

Once again, Takumi couldn’t help but notice the similarities between himself and his Nohrian counterpart.

That Prince Leon isn’t even here and yet still I can’t escape him…

When they arrived on the next floor, Marx gestured for Takumi to follow him as he pushed open one of the ornate bedroom doors.
“I hope this will suffice,” he said.

Takumi stepped into the room, expecting Leon to be waiting for him, for Leon to be splayed out on the bed daintily holding a glass of fine wine.

Leon would say: “My, my, Hoshidan Prince, you’re looking rather filthy. Perhaps I should clean you up with a nice bath, Hm? Seeing as I was the one who broke your arm and made it unusable, I’ll take it upon myself to personally bathe you.”

The mage would clamber off the bed in a graceful manner—everything he did was always so graceful—and he’d offer a hand to Takumi.

“I’ll even bathe with you, let you sit between my legs. I know that’s what you did with your precious elder brother back home. Now Nohr is your home. And you belong to me.”

“Prince Takumi, did you hear me?” said Marx, turning to glance over his shoulder.

He had opened the door to the washroom and when he noticed that Takumi was unresponsive, moved to set a hand on the archer’s shoulder.

Takumi flinched away from him and when he realised what he’d done and moved to apologise, he saw hurt flash in Marx’s eyes.

But it was gone so quickly that the archer wondered if he’d imagined it.

“Prince Takumi,” said Marx, prompting again as though nothing had happened, “the washroom.”

He gestured and Takumi moved to observe the room from the doorway, eager to move past his embarrassing outburst.

When he glanced into the washroom, he found it to be more spacious than he’d expected. The tile flooring was a gentle cream colour and a large tub sat in the corner of the room.

It looked to be used more for soaking and decompressing than for actual bathing but at this point, Takumi didn’t care.

There was the smallest of windows stationed higher than Takumi could have ever reached and the dull sunlight of the Nohrian skies dotted the lip of the tub and the tile flooring.

“This is-,” he began, “this is very nice.”

Marx nodded, looking a bit awkward and turned on heel.

“I-I’ll leave you to it then,” he said finally.

The Crowned Prince nodded once more, as though he had been expecting something more, but swiftly left Takumi standing alone.

Takumi inhaled deeply, finally feeling that he could breathe easy with his newfound freedom, however little it may be. He wasted no time drawing a bath and moving to strip down.
It took longer than necessary with his useless arm but there was no reason to complain as he eased into the tub.

Takumi breathed out a sigh of relief and took his time unclasping his hair, letting it cascade down his back and into the water.

He sighed and leant back so that he could rest his head on the edge of the tub, staring up at the ceiling and studying the patterned tiles.

*That Prince Marx was certainly different than I expected.*

Though Takumi was still dubious, thinking that Marx had a hidden agenda, he couldn’t say anything about the prince’s cordial attitude.

The Crowned Prince had been rather formal but not unkind. And in comparison to Leon’s past treatment, Marx seemed nearly tolerable for a Nohrian Prince.

Takumi shook his head to dislodge the heavy thoughts and glanced down into the water. It was murkier than he had originally thought and he ran his hands through it numbly.

He closed his eyes and let out a sigh, relaxing against the gentle heat.

The prince stretched his legs, surprised at how spacious the tub actually was. He felt his toes touch briefly against the porcelain edge of the tub and it was hot to the touch.

Soft too.

*Wait, it’s…soft?*

Curiosity drove Takumi to press his toes against the place again, testing the feeling for a second time.

Unseen fingers curled around the prince’s ankle and Takumi’s blood turned to ice, fear clenching a chilly hand around his heart.

*Wh-what’s-?*

A dark form rose up from the depths of the bath, a shadow taking form the closer it got to the surface, and Takumi felt as though he suddenly couldn’t breathe.

He struggled backwards, pulling his knees to his chest, fearing what would inevitably spring from the watery grave he was presently sitting in.

*“Takumi-,”* the shadow whispered.

The voice was pleading, static, disconnected somehow.

*“R-Ryouma-?”* the prince found himself hissing in disbelieving reply.

Surely it-, it wasn’t Ryouma, right? No, it couldn’t be!

And yet, as Takumi stared down at the water, Ryouma’s face appeared, shifting unnaturally with the ebb and flow of the bath.
“How-?” Takumi whispered.

“Lady Aqua,” he answered, simply, as though Takumi should have expected it.

It was enough of an explanation.

“B-but she betrayed Hoshido-! Why would she-?”

“Not much time-,” Ryouma said, voice already beginning to fade.

“Wh-what is it-?” Takumi asked, desperation clawing deep within his heart.

The ache that he had worked to set aside was bubbling up within him with twice the intensity; he hadn’t expected to see Ryouma. And now, seeing the High Prince’s face nearly sent Takumi to tears.

*I miss you Ryouma,* he wanted to say, a sob rising in his throat.

*I miss Hoshido. I want to return to you. I want to return to Hoshido.*

*I want to see Sakura, Hinoka. Oboro and Hinata, are they well? I want to see all of them.*

*And I want to see you.*

“And my Raijinto blade-,”

Ryouma’s legendary sword? Why was he mentioning it now?

“Why are you mentioning that now?” Takumi whispered, shocked that Ryouma would put his weapon before his own brother.

“I-,” he began as the image began to shift and jerk, falling to pieces in the water.

Takumi, feeling an overwhelming sense of loss, ran his fingers frantically through the bath as though that would keep Ryouma’s watery form intact.

When the image was finishing jerking about, Ryouma’s face settled but the voice that now spoke belonged to Leon.

“You can’t hide from me,” he said, even though it was Ryouma’s lips that were moving.

Takumi recoiled and the watery image re-formed into Leon’s face.

The Nohrian Prince offered Takumi a cruel smirk.

“You can never hide from me, Prince Takumi,” he whispered again.

And then the image contorted again, shifting between Ryouma’s face and then Leon’s, switching repeatedly between the two, voices intermingling in Takumi’s head.

He felt that icy hand on him again.

But it was clutching around his left wrist this time, grip turning harsh as iron, refusing to release him.
“I’ll get what I want eventually,” Leon hissed, “and King Garon will get the calamity he so desires.”

It was Ryouma’s voice this time and that made it all the worse.

Takumi moved to pull himself from the water, trying to brace himself with his right arm. He’d forgotten that it was still useless from where Leon had broken it, and he slipped deeper into the tub.

Panic crawled its way up his throat and he let out a strangled cry.

*I’m stronger than this*, he thought, since it had become a sort of mantra to him as of late.

Gods, it didn’t help.

Takumi lifted his knees to the surface of the water as though that would be enough to shake Leon and Ryouma’s faces from existence.

“Prince Takumi?”

A different voice this time. Closer.

And suddenly there were firm hands on his shoulders.

“D-don’t-!” Takumi seethed, fear overpowering his sense of reason, “Don’t touch me-!”

He twisted out of the grasp, fright momentarily blinding him.

“Prince Takumi-, please-,”

The hands were back upon him again, gentler now, coaxing him to relax, as though he were like a wounded animal.

“C’mere,” said the voice, breath hot against Takumi’s ear, “let’s get you out of there.”

The prince felt all the fight leave his body at once and he allowed himself to be dragged from the bath, suddenly exhausted.

He didn’t want to open his eyes, fearing that Leon’s cheshire grin would be awaiting him.

*Wh-what even happened, just now...?*

Takumi leaned into the warmth of whoever was carrying him, wishing he could just pretend that it was Ryouma.

But suddenly, the watery lies came washing back over him and he ducked away as though they would simply pass over him harmlessly.

*No, I don’t want it to be Ryouma-,*

Because what if it was actually Leon? What if it was Leon manipulating his memories and his mind and every part of him so that he was no longer himself?

*What if I can’t tell them apart*?
He was suddenly on his feet, shivering against the chill of Nohr on his bare skin.

“Prince Takumi.”

It was Marx who had righted him. The Paladin took a step back, as though testing if Takumi was alright to stand on his own. He had this strange look on his face, as though he was very concerned. And Takumi couldn’t understand why.

“I’m your enemy!” He wanted to shout, “I’ve killed your people and invaded your kingdom!”

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t push the insults, the harshness, past his lips in the face of kindness. Even to the face of the Crowned Prince.

“What happened?”

And Takumi stumbled for a proper answer, stumbling over the confusion in his thoughts, and the embarrassment of his nakedness, stumbling foolishly in front of his enemy.

“I-, there-, in the tub-,”

Marx handed him a towel before nodding once and turning back to the bath, tensing against the unknown force that had infiltrated and infused Takumi’s mind.

The prince hurriedly wrapped himself up in the towel, grateful momentarily for the cover.

When Takumi turned back to observe Marx, the Crowned Prince had rolled up his sleeves and was up to his elbows in bathwater.

He wasn’t wearing his armour, Takumi realised, somewhat dumbly.

No wonder I didn’t know who he was…

He had never seen Prince Marx without his armour.

And for good reason, he thought.

Marx looked much less intimidating in his traditional garb. He still looked dutiful, that must’ve come naturally with age, but where he had been made up of sharp angles and cold steel, he’d been reduced to a soft, mortal man without his armour.

“Maybe it was the faucet?” Marx said to himself, leaning to inspect the metal piece.

Takumi took a step back and his fingertips brushed against one of the dowel rods that were driven into the wall. They were strictly for a decorative purposes but with a violent tug, one broke free.

The prince weighed it in his hand. It was about the length of a sword, heavy but still light enough to be wielded one-handed.

Good thing, since my right is still out of commission…

Some inner hatred within Takumi rose up then, as he watched Marx from behind.

The Paladin was so blissfully unaware of the heated anger that had coiled tightly in Takumi’s chest
for an entire week. That dark cell had given him time to think, to plan, to ready himself for an opening.

And this was it.

“Hit him,” said that lifelong disgust within Takumi, voice cold and commanding.

The part of him that hated Nohr and all its people, Prince Marx included, began to rise up, bubbling to the surface, and making his blood boil.

“Strike him! Show all of Nohr that you’re a force to be reckoned with. You’re the Second Prince of Hoshido, wielder of the Legendary Fuujin Bow! You are a storm that cannot be contained!!”

And Takumi lifted the blunt rod, feeling his old lessons and practice rise to the surface, as though wielding a sword were the most natural thing in the world, as though Takumi had never picked up the Fuujin Bow in the first place.

*This is an extension of my arm. Swing with force. I only have one shot so I’d better make it count.*

Ryouma’s voice echoed in his mind then, offering up his own advice from the past: “You must genuinely try to kill me.”

And he faltered for a moment as Marx’s form shifted into Ryouma’s.

*N-no-, Takumi thought, resolve and grip both wavering.*

“He’s your enemy!”

But Takumi scrambled backwards, feeling suddenly faint, and leaned against the wall with an audible sound of discomfort.

“Prince Takumi-?” Marx said, glancing over his shoulder worriedly.

That look of concern was back on his face, so blatant and genuine that it shook Takumi to his core.

His confusion was enough to drown out the hatred within himself and for a moment, the prince’s mind was blessedly quiet.

“I-, I don’t know what’s wrong with the tub-, or the water-,” Marx was saying as he came back over to Takumi’s side, “But I-, Are you alright?”

He put a steadying hand on the prince’s shoulder and Takumi felt the entire room shift.

“Oh Gods,” he whispered to himself, closing his eyes and leaning against Marx’s broad form.

The Crowned Prince jolted at the sudden closeness, not expecting Takumi to lean against him, not expecting him to make their proximity so close so willingly.

After only a moment’s hesitation, Marx hooked an arm around him and held Takumi closer. He withdrew a bit only to put his free hand against the archer’s forehead.

“I’m a fool,” he said suddenly, and had the situation been different, Takumi would have
laughed and said: “yeah, you are!”

But he said nothing and was simply grateful for the nice coolness of Marx’s hand.

“It’s natural for you to get sick with Nohr’s climate,” the Paladin said to himself, “It’s been so long since I-,”

He trailed off suddenly and Takumi almost said: “No, please continue.”

After a moment, Marx simply provided: “Kamui got sick the first few months he was here too. I’d forgotten.”

So Marx swept Takumi up into his arms as though the prince weighed no more than a child, and held him close to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” said Marx as he carried Takumi from the washroom.

Why…?

“If I could take away all the pain of this endeavour, I would,” Marx said, more to himself than to Takumi, “If our kingdoms could achieve peace then maybe…”

He shook his head, “It’s wrong to even entertain the thought; this is how it’s always been.”

Feeling overwhelmed and sickened, Takumi pressed his head against Marx and after a moment, began to weep.

He sobbed silently and hoped that Marx would never mention it to anyone.

*Especially that devious Prince Leon…*

But Marx simply moved to settle Takumi down gently atop the bed’s covers. He sat down at the prince’s side and adjusted his right arm so it wouldn’t hurt.

Takumi hadn’t even realised that Marx knew it was still recovering from where Leon had shattered it.

Marx moved again and lifted his hand, moving it slowly towards the prince’s face. Takumi closed his eyes, waiting for some harsh movement, for Marx to seize his chin in his hand like Leon had, or simply to slap him.

But the Paladin did neither. When Takumi felt it was safe to open his eyes, realising no hurt was coming, he felt Marx simply part his hair a bit and draw a few stray hairs away from the prince’s round face.

“I’m sorry,” Marx whispered again, words heavy with the truth.

He glanced away, seeming ashamed for something Takumi couldn’t understand.

“I-,” said Marx, seeming uncomfortable, “I should find you some garments.”
He moved to leave and Takumi, terrified that Leon and Ryouma’s faces would appear before him again, clutched at the Paladin’s sleeve weakly.

“Don’t leave me alone-,” he whispered, slowly raising his gaze to meet Marx’s.

The Crowned Prince’s eyes went very wide and he nodded slowly in understanding, “O-of course. But I-, we really should get you properly clothed.”

He patted Takumi’s hand and inclined his head to the chamber door.

“I will have Lazwald get you something, alright?”

Takumi watched him, looking for a mocking look that just wasn’t there. And then he nodded once.

Marx nodded too and got to a stand, making his way to the chamber door.

There were voices then, Marx’s and two others, and Takumi struggled to hear what they were saying.

“Pieri,” he said, and then there was obedient silence, “remain here. Lazwald, with me.”

“Yes, Lord Marx,” the pair said in unison.

Takumi sat up suddenly, hurrying to re-adjust his towel so that it sat properly. And he moved to sit princely, drawing painfully upon his memories of how Ryouma would sit.

Marx returned with a mercenary at his side. He had greyish hair much like Takumi’s but when the mercenary inclined his head, the prince noticed it turned navy in the dim light; was it just his imagination?

“Lord Marx,” the mercenary said with a voice that oozed adoration, “what exactly are you asking me to-?”

He trailed off, jaw dropping when he saw Takumi.

“N-naked noble-,” he stuttered out, and Marx turned to stare at him in disbelief.

“Lazwald-!” he hissed, seeming embarrassed by his retainer’s reaction.

“I-I’m sorry-!” Lazwald hissed, turning to glance elsewhere.

“Please get Prince Takumi a suitable pair of nightclothes,” said Marx softly.

“O-of course-, of course,” the retainer replied, hurrying off without glancing back.

“That was-,” began Marx, moving to retake his seat beside Takumi, “one of my retainers: Lazwald.”

“Quite the character,” said Takumi, clasping his hands together in his lap.

It was the only way he could get them to stop shaking.

Marx sighed and closed his eyes, taking in a slow breath.
“Are you alright?”


“Earlier, you mentioned something about the bath-,”

The prince clenched his fists and tried not to think back on it. He didn’t want the images of Ryouma and Leon contorting in his head for the rest of the evening.

“It’s nothing,” he said, unable to look Marx in the face, “it’s as you said: I’m just a bit ill.”

Marx didn’t seem convinced but he didn’t press the matter and Takumi appreciated it more than he would ever say.

Lazwald returned before Marx could say anything else and handed the clothes to Takumi directly.

Though the mercenary had seemed bothered by Takumi’s lack of proper attire earlier, he didn’t seem to have a problem with Takumi himself.

*Unusual for a Nohrian to be so…*

How was Lazwald? Indifferent? He didn’t seem aggressive, didn’t seem to judge Takumi for his birthright.

Takumi found himself thinking back to what Marx had said about there being peace between the two kingdoms.

If that were the case… then everyone would behave similarly to how this Lazwald character was.

*Maybe he’s just cordial because he’s kissing up to his liege.*

Takumi accepted the garments all the same. He got to a stand and headed back for the washroom, leaving Marx and his retainer alone.

In the washroom, Takumi was determined to avoid looking at the tub for fear that Leon would be perched inside of it, wearing that cheshire grin of his.

“*Would you like me to service you again, Hoshidan Prince? I’m sure you enjoyed the feeling of my lips around your cock. In fact, I can see right into your head; you can’t stop thinking about me. I’m flattered.*”

Takumi clenched his fists, feeling the fine fabric between his fingers and refusing to look into the mirror.

He slipped out of his towel and pulled the nightgown over his head. It was thinner than he was comfortable with but it would be rude to throw Marx’s (and Lazwald’s) kindness back in their faces so he snapped his mouth shut.

The prince pulled the sleeves down further over his hands as though he could hide their shaking. He shrugged, deciding that that would have to do, and made his way to the door.

He was just about to open it when he heard Marx speaking.

“Lazwald-,” the Crowned Prince said, voice warning.

“Lazwald-,”
Takumi froze, not wanting to interrupt but also not wanting to eavesdrop.

“We really shouldn’t be doing this-,” Marx said, though Takumi could hear the teasing lie in his voice.

“I’m sure you can spare a moment,” Lazwald said, voice rich like honey.

He laughed quietly and Takumi heard the unmistakable sound of lips on skin contact.

“Too bad I can’t shed you of your crown for a moment to see those lovely golden curls framing your face,” said Lazwald with a small laugh.

“I’ll make you eat those words,” Marx promised, and Takumi could hear the smile in his voice.

“But not tonight,” he said, voice suddenly serious.

“Wha-? Lord Marx, what is it?”

Whatever had been about to happen dissipated just as easily as it had begun and though Takumi was relieved, he felt worry crawl its way into his throat.

“Something isn’t right,” Marx said softly.

Lazwald made a humming noise in agreement, “Care to elaborate on that, My Lord?”

“It’s-, maybe it’s my memories clouding my judgment,” the Crowned Prince admitted, seeming suddenly unsure of himself.

“Maybe I can’t stop seeing Kamui in Prince Takumi and that’s making me see things that aren’t really there.”

“What do you mean?”

The Paladin let out a sigh of quiet frustration, “It’s Leon. Prince Takumi told me some… disturbing things. I can’t… I can’t really believe it.”

Lazwald frowned, “You think the prince is lying to you?”

“No,” said Marx, “perish the thought, Lazwald. But the actions that Prince Takumi described… they don’t sound like Leon at all.”

“What do you think is going on then?” asked Lazwald.

“I-, I’m not sure,” Marx said, “but I intend to find out.”

He paused, collecting his thoughts, Takumi supposed.

“Speak with your enthusiastic friend,” Marx said.

“Enthus-? You mean Odin?”

“The one who serves Leon,” the Paladin said with a nod, “I want him to report to you and you to me. I need to know what’s going on. It’s my duty as the Crowned Prince.”

“And as the elder brother,” said Lazwald.
The teasing lilt was back in his voice but it sounded fake to Takumi.

Marx laughed a bit at Lazwald’s comment but that sound seemed hollow too.

“But for now, Lazwald,” the Paladin said, “I want you to spend the night here.”

“W-with Prince Takumi-?”

Takumi snorted to himself.

*I was right, he’s just like all the other Nohrians.*

*I can’t believe I thought he was any different; he’s mortified by the mere idea of being around me.*

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” said Lazwald, sounding sheepish, “It’s just that I-, I don’t do well with sleeping nobles.”

It sounded like he was talking about someone other than Marx.

*But who?*

“You seem to do just fine doing well with me, Lazwald,” said Marx and Takumi could hear his smile again.

He smiled himself, drawing a bizarre happiness from the easiness of the relationship between Lazwald and Marx.

“I-, well-,” the mercenary floundered.

Marx let out a small laugh, “Can you do it?”

“Yes,” Lazwald said, “But please allow me to remain… outside his quarters.”

Takumi, having heard what he’d needed, continued with what he’d been doing and pushed the door open, keeping his hands in front of him as though that would be enough to hide his frame beneath the sheer of the nightgown.

Marx eyed Takumi for a few moments, gaze raking down his form before the Paladin let out a hum of approval.

“I trust that will… suffice?”

Takumi nodded, “Y-yes. I-, thank you.”

He bowed a bit and when he looked back into Marx’s face, he saw that look of surprise in the Crowned Prince’s hazel eyes again.

*Why does he look so surprised?*

“Lazwald,” Marx said with a nod of his head.

It was a dismissing gesture but Takumi was sure he would have missed it, had he not known how
close that Marx and Lazwald were.

The mercenary turned to Takumi and met his gaze, offering him the smallest of smiles.

There was a strange mark in the middle of his right eye but he blinked and shifted his gaze to the floor before Takumi could inspect it any more.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Prince Takumi,” said Lazwald.

He seemed genuine.

*Maybe I was wrong about him…*

With that, Lazwald exited, leaving Marx and Takumi alone.

“It’s only right to tell you,” the Paladin said, “that I’ve asked Lazwald to take first watch this evening. If you require anything, you may simply ask him. And… maybe more importantly, you may trust him.”

*I thought that Lazwald’s night-watch was going to be a secret between them but for him to share it with me…*

Takumi blinked.

*It means he trusts me.*

“And you may use it against him.”

The prince squeezed his eyes shut as though that would silence the hatred in his heart.

“Prince Takumi?”

“I’m-, just tired,” the archer offered.

Marx stood and gestured to the bed. As Takumi climbed into it, the Paladin straightened his blouse and smoothed the creases in his sleeves.

Takumi pulled the covers up to his chin.

“Are you comfortable?” Marx asked him.

It seemed too intimate a question. Takumi, shocked into silence, stared at him.

“I-1-, your arm, that is,” Marx hastily supplied, realising how it must have sounded.

Takumi nodded hurriedly, hoping to clear the awkwardness from the air, “Y-yes, I’m fine.”

Marx moved to snuff out the lamp and Takumi could barely see him in the darkness.

The Paladin leant down, his breath hot against the prince’s forehead.

Takumi was expecting him to say something.

And for a long moment, the prince wondered if Marx was going to kiss him. But then the Paladin withdrew suddenly and let out the smallest of frustrated sighs.
“Goodnight, Prince Takumi,” he said simply as he strode for the chamber door.

When Marx was gone, Takumi laid awake in the bed for a long time, thinking. He replayed the events of the day over in his mind, trying to decipher everything that had happened.

It was a lot to take in.

Leon had pretended to be Ryouma.

And he had mentioned the Raijinto Blade as what?

A way to make me comment about Ryouma…? Maybe he’d take anything as long as it sounded vaguely related to a weakness…

The prince frowned, something was missing.

He knew the blade’s name…

How? Takumi thought back to it. Ryouma—or, Leon, as Ryouma—had mentioned Aqua, hadn’t he?

“Lady Aqua,” he remembered.

“Wait, no-,” Takumi said to himself, suddenly realising that it was strange.

“Ryouma wouldn’t have called Aqua ‘Lady,’ she was our—his—sister for years…”

He sat up, “And Prince Leon would simply call her ‘Aqua’ or, bold as he is, ‘Sister.’ Not…”

Prince Marx was right; something’s wrong here…

Takumi thought back to when he’d seen Leon face-to-face. The dark knight had referred to his father as “King Garon.”

But he’d just say “Father,” right…?

Considering it, Takumi realised it had happened again in the tub as well.

Almost as if Leon is… not who he seems.

And something about it was suddenly very frightening.

Icy fear shot through the prince and he drew himself up and out of the bed.

He went for the door, intending to-, to what?

What can I do…?

He stood there, hand poised above the doorknob, frozen in helplessness.

“Azure!” said a voice outside, dragging Takumi out of his thoughts.
‘Azure’…? *I thought his name was…*

“Owain-!” hissed Lazwald from just beyond the door, “you’re gonna get us caught if you say things like that!”

“It’s fine right now though, right? I mean, it’s just us,” said the second voice.

“You should still use the right name,” Lazwald chided.

“You called me the wrong thing too, ya’ know,” said the second voice.

“Well you look exactly the same,” said Lazwald and Takumi heard a laugh rise in his throat, “the only difference is that now you have a ‘tome hand’ instead of a ‘sword hand.’”

“But my new name grants me incredible magical power,” said the second voice, “it enables me to embody my true form as Odin Dark!”

*Leon’s retainer… the one who works with Zero, right. Odin. So why did Lazwald call him… ‘Owain’?*

He was the enthusiastic one that Marx had mentioned earlier.

“Well, there are two differences,” said Odin suddenly. And Lazwald hummed in agreement, “this time we’re serving princes.”

“Despite being princes ourselves,” Odin whispered.

‘Princes ourselves?’

“Yes, but you remember what Hydra said, don’t you?”

Odin sighed, “I do. But I really wish we’d ended up in Hoshido like he said. Instead we’re here in Nohr and it’s so dark; nothing like home.”

*Are they Hoshidan…?*  

Lazwald hadn’t looked Hoshidan when Takumi had met him.  

*Maybe his mother is Hoshidan…? And his father Nohrian…?*

“I miss Marc,” said Odin after a moment, and his tone was heavy with grief.

“I miss your sister too, Owain,” said Lazwald jokingly, attempting to lighten the mood.  

*Odin has a sister?*

“I wish they were here. Marc and Lucina both. Luci would know what to do. And we could always use Marc’s tactics.”

*Lucina…?*

“She is pretty good at saving the world,” said Odin with a small laugh.
“Luna probably misses her the most though,” said Lazwald quietly.

_Luna?

Takumi figured that she was a retainer to one of the princesses if she was friends with Lazwald and Odin.

“Oh, she and Luci were close, weren’t they?” said Odin quietly, seeming to have trouble remembering.

Lazwald laughed quietly, “Yeah, yeah. They wanted to have a summer wedding.”

There was silence for a moment and Takumi was afraid that they were done talking.

Their conversation had helped calm him and he had sat down on his side of the door, listening silently.

“Oh,” said Lazwald, speaking again, “I’ve been meaning to ask…”

“Is it about the Brand?”

_Brand?

“So you noticed it too,” said Lazwald, sounding upset, “I didn’t expect it to reappear so soon. Even with Hydra’s magic, it seems we can’t escape the royal bloodline.”

“Look at me,” said Odin and Takumi heard movement.

Odin made a noise, “At least my robes cover mine. But there’s yours, right there in the middle of your face.”

“It’s not exactly like I can wear an eyepatch,” said Lazwald, crossly, “Lord Marx would notice.”

Takumi frowned, trying to determine what they were talking about. He’d seen the strange symbol in Lazwald’s eye earlier.

Was that the Brand?

Lazwald and Odin had called themselves princes earlier; were the Brands proof of that?

_But I don’t have a Brand, _Takumi thought, _none of us do._

“Odin, I have to ask a favour of you,” said Lazwald, seeming to put their previous conversation behind him.

“Sure,” said Odin easily, “anything to help one of my kin. Simply name your favour, Azure.”

Takumi heard only silence for a few moments and he imagined Lazwald to be rolling his eyes.

“Lord Marx said some troubling things to me,” he offered after a moment.

Takumi remembered their earlier conversation.
“And I just… wanted to know if Prince Leon has been acting… strangely.”

Odin hummed, deep in thought.

“I haven’t noticed anything,” he said, lacking his usual theatrics in the face of seriousness.

“I don’t get it,” said Lazwald, sounding frustrated, “I wish we could just ask-, why is everyone being so mysterious? This is just like Luci and Dad…”

“But Lucina had a good reason to keep quiet about being Chrom’s-,” but he fell silent where there was commotion down the hallway.

Takumi got to a stand, pressing an ear to the door, trying to decide what he was hearing.

“Is that… Lord Kamui?” asked Lazwald quietly.

His voice was louder and Takumi realised that the two of them were leaning against the door, trying to remain out of sight.

“It sounds like… Lord Leon is with him,” Odin hissed in reply.

_Kamui and Prince Leon… together? What are they doing?_

“Should we see what they’re up to?” asked Lazwald.

He sounded lost.

“I-I don’t know,” said Odin, sounded equally as concerned, “I don’t want to intrude on Lord Leon’s personal affairs but…”

“But what if Lord Marx is right?” countered Lazwald.

Odin let out a groan of frustration.

“I don’t know what to do,” he hissed.

“I can’t leave the prince here alone,” said Lazwald, “but we’ll never find anything out like this…”

There was the sound of movement and Lazwald ad Odin fell silent again, breath coming in short pants as they huddled in the shadows of the hallway.

“Come with me, Kamui.”

Leon’s voice echoed softly down the hallway and Takumi clenched his fists, fear chilling his blood.

“Oh, but it’s so late, you’re sure we won’t get caught?”

“No one will pay any mind to us,” Leon assured him.

Takumi heard their approaching footsteps and he backed away from the door.

The doorknob turned and Takumi dropped into a stance to defend himself from the Nohrian Prince.

But it was Lazwald and Odin who came shuffling in, hurriedly pushing the door back so only a
“Prince Takumi,” said Lazwald, blinking in surprise, “you’re awake.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Takumi supplied lamely.

“So you’re Prince Takumi,” said Odin, nodding in greeting, “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Yeah, charmed,” whispered Takumi, “anyway, what’s going on with those two?”

Lazwald and Odin traded glances.

“I wish I could tell you,” the mercenary said.

Takumi frowned.

I’m not going to figure anything out with these two...

“I need a change of clothes,” said Takumi, straightening.

Odin blinked at him, “you have a plan?”

Takumi nodded as Lazwald slipped back into the hallway to retrieve some proper clothing.

“I’m not quite sure what’s going on,” Odin admitted when they were alone, “but I would like to apologise for my liege’s behaviour. Sometimes Lord Leon is driven by forces darker than even my own. He bears a heavy burden in that glass heart of his, Prince Takumi.”

Lazwald came careening back into the room before Takumi could reply to the mage.

“Wh-what is it?” the Hoshidan Prince asked, concerned for why Lazwald had been sprinting around the castle like some sort of thief who didn’t belong there.

“I didn’t realise that Prince Leon and Lord Kamui were still out and about,” the mercenary said, handing the stack of clothes to Takumi.

The prince accepted them and hurried into the washroom.

I can’t waste any time...! I need some answers...

“Hey,” said Lazwald, glancing at Odin, “you wanna follow them? See where they go?”

“What are you gonna do?”

The mercenary gestured to the washroom, “He probably doesn’t know how to get into those.”

Odin nodded in understanding, “Alright. I’ll meet you outside in a few.”

Lazwald returned the nod.

“It’s nice to be working together again,” said Odin softly.

“Just like old times,” Lazwald agreed with a small smile.
Takumi had stripped out of his nightgown at record speed, ready to be in something layered (or at least thicker than the gown that Lazwald had given him earlier).

Surely this doesn’t… maybe I have it on backwards?

“Prince Takumi?” came Lazwald’s voice through the door.

Swallowing his confusion in light of getting closer to the truth, Takumi flung the door open, “Am I wearing this wrong?”

Lazwald smiled gently and adjusted the blouse a bit, tugging it so it sat properly against Takumi’s frame.

“I’m supposed to be… exposed like this?” Takumi mumbled.

Lazwald glanced away, “It’s traditional in Nohr to wear… flattering garb.”

Takumi looked down, studying the wide V of the blouse.

“This doesn’t leave anything to the imagination,” he muttered.

Lazwald shrugged, “I’ll bring your Hoshidan garb when it’s back from the wash.”

“There’s no time,” said Takumi, hurriedly pulling his hair into a bun, “I’ll go like this.”

“You look-,” began Lazwald before trailing off.

Takumi gave him a confused look.

“-Nice,” Lazwald finished.

It hadn’t been what he was going to say.

You look Nohrian.

Realising how rude it would have been to say aloud, Lazwald simply gestured, “Odin followed Prince Leon and Lord Kamui, let’s meet up with him.”

Takumi nodded, grateful that Lazwald had dropped the illusion of respect in the face of danger; he certainly had the command for a proper prince, if that were truly what he was. They slipped into the hallway.

“Prince Takumi, Azure,” Odin said when they arrived at his side, hidden in the shadows, “good to see the both of you.”

“It’s Lazwald,” said Lazwald with an irritated sigh, “I knew you’d mess it up sooner or later…”

“It’s okay,” said Takumi, when Odin shot him a petrified look, “what’s going on between Kamui and Prince Leon?”

Odin nodded and swallowed his fears, “R-right, right. Well, they headed back towards Lord Leon’s quarters.”
“A bit of late reading?” suggested Lazwald.

“If only it were that,” muttered Odin, seeming to think otherwise.

Takumi sighed and then clenched his fists, “I’ve got to figure this thing out.”

“But-,” began Lazwald.

“Listen,” said Takumi, deciding he’d had enough, “I’m going. You’re just supposed to guard my chamber door, right, Ser Lazwald? Then just guard the door. You’ve spoken to Ser Odin like Prince Marx asked you to do.”

“Azure,” said Lazwald softly.

“What?”

The mercenary raised his gaze, “Please just call me ‘Azure.’”

“But, Laz-,” Odin hissed.

“This is my cousin,” said Lazwald, “Owain. Please keep it between us.”

“Our secret,” promised Takumi, feeling the smallest of smiles tug at his mouth.

Maybe I was wrong about Nohrians.

Though, I suppose if these two are really who they say they are, that makes them… something other than Nohrians.

Regardless… they’re all I’ve got.

“We’ll… head back to your chamber then,” said Lazwald.

“You didn’t even notice I was gone,” said Takumi with one decisive nod.

Lazwald nodded and moved to leave but Odin paused.

“What is it?” Takumi whispered.

The mage tapped his chin, “I’m worried.”

Takumi lifted an eyebrow, “I’m a prince, I’m more than capable of caring for myself.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Odin said, more to himself.

Then, seeming to come to a conclusion, he offered his hand to Takumi, “Can I cloak you?”

“Excuse me?”

The mage lifted his hands in surrender, “It’s nothing dangerous, I swear it. Though your new garments sure give you a Nohrian look, you’re obviously unused to them. So I’ll cloak you.”

Like… literally or…?

Realising that an explanation was needed, Odin cleared his throat.

“It’s an ingenious spell really, one to cloak you from the wandering gazes of any and all
passerby. You’ll be virtually untouchable. Although-,”

“Gods, Owain,” said Lazwald, reappearing. “I was wondering what was taking you so long.”

He turned to Takumi, “Owain wants to put an invisibility spell on you. It works like a charm, no worries. But, you’ll need to avoid running into any mages, including Prince Leon; they’ll be able to undo the spell with just a touch.”

“Invisibility?”

“Then you can get some answers,” said Lazwald with a small nod.

He seemed equally as eager for an explanation as Takumi was.

Glad I’m not alone in that then.

Odin moved to cast the spell and when Lazwald squinted, Takumi decided he was invisible enough.

“I can’t even tell that he’s here,” said Lazwald, “kinda incredible, actually.”

When Takumi said nothing, Lazwald frowned.

“Wait, he is here, isn’t he?”

Odin shrugged and snickered, “C’mon, let’s leave him to it. You don’t want Prince Marx to discover that you’re slacking.”

***

Takumi made his way down the winding corridor, wishing he’d brought ink and paper to draw himself a map.

I’ll never find my way back to my room at this rate...

When he found the area where Leon resided, Takumi couldn’t help but take note of the little things. It was distanced from the other rooms he’d seen; presumably those belonging to his other siblings. The prince clenched his fists and put a hand to the door, wishing he could just shove it open and demand answers.

No. I have to be patient.

Odin had done him a huge favour by cloaking him, it would be rude to throw the kindness back in his face.

And risk getting Odin in trouble with this cruel Prince Leon...

The door to Leon’s quarters was ajar but Takumi found himself pushing it open a bit further so
he could slip into the room.

He let out a breath of relief, glad that neither Leon nor Kamui had seemed to notice him.

Kamui was splayed out on the bed with Leon poised over him.

“Brother-,” Leon whispered, voice suddenly tender.

He’s different this time… is this the real Prince Leon?

“Leon-,”

“Have you been a good boy today, Kamui?”

Takumi shimmied against the wall, keeping a fair amount of distance between himself and the princes.

“I don’t know, have I?”

He sounded so coy that it made Takumi pause.

Kamui sounds so…

Nohrian.

“You’re doing well with your tomes,” Leon said, nodding approvingly.

He was gazing down into Kamui’s face, chestnut eyes revealing a great tenderness.

He looks like he cares for Kamui so much…

Even with Kamui’s Hoshidan blood, Leon didn’t seem to mind it at all. He looked at Kamui like the prince was his entire world, with a love so deep that it hurt Takumi to watch it.

“It’s only thanks to you that I’m improving as I am,” Kamui said with a small smile.

Leon glanced away, letting out a sigh of disbelief.

“Could you be any more charming, Brother?”

Kamui laughed quietly, “I don’t know, you tell me.”

Leon turned back to him and kissed him on the cheek, “Look at you, who taught your tongue to be so sharp?”

“Surely not my little brother!” Kamui teased, face breaking into a wide grin.

Leon tackled him and they rolled over on the bed until Kamui was pressing him against the sheets.

“My strength is trumping your magic, it seems,” said Kamui with a wink, leaning down to press his lips against Leon’s forehead.

They behave so…

They were behaving like siblings. Seeing the two interact reminded Takumi of how Ryouma would
always ruffle Hinoka’s hair.

Thinking about his own siblings made the sadness in his heart bloom again.

Leon flicked his wrist and moved to dislodge Kamui; the two of them rolled again.

They tumbled into the floor and Kamui let out a groan.

Leon perched on top of him, letting his full weight rest against the dragon prince.

“You were saying?”

“What, that’s cheating!” Kamui said, though he didn’t sound mad.

Leon rolled his eyes, “All is fair in-,”

But he paused. Kamui frowned.

“Leon?”

“Wait, wait,” said Leon, glancing around the room.

Kamui sat up as Leon withdrew from atop him.

“What is it?”

“It…” he seemed alarmed but hid it easily.

Kamui didn’t seem to notice.

_Foolish even now, aren’t you?_ thought Takumi.

“Zero said he wanted to see you tonight,” said Leon, changing the subject without an ounce of grace.

“He did?” said Kamui, ruby-red eyes widening.

_Even if that Prince Leon is terrible with words, he seems to know Kamui’s weak point…_

“I think he was coming to… _visit_ you this evening?”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Kamui whispered, mockingly offended.

Leon offered him a smile.

Fake, Takumi thought. It was so obvious.

_And yet Kamui is blind to it…_

“I-,” said Kamui, moving to dislodge Leon, “I have to go!”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to keep studying with your brother?”

“Leon!”
The dark knight laughed and got to a stand, offering his hand to Kamui.

The dragon prince took it and Leon led him to the door.

“Bright and early tomorrow,” said Leon, “don’t forget our lesson.”

“Is Camilla coming to visit soon?” asked Kamui, seeming as if he only just remembered her approaching arrival.

“A few days from now, I think,” Leon said, seeming impatient.

Kamui nodded wordlessly.

“Now then,” said Leon, trying to keep a cool air about him, “don’t keep my retainer waiting.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Kamui lightly, exiting swiftly with a small kiss blown in farewell.

Leon smiled after him until he was out of sight.

When Kamui was a safe distance away, Leon slammed the door shut and locked it, spinning violently on heel.

“Now then,” he hissed, voice venomous, “something reeks of foreign magic.”

He scanned the room, squinting, and Takumi felt his blood run cold.

_I have to get out of here-!_

“What is this? The smell daisies and fresh citrus,” Leon whispered, “Odin’s magic. But…”

He stalked around the room, “What’s it doing here?”

_It’s me. I smell like Odin’s magic. I’m covered in it. He’s going to find me. And then he’s going to do something terrible to me like last time._

But Leon was different right now, wasn’t he? He wasn’t behaving like he had a week ago in the cell.

_Does this mean that he’s… that this is the real Prince Leon?_

Would it be easier to work with this version of the prince?

As he was thinking, Takumi hadn’t realised how close Leon had gotten to him.

He didn’t dare to breathe.

But then, it hadn’t mattered, because Leon turned to him and seized him suddenly, using his weight to shove Takumi against the wall, hands fisting in his garments.

Odin’s spell fizzled out of existence and Takumi could see himself again.

_It’s gone, It’s gone-, the spell-!_
“YOU!” snarled Leon, expression turning dangerously dark.

Takumi moved to dislodge him but Leon threw his weight against the archer’s right arm, knowing where to apply the pressure.

And Takumi bit his lip to stop the cry of pain that had risen in his throat.

He’d nearly forgotten about his useless arm.

Although clearly this Prince Leon hasn’t…

“What are you doing in here?” Leon demanded, voice cold.

Takumi struggled again and Leon let out a growl in warning.

“Don’t make me throw a binding spell on you, filthy Hoshidan,” he hissed.

“Get away from me-!” Takumi returned, gathering his anger and throwing his weight against Leon.

Seeming baffled that Takumi would dare oppose him, Leon stumbled backwards.

Takumi took his chance and sprinted for the door.

Leon let out a low laugh and a sense of overwhelming dread filled Takumi’s insides.

“You think you can escape?” said Leon, lifting a hand.

A spell came curling down his fingertips, shooting to infuse Takumi and render his limbs nearly useless.

He stumbled and Leon was there to catch him.

“You can’t,” he hissed, “you can’t escape. You’ll never escape.”

Leon dragged him through the chamber until they were both in the washroom.

“Wh-what are you doing-?” Takumi whispered, more to himself than to Leon.

But the knight tugged him until they were standing before the full-length mirror, “Look at yourself, now. Do you see a Hoshidan Prince?”

When Takumi didn’t answer, Leon continued: “You, clothed in Nohrian garb, hiding beneath a Nohrian spell, sneaking into a Nohrian’s chamber. Do you have any idea what this looks like to an outsider?”

And then, he grinned at Takumi in the mirror, “Do you have any idea what this would look like to your sweet big brother back in Hoshido?”

At the mention of Ryouma, Takumi felt that overwhelming sadness threaten to consume him again.

He’s right-, I-, I look like…

“Maybe it was pointless to ask you to become my consort,” said Leon, voice thick with venom, “you’re already doing just fine on your own.”
“Look at yourself,” Leon ordered again.

When Takumi didn’t, the knight clutched at his bun and forced him to raise his gaze.

“You look like a whore,” he whispered, breath hot against the Hoshidan’s ear.

The worst part was that it was true. Takumi had never worn such revealing clothing, let alone in a foreign—enemy—kingdom.

He had never waltzed so easily into an enemy’s bedchamber, watched his intimate encounters, none of that.

In Hoshido, that would have been…

*My actions are way out of line…*

“Just submit to me,” Leon said, sounding annoyed again, like he couldn’t understand why Takumi was fighting him so.

Takumi moved so he could meet Leon’s gaze in the mirror.

Whatever he’d been intending to say died on his lips as he saw the faintest magical aura surrounding Leon.

*Wh-what is that?*

He squinted, trying to make it out.

“What’s-?”

“What is it, Prince Takumi, do you have something to say to me? Have you changed your mind about becoming my dearest companion?”

“Look at yourself,” Takumi whispered faintly.

Leon snickered, “Excuse me?”

Takumi turned, skin hot with embarrassment as he moved to press his lips to Leon’s.

“Do I have your attention now?” he asked softly, more to himself than to Leon.

The knight quirked a brow, still somewhat dazed by the bold action.

“Sure, yeah, what is it?”

“Look at yourself,” said Takumi, voice low and alluring, “look at yourself in the mirror, Lord Leon.”

He used the term of familiarity as though that would help convince the knight to observe himself.

Leon shrugged, seeming suddenly willing to do as Takumi asked.

*Whatever it takes, I guess…*

As Leon moved to study himself, he squinted a bit, seeming to dislike what he saw.
Does he see it? Surely. He must!

And when Leon frowned, Takumi knew that he saw the truth.

“What’s-,”

Leon loosened his grip on the Hoshidan Prince and put a hand to his chest. His own magic bloomed across his shirtfront and Takumi watched as the violet arura that had previously surrounded Leon dissipated.

The knight blinked, seeming lost.

“P-Prince Leon-?” Takumi whispered, suddenly wondering if he’d been wrong about his assumptions.

I thought that he was being manipulated but now... what if I was... what if I've done something horrible?

“What’s going on?!” Leon hissed, staring at Takumi in the mirror.

He released his holds suddenly, taking a step backwards.

“What are you-, why are you here? You’re... the Hoshidan, aren’t you? Why the hell are you-, Why are you in Nohr?”

Takumi stared at him.

**He doesn’t-, he doesn’t remember-?**

“You don’t remember-?” he whispered, disbelieving.

“Remember what-?!” Leon hissed, squinting at him.

He took another step back and raised his hand, magic gathering in his palm.

“Wh-where are my retainers? What have you done to them?”

“M-Me?! I haven’t-,”

Realising that he was probably wasting his time, Takumi shook his head and turned on heel.

“Never mind that,” he whispered to himself, “I’m outta here.”

And he took a step in the direction of the door.

Having forgotten about Leon’s incapacitation spell, he pitched forwards with a surprised yelp.

Leon caught him, more out of reflex than courtesy, and righted him.

“What-? N-no, you need to explain what is going on right now,” said Leon, sounding very concerned.

Takumi blinked, “I-? No, it’s you! You’re the one who-, you were being manipulated! You did terrible things to me! And now what, you’re pretending not to remember? Is this another one of your cruel games?”

“I-, that’s preposterous!” Leon hissed, “I’m the greatest mage in all of Nohr! No one could
manipulate me!”

“That’s-!” Takumi began.

But before he could finish, the door to Leon’s chamber flew open and Odin and Lazwald stood in the doorway.

Embers came curling from the mage’s fingertips and Lazwald ducked into the room.

“Prince Takumi, Prince Leon-,” he said, slipping into the washroom.

“Odin!” said Leon, sounding overly relieved, “you’re alright!”

The mage blinked, surprised, “Y-yes, I-, are you alright, My Lord?”

“Marx was right!” Takumi hissed, eyes pleading when he saw Lazwald.

Realising the weight of what the prince had said, Lazwald rushed to his side, “Wh-what? You’re sure?”

“We have to go-,” Takumi said, “We have to go talk to him right now.”

“I need some answers,” Leon hissed.

Odin lifted his hands, “Let’s all go together.”

“No, wait,” said Takumi, “I need someone to undo this spell.”

“What spell?” Odin and Leon said in unison.

Takumi glanced between them, “I-I don’t know, I can’t use my limbs.”

He glanced at Leon, “You casted some spell on me and I can’t-, I’m paralysed.”

Leon blinked owlishly at him and then squinted, “Don’t be foolish, I don’t cast spells like that.”

He stepped away and when Takumi tried to move again, it was Lazwald who caught him.

“It seems rather true to me, Prince Leon,” the mercenary offered with a helpless shrug.

“I-,” said Leon, suddenly uncertain, “I don’t… know how to cast disarming spells.”

“But you-,”

“No, no, we need to figure this out,” said Leon, sounding levelheaded for the first time, “If that means speaking with my brother then by all means, lead the way.”

Lazwald and Odin both looked at Takumi.

It was like they were waiting.

For my direction? Surely not, we’re in Nohr and I’m their captive prince.

But he didn’t say any of that aloud.

He just let Lazwald hoist him up into his arms.
“Let’s go,” he said.
Chapter Summary

After a few revelations, Prince Takumi has figured out that the Second Prince of Nohr is being manipulated by an outside force. He intends to find out more but is stopped short when Leon uncovers his plot and then claims to have no memory of his past actions. Takumi struggles to make a place for himself in Nohr nonetheless, deciding that if he can befriend Lazwald and Odin, maybe there are more allies waiting to be discovered.

Chapter Notes

just a brief warning, theres some zero/takumi towards the end of this chapter; it isnt a recurring thing but just,,, a warning
yeah
oh and also the end of the chapter also involves traces of non-con elements so,,, if youre concerned about that,,, heres your warning

Lazwald had been the one to take Takumi back to his quarters. During that time, Odin had accompanied Leon to visit with Prince Marx.

Takumi had wanted no part in that.

In all honesty, he was still reeling from Leon’s confusion.

After everything that's happened between us… all those cruel things he said… when he...

The prince let out a slow breath, hoping he could hold himself together, at least until he was alone.

Then it... it will be okay to fall apart then. Alone. Like always.

The thought wasn’t a comforting one.

Lazwald—curse him—seemed to take notice of the prince’s discomfort.

“Prince Takumi?” he said, slowing.

“I-It’s fine, I’m fine,” Takumi whispered, praying that he sounded reassuring enough.

Lazwald was clearly unconvinced but he didn’t push for an explanation.

When they arrived at Takumi’s chambers, Lazwald struggled with the door for a moment and had the situation been different, Takumi would have laughed at him for it.

But instead, he was just grateful that the mercenary was strong enough to carry him into the room.
“Now, where shall I put you?” Lazwald asked gently.

He seemed so different now that they were alone.

“The chair,” Takumi said, “please.”

The mercenary nodded and arranged him in the seat, taking a respective place at his right side.

“Are you comfortable, My-, Prince Takumi?”

He was about to call Takumi something different.

Things are changing too quickly for me to keep up…

“I’m sure that if I could feel anything, it would be alright, thank you,” was the prince’s blunt reply.

Lazwald pursed his lips and had nothing to say to that.

After a few moments of silence, Takumi glanced up at Lazwald, who seemed content to just stand in the quiet.

“What do you think they’re doing?” he asked softly.

The mercenary glanced down, seeming surprised at the prince’s curiosity. And then, after a moment, he let out a sigh.

“There have been times in the past,” he began, voice low, “when Lord Marx has reprimanded Prince Leon for his actions.”

“How do you know?”

Lazwald glanced away, “I’ve witnessed them; it isn’t pretty. When those conversations occurred… Lord Marx became very cold.”

Takumi wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

Seeming to realise this, Lazwald explained further: “Few know that Lord Marx has different faces. We all have them, naturally. Lord Marx, however, he’s only got the two. But, they couldn’t be more different.”

Takumi frowned.

Ryouma isn’t like that; he’s just Ryouma through and through…

“Lord Marx is the Crowned Prince of this dark kingdom,” said Lazwald, “so he must behave as such. But with his siblings, Leon and Elise most of all, he is also the Elder Brother.”

Lazwald sighed, “When he reprimands Prince Leon, he becomes the Crowned Prince where he should instead be the Elder Brother. Do you follow?”

He turned back and Takumi nodded slowly.

The prince had seen evidence of this dual nature of Marx’s. In fact, he himself had been subjected to
When they’d first met back in the cell, Marx had seemed upset with Takumi’s abhorrent treatment. He’d been the Crowned Prince then. But today when he’d come to Takumi’s aid in the washroom, he’d been the Elder Brother.

*Despite the fact that I’m…*

*Me.)*

“What’s going to happen?” Takumi asked.

He left off the ‘to me’ part.

Lazwald didn’t seem to notice.

“What’s most likely… is that Lord Marx will sentence Prince Leon to some menial task, have him apologise to you profusely.”

Takumi nodded.

In truth, he didn’t really care for an apology; it was much too late for that.

He just hoped that Prince Leon would leave him alone.

*If he stayed out of the way then maybe… maybe things could be…*

“Someone’s coming,” said Lazwald, moving for the door.

Takumi hadn’t heard the approaching footsteps.

*And with good reason,* he thought as the visitors entered.

“Prince Takumi,” said Marx, gesturing, “my sister has kindly offered her help with your… predicament.”

“Hello Takumi,” said Aqua, voice soft.

She looked the same as she had the day that she’d deserted the kingdom.

*Sister…* Takumi thought.

And then scolded himself for it.

*No, not anymore…*

Her hair flowed elegantly down her back, stretching to meet the stone flooring beneath her bare feet.

When Takumi finally looked into her face, there was genuine concern in her golden eyes.

*Why…?* The prince asked himself.

Aqua came and knelt before him, putting a dark hand against his knee.
“Leon and Odin filled me in,” she offered quietly.

Her voice was so blessedly familiar to Takumi’s ear and her presence calmed the fear that had been raging in his heart.

“I have a feeling that my song can erase this spell,” she said.

There was a sliver of disapproval in her voice.

Marx and Lazwald seemed oblivious to it. But Takumi had known her long enough to hear her distaste.

What was she upset about? The spell was an inconvenience, sure, but why did it seem to make her so uncomfortable?

“Marx, Lazwald,” said Aqua quietly, turning to fix her golden gaze upon them.

“Let’s go,” said Lazwald, taking Marx’s hand before the prince could offer any dissent.

The mercenary eyed Aqua with a knowing look and she nodded her thanks to him.

Takumi felt strange watching them interact.

*She’s so… peaceful here, right at home. She fits in here.*

The exchange with Zero came back to him, suddenly.

“There’s no place in Nohr for someone like me.”

Zero’s response had annoyed him at the time; “Even if you say that, Kamui is living proof that you’re wrong.”

And now, as he watched Aqua wave a small good-bye, offering Marx the smallest of timid little smiles, the prince realised that Zero had been wrong.

*It’s not just Kamui, he thought, it’s Aqua too.*

“Takumi,” she said, turning her attention upon him once again.

She paused, bit her lip, and then shook her head.

“Never-mind. I’ll just-,”

“No, no,” said Takumi, fixing her with a neutral look, “say what you need to say.”

“I-It isn’t proper,” Aqua whispered.

Had he been able to move his limbs, Takumi would have taken her and shaken her for her words.

“Everyone in Nohr lies to each other,” said Takumi, suddenly glancing away, “everyone has a role they’re expected to play and so they do when they have to. But that’s not who they really are. Are you going to succumb to that too?”
When Aqua refused to look at him, he sighed.

“I know you’re very perceptive,” Takumi said, “you were my sister once too, you know.”

She watched him for a moment, gauging silently. And then, seeming to have reached a conclusion, sat down, perched at Takumi’s feet.

Aqua always sat with her legs tucked underneath herself as they did in Hoshido. Something about how she fell into the familiar habit helped ease Takumi’s worry.

“Odin told me some disturbing things,” she said after a while, studying the stone flooring, “things that Leon-, that my brother-, that he did to you.”

Great, Owain knows now?

“Things have always been a bit tense here at the Northern Fortress,” Aqua supplied softly with a shrug.

Takumi nodded for her to continue.

“Your arrival has…escalated things. But, I’ll admit, Takumi, I never expected to see you dressed quite like that,” she said, hiding her teasing smile behind her hand.

Takumi wanted to snap at her but the easiness with which she’d spoken, the way that she treated him normally, the kindness even in the face of his anger…

The silly joke at such a serious point in time…

I can’t… I can’t do that to her, not like this.

“Yeah, I bet I look like a real fool in this,” he said instead, snorting.

Aqua blinked, clearly surprised that Takumi would engage in her joke.

“Dunno if Ser Lazwald told you,” the prince continued sheepishly, “but I couldn’t even get this damn blouse on.”

Aqua giggled and then after a moment, threw her head back and let out a loud laugh.

Gods, it was a lovely sound.

I missed this, Takumi thought, unable to stop himself.

“I-It suits you though,” she said, pulling a strand of hair over her shoulder and toying with it absently.

“You think so?” said Takumi, glancing down a bit to get a better look at himself.

“It’s different,” Aqua admitted, “but it does compliment your form.”

“I’m grateful you didn’t reference my feminine shape,” Takumi said with a snort.

Aqua glanced away, “Much too Nohrian of a phrase for me, thank you.”
The prince snickered, “I’m sure Prince Marx would be saddened to hear you say that, Sister.”

Aqua raised her gaze suddenly, golden eyes widening at Takumi’s choice of words.

The teasing smile sat on his face for a few seconds too long, until his words finally registered.

“I-, I mean-,”

“I-,” said Aqua, “I should get going. I’ll reverse this spell and… leave you.”

Takumi shut his mouth and nodded wordlessly.

As Aqua had sang her song, the feeling in Takumi’s limbs returned and he felt the panic in his heart finally die down.

“I should-, get changed,” he said abruptly getting to a stand.

It took him a few moments to regain his proper footing but he made his way to the washroom all the same.

Alone, Aqua glanced towards the door. She looked back to the washroom, listening to Takumi as he shed his garb and exchanged it for an evening gown.

She got to a stand and crossed the room, hand hovering over the doorknob. Kamui was waiting for her.

*I should just go,* she thought.

But she couldn’t.

Before she could force herself to leave anyway, Takumi came padding back into the main room.

“This ought to make me feel better,” he said to himself, tugging on the thin fabric, “but it doesn’t really.”

“Maybe you’d feel better if you wore three gowns at once,” suggested Aqua with a small smile.

“Were you going to leave?” Takumi asked.

*Straightforward as always,* Aqua thought.

Then after a moment, she nodded.

Takumi came over to her and lifted a hand as though he were going to pat her, or maybe offer it to her. Seeming to think better of it, he paused, hand poised in mid-air, awkwardly unmoving.

“Takumi-,” Aqua began.

“I’m sorry,” Takumi interrupted.

He looked pained.

“I said such horrible things to you when you-, when you decided to leave Hoshido… I was
being selfish. I shouldn’t have done any of that-,”

“N-no, it was I who was being-,”

“Let me finish-!” said Takumi, clenching his fist and biting his lip.

Aqua, realising that this admittance was difficult for him, chose to close her mouth and nodded wordlessly for him to continue.

“I see the way that Prince Marx and the others treat you. They care for you. And you belong here.”

He drew his hand back towards himself, looking down at the flooring, unable to look Aqua in the eyes.

“You deserve to be happy. You’re finally back with your family. I was so young when you first came to Hoshido that I’ve forgotten you were a prisoner as well. Now, being in a similar position, I see that I was wrong in judging you.”

“Takumi-,” she said, reaching for him.

When he raised his gaze, there were unshed tears in his amber eyes.

“Aqua-,” he whispered, “can you find it within yourself to forgive me?”

“Oh, Takumi,” Aqua said, moving to embrace him, “of course I can.”

He trembled against her, quiet crying muffled by her thick hair.

“Besides,” Aqua said, reaching up and parting Takumi’s hair out of his face, “you’re always going to be my little brother.”

He held her closer, burying his nose in her hair and wishing that this moment could last forever.

Forgiveness…

“Goodness, me, Takumi,” she said, laughing quietly, “you must be so very tired if you’re gushing about your feelings like this.”

“Don’t mock me when I’m crying, Aqua,” said Takumi, though there was no venom in his voice.

He withdrew and sniffled a bit, wiping his tears, “Thank you.”

“I should be the one thanking you,” Aqua offered with a smile.

Takumi shook his head, “No, really. Thank you, Sister.”

“I hope they’ve been treating you well,” Aqua said, “even after all that’s happened…”

“That reminds me,” said Takumi, blinking, “how well do you know A-, uh-, Lazwald?”

“Marx’s retainer? We’ve spoken briefly, why?”

Takumi frowned, “It’s-, he just said some strange things to me. I’m still trying to figure it out. I
thought maybe you could shed some more light on the subject…”

“Alright,” said Aqua, “then let’s talk about it tomorrow, yes? You must be exhausted.”

The prince nodded; she was right as always.

She turned on heel and Takumi moved to extinguish the lantern before getting into the bed.

“You know,” Aqua said, turning to glance at him over her shoulder, “If you want, I can show you around tomorrow. I’ll give you the grand tour, and all that. There’s an archery range here too. Maybe I can take you there?”

Takumi nodded, “I’d like that.”

***

The nightmares that evening had been bad. Worse than usual.

If it had just been Leon, Takumi was sure he could’ve managed.

Except it wasn’t.

Marx had been there too. And that had been too much.

“Keep his legs open, Brother,” Leon had said, offering Takumi a wolfish smirk from across the room.

He looked downright devilish, skin milky white beneath the dim lamplight in Takumi’s quarters and eyes bright with a predatory look.

“It’s okay,” Marx had whispered, breath tickling Takumi’s ear, “Everything’s okay. Don’t be scared.”

It had felt so real. The feel of Marx’s chest against Takumi’s back, the way that Marx’s hot hands were tucked beneath the prince’s knees and spreading him wide for Leon’s viewing pleasure, it had all felt so real.

Marx’s cock had twitched inside Takumi and the prince had tensed as Leon approached.

“Don’t fight it,” Marx had said, angling Takumi’s head to the side.

“This is supposed to be enjoyable, Prince Takumi. Shall I help you relax?”

And Takumi had nodded.

He had… wanted Marx to touch him, wanted the Crowned Prince’s hands on him, mouth insistent against his.

And it had been.

Marx had kissed him in that dream with a gentleness that Takumi found nearly incomprehensible.
The Paladin’s lips had been soft against his, tongue slipping into Takumi’s mouth slowly.

It had felt as though Marx were trying to memorise the curve of Takumi’s lips, offer him a pleasant distraction against Leon’s approach.

“Close your eyes, Little Prince,” Marx had whispered as he’d withdrawn for a quick breath, “enjoy this moment. Think only of me, if you must.”

Leon had crouched in front of him then, hands deliciously cold against Takumi’s inner thighs.

He had twitched against the chill and Leon had laughed, breath warm against the prince’s bare skin.

“Everything’s okay,” Marx had reassured.

And Takumi wondered if maybe it was.

He had closed his eyes as Leon leaned to take his cock into his mouth. Takumi had thought that maybe, if he couldn’t see what was happening, it wouldn’t be nearly as bad.

“Everything’s okay,” Marx said again.

And his voice was tender. Calming.

Takumi leaned against him and Marx thrusted shallowly up into him. It wasn’t painful, which was nice.

Marx’s heat against him was reassuring, supportive. The Paladin’s calming presence and the slow, gentle sex, it was all very new.

And nice. And Takumi found that he didn’t mind it.

Even with Leon perched between his legs, choking down his cock, Takumi was already numb to the uncomfortable idea.

As long as Marx was there, offering his quiet support-,

That’s all I need.

“See? You’re doing so well,” Marx whispered, the compliment coming naturally.

The praise sent a wave of joy shooting through Takumi and he hummed in acknowledgment.

“Just like that-,” Marx said.

“You’re-,”

But Takumi’s moan had interrupted him and Marx fell silent, seeming content with the prince’s audible pleasure.

“Are you feeling alright, Darling-?”

The Paladin’s voice was suddenly different. It sounded more… feminine.

Confused more than anything, Takumi drew away from him.
“Wha-?” he began, amber eyes fluttering open.

_Dream. Just a dream._

Takumi found himself to be nestled in the warmth of a loose embrace belonging to a rather robust-looking woman.

One of her hands was poised across his frame, fingers frozen mid-trail through his thick hair. It appeared as though she had been playing with the strands idly before falling into her slumber.

Something about her was familiar though Takumi couldn’t place the feeling.

“What in the-?”

“You were moaning in your sleep,” the woman said, unmoving.

Takumi was glad he’d been watching her lips as she spoke, or else he’d have thought that he’d imagined her voice.

“You must be exhausted, Darling,” she continued, shifting a bit so that she was more comfortable.

The bed creaked in protest and she let out an exasperated noise at it.

Takumi said nothing, finding his words dying in his throat every time he wanted to speak.

“It’s alright,” she said, combing her hands through his hair, “you’re safe here. They won’t hurt you while I’m here with you.”

Some part of Takumi wished that that were the case.

But his dream had revealed that idea to be a lie.

*If Prince Leon can be… corrupted… why not Prince Marx? Why not this woman as well? None of them are safe. And I’m not safe either.*

_Not here. Not in Nohr._

“Go back to sleep,” she whispered, “I’ll be here when you wake again. I won’t leave you.”

The things she was saying reminded Takumi of his mother…

...“Oh my, another nightmare?”

Mikoto would be wiping sleep from one eye and pushing her raven hair over one shoulder, leaning to direct her attention onto Takumi.

“Can I sleep with you, Mother?”

Mikoto had given him that warm smile and lifted the cover, moving so he could nestle against her stomach.

“I’ll be here when you wake again. I won’t leave you…”
…And now here, in the present, this mysterious woman was saying the same thing. Takumi didn’t have the strength to argue with her; not that he felt he should.

   “Okay,” he said softly, allowing himself to relax against her warmth.

She pulled him tighter against her chest, setting her chin atop his head.

   “How unforgivable of my brother to treat you poorly,” she whispered into his hair, “you seem quite lovely to me.”

Something about her wording bothered Takumi.

*Her brother…?*

But he was already drifting off into sleep before he could think much else on it.

   “Camilla-!”

The second time that Takumi awoke, he found the mysterious woman to still be by his side.

*She stayed…*

Something about her presence relieved his worries.

*She stayed…!*

   “Oh, look what you’ve done, Leon,” the woman said with a deep frown, “you woke him up!”

Takumi sat up, rubbing an eye and trying to decipher what they were saying.

It took him a moment to make the mental switch to Common after his dream.

   “Don’t tell me that you’re jealous,” the woman said, sitting up beside Takumi.

He tried to get a better look at her now that he could think properly and wasn’t nearly so tired.

   She had thick hair that flowed down her back like a mass of wild lavender sprigs, tumbling down her frame in a way so messy that it was mesmerizing.

   “So sorry that my foolish brother woke you,” she said, turning to tuck a piece of Takumi’s hair behind his ear.

He let her.

She offered him a good-natured smile that seemed more genuine than anything he’d seen thus far in Nohr, save his reunion with Aqua.

   “Have you any idea what this looks like? You’re going to tarnish Nohr’s name if you keep doing things like this-!”

Realising that he knew that annoyed pitch, Takumi turned, surprised to see Leon bustling around the room.
“Wh-what is he-?”

“I’m tarnishing Nohr’s name?” said the woman, lifting an eyebrow.

She was challenging Prince Leon head-on, something that Takumi was surprised by.

The woman was quiet about it, not nearly as aggressive as Leon could be, but she was quite certainly challenging him.

She seemed like the type to poison tea and then sit with you while you drank your own demise.

Dangerous. Crafty.

Similar to Prince Leon.

But with more class.

“Camilla-,” Leon warned, coming to stand at the side of the bed, arms crossed indignantly over his chest.

He was clothed casually as he’d been yesterday, save for being armoured from the waist down.

“Leon, I don’t know what you were expecting,” Camilla said, brushing her hair over her shoulder, “this is my chamber after all.”

“Wait-,” said Takumi, moving away, “this is your-?”

Leon snorted, “Marx forgot to mention that to you, did he? Typical.”

“Don’t insult our brother in front of our guest,” scolded Camilla softly, “or have you forgotten your manners, Little Brother?”

Leon huffed.

“I-,” began Takumi, “what time is it?”

“What, do you have somewhere to be?” said Leon, tone mocking.

Takumi threw the covers back and got to a stand, sure to cover himself beneath Leon’s gaze.

“Yeah, actually,” he snapped, “I do.”

With that, he stalked into the washroom without a single glance back over his shoulder.

He had wanted to look, though. Just to see Prince Leon’s face.

After that brief moment of triumph, it occurred to Takumi that he had not brought a fresh set of clothes.

Dammit…

He let out a defeated sigh.

I can just sit here and wait until he leaves or I can suck it up and go back out there.
Both options were equally bad.

“Oh, that reminds me-,” said Camilla from beyond the door, like a beautiful lavender blessing. She knocked on the door to the washroom and Takumi opened it with more hurry than he’d wanted.

“Luna passed some information on to me,” she offered.

*Luna…?*

After a moment, Takumi recalled that she was friends with Lazwald and Odin. *She the one marrying Azure’s sister Lucina, right?*

“What-, what sort of information?” he asked, genuinely curious.

What had Lazwald and Odin told her that was important enough to mention to Camilla?

“I heard that Nohrian garb doesn’t suit you,” she said.

Takumi blinked.

He had complained about being unable to get into the clothes but had Lazwald really taken note of his discomfort?

“What are you getting at, Sister?” Leon asked, moving so he could get a glimpse at Takumi.

The archer closed the door a bit, suddenly self-conscious.

Even if Leon didn’t remember the cruel things he’d done, it didn’t make it any easier for Takumi. *I don’t want to see him…*

“Oh, out with you, Little Pest!” said Camilla, waving jokingly at Leon.

He pouted at her.

“You can come visit Prince Takumi after I’m done with him.”

Leon rolled his eyes, trying to save face, and shrugged.

“Alright, fine. I’m going, I’m going.”

“At last,” said Camilla so that only Takumi could hear.

Despite everything, he was beginning to think that maybe she wasn’t so bad.

“Now then,” she said, pushing the door open wide when it was just the two of them, “let’s find you something wonderful.”

Takumi padded back into the main room, watching as Camilla stalked to the wardrobe against the wall.
She flung the great doors open, bending over to get a look at all the fabrics within.

“Do you have any preferences?” she asked, turning and gesturing.

Takumi blinked, confused for a moment.

“I-, you want me to wear one of those?”

“Aqua told me a bit about Hoshidan garb,” Camilla supplied with a simple shrug, “I thought that perhaps gowns would suit you better than…”

She trailed off with a shrug. She didn’t seem to care if Takumi chose to wear a gown or not.

No judgment. I like it.

Takumi nodded, “I-, appreciate it, Princess Camilla, thank you.”

She blinked, seeming surprised by his amicable attitude towards her.

After a moment, her expression softened and she smiled gently at him.

“Of course. Now then,” she turned back to the garments, “how do you feel about royal blue?”

As fate would have it, royal blue really brought out of the little flecks in Takumi’s eyes.

He had been dubious about wearing a woman’s gown at first. After all, it had been a few years since Mikoto had dressed him up to match with Sakura for festivals.

He hadn’t minded it so much then, for his unique beauty drew enough attention for him to be alright with the arrangement.

But now, slipping into a gown again, especially one of Camilla’s, seemed like a recipe for disaster.

Luckily, Takumi found that as long as he had the hem of the gown hitched up a bit, it was relatively freeing.

Much better in comparison to those tight trousers…

“Loathe as I am to admit it,” said Takumi, dropping his holds on the gown and letting the hem pool at his feet, “I have a newfound respect for Nohrian soldiers.”

“Oh?” said Camilla from where she was lounging on the bedspread.

She had laid down and then asked Takumi to strut back and forth across the room for her, modelling the few dresses she had selected for him.

“I had to wear a pair of those trousers yesterday,” he said, “and I could hardly move properly.”

“Dying for an aesthetic is easiest way to get remembered for an eternity in Nohr,” said Camilla with a small chuckle.

Takumi snorted, “I take it that’s why you prefer to go nearly nude?”

“At last!” said Camilla with a dramatic sigh of relief, “someone who understands my garment choices! I couldn’t possibly wield an axe like that. So I may as well just go without clothing then,
Takumi blinked and found himself smiling a bit; he was beginning to like this Princess Camilla. She sat up and then got to a slow stand. Everything she did, Takumi was noticing, reminded him of slow sex. She was a regal beauty, every movement purposeful, never faltering or looking foolish. Her confidence wafted off of her like a foreign perfume and Takumi felt that maybe she’d infused him with a bit of it on accident.

Especially considering the fact that I’m wearing-,

“Elise always has me do her hair in the mornings,” said Camilla, coming over to Takumi and standing behind him.

They were both looking in the mirror, admiring how the ruffles and pleats of the dress complimented Takumi’s shape.

The blue really accented his dusky skin in a way that Camilla claimed was ‘a glorious way to address your beauty.’

“Perhaps you’d let me do up your hair as well?”

The prince blinked.

Had anyone ever done his hair before? Maybe Oboro, for the few festivals. But then again, Oboro was always doing things like that.

Especially with Hinata, Good Gods…

“What is it? You’ve got a funny look…”

“Oh,” said Takumi, realising he’d left Camilla hanging, “I was just remembering something silly; it’s nothing. Anyway, what did you have in mind?”

“Oh my,” said Camilla, blinking in surprise.

“What is it?”

The princess frowned a bit, “We should wash this first.”

“I-In the bath…?” Takumi whispered.

The fear crept up into his chest again at the thought.

What if I see Ryouma again…?

Gods, that was the last thing he wanted.

“Not to worry, Darling,” Camilla said, unlacing the gown with practiced speed, “I’ll stay with you.”
Takumi let out a small breath and then clenched his fists, “Alright.”

Camilla had stayed with him earlier so maybe… maybe she could do it again.

So he let her lead him to the washroom.

Camilla bent to turn on the tap while Takumi slipped out of the gown.

He folded it neatly before tossing it over the back of a chair.

Camilla seemed impressed with his handiwork.

Takumi was just glad that she was looking at the dress and not at him in all his nakedness.

“Don’t fret, Darling,” Camilla said, gaze still averted, “though you have nothing to be ashamed of, I’ll keep my eyes elsewhere while you climb in.”

Takumi hummed gratefully, unable to come up with a proper response, before sinking down into the tub.

“Oh-,” he said, surprised.

The tub was nearly brimming over with bubbles. A sweet scent permeated the air and Takumi sank lower into the tub.

“They’re great, aren’t they?” Camilla said, spinning on heel and kneeling beside the tub, “I bought this special blend.”

“Bubbles…” Takumi said absently.

“You’ll smell like the freshest rose,” the princess said, sounding immensely proud, “Oh! I can hardly wait!”

She put her hands together in delight before straightening, “But, that’s right, there’s much to do!”

Takumi leaned back as Camilla drew a basin closer, slowly pouring the water over the prince’s head and dampening his hair.

“Elise always loved it when we did this part,” Camilla said, sounding oddly wistful.

“Prince Marx mentioned her earlier,” said Takumi, recalling how much Marx had seemed to care for the little troubadour.

Camilla let out a quiet laugh at that, “Oh, did he? It’s no surprise; she is our little treasure. Though she’s been through so much, she is still the light in our darkness. We’re very blessed to have her.”

Takumi nodded for her to continue as she sat the basin down and ran her fingers through his hair, gathering it atop his head.

Takumi had seen the princess’s long fingernails earlier, painted a startling wine red colour. He had worried that her nails would cause him some pain but Camilla was very careful in her actions.
“Which reminds me,” said Camilla, massaging the prince’s scalp gently, “do you want me to paint your nails? I think silver would just look darling on you.”

Takumi leaned back further, wishing this could last forever. Camilla had a strangely calming presence about her that reminded him of his mother.

It was bittersweet.

“Sure,” he said finally.

Camilla made a satisfied noise and drew the basin up again.

“Lean forwards for a moment,” she said, though there was no harsh command in her voice.

Takumi did so and Camilla balanced the basin in one hand, smoothing the prince’s hair with the other.

“Prince Takumi, may I ask you something?” the princess said finally, hand slowing its movement in his hair.

Takumi hadn’t spoken with her very long, but he detected a sense of self-consciousness in her tone that was so unlike her.

Why?

“What is it?”

She let out a slow breath.

“What is it exactly,” she said, voice soft, “that caused you to fear my brother?”

To fear Prince Marx?

Takumi didn’t think he feared him; not tremendously, anyway.

“Earlier,” the princess continued when Takumi said nothing, “your entire demeanour changed when you realised that Leon was in the room.”

Leon.

Of course that was what she’d meant.

She thinks I’m afraid of Prince Leon.

The thought stopped him for a moment.

Am I?

“I don’t mean to intrude,” said a voice from just beyond Takumi’s vision.

Camilla turned to the door, “Oh not at all, Dearest, we were just finishing up in here. Give us a few minutes, would you please? For your big sister?”

“C-Camilla-, you’re making me blush out here-!”
Takumi finally realised that the voice belonged to Kamui and he frowned a bit; he still wasn’t ready to face his brother quite yet.

Camilla hummed in disapproval, “this will take a few hours to dry.”

She wrung the prince’s hair out and parted it into two halves, pushing them over Takumi’s shoulders.

“I’ll get you a towel,” she offered, getting to a slow stand and stalking over to the linen closet.

“Princess Camilla?”

“Yes, Darling?”

Takumi toyed with the ends of his hair, “I’m not afraid of Prince Leon.”

The princess turned to look at him quietly for a moment before answering.

“Alright,” she said, “I believe you.”

“But I-,” said Takumi, “I am wary of him. He did an unspeakable thing to me, said some unspeakable things. It isn’t easy to overlook those actions. Even if Zero and O-, Odin apologised for them.”

“My brother’s retainers should not have to bear his burden,” Camilla agreed softly, returning to hand Takumi the fresh towel.

She pointed towards the door, “I’ll… get you a tunic to wear while your hair dries. Alright?”

“Wait-,” said Takumi, getting to a panicked stand.

“Wh-what is it?” Camilla asked, momentarily caught off-guard by the prince’s sudden clinginess.

And his stark nakedness, she thought but didn’t say.

“D-don’t leave me alone,” he whispered, “not here. Please.”

Camilla nodded and leaned against the wall, “Alright. I’ll stay.”

And then, after she spotted the relief in Takumi’s gaze, she teased him with: “As long as you angle that gorgeous form away from me. How cruel of you to put your beauty on display just out of my reach, Prince Takumi.”

Realising that he was standing bare before an enemy princess and begging her to stay with him, Takumi froze, mouth hanging ajar.

“Oh, I jest,” said Camilla, hiding her laugh behind the cover of her pale hand, “don’t worry yourself over this, Prince Takumi.”

Even if you say that…

The prince closed his legs and held his towel protectively over himself.

“Don’t worry, I’m not new to a sight like this, I can assure you,” Camilla said.
But she glanced away anyway and Takumi let out a sigh of relief.

“Big Sister-?” came Kamui’s muffled voice from just beyond the door.

Takumi straightened and held his towel closed at his waist.

“Y-you can-,” he began awkwardly.

*Look now,* he was going to say.

Realising how silly it sounded, the words died on his tongue.

Camilla simply nodded and gestured to the door, “I’m going to find you a tunic, alright? You’re welcome to join me… unless you’d rather… avoid Kamui for now.”

She seemed to understand Takumi perfectly. So much so that it scared him.

How is it that she knows my feelings so well?

They’d only been acquainted since that morning.

“I’m coming with you,” Takumi said finally, swallowing up his annoyance at Kamui and tailing Camilla into the main chamber.

Kamui was poised in front of the mirror, holding a gown in front of his form.

When he spotted Camilla, his face lit up and he spun around in a circle, the gown billowing out around him.

“How does this look? Do I look lovely, Big Sister?” he asked, smile breaking across his face.

Camilla chuckled a bit at him; “Perhaps you’d do better in a red gown than a blue one, Dearest.”

“Oh, Aqua would’ve said the same thing,” Kamui said with a playful pout.

Camilla came to his side, watching him over his shoulder.

“Perhaps a creamy white would be better?” she mused softly.

“Wh-white?” Kamui whispered, “Don’t make jokes at a time like this, Big Sister, this is serious!”

Camilla blinked at him, “What’s so serious?”

Kamui gestured, as though trying to grasp the word he needed from the air.

“Aqua said that I was supposed to-,” he paused upon seeing Takumi.

“Br-brother-, I mean-, T- Prince Takumi. Hello.”

The colour had drained from his face in a hurry, Takumi noticed.

Annoyed at his sudden formality, the prince rolled his eyes.

“Why the sudden fright, Kamui? Do I scare you so much?” he asked.
And then, swore at himself.

*I was supposed to be civil with him and yet here I go…*

“Sorry,” Takumi said, glancing elsewhere, “there’s no need for-, just ‘Takumi’ is fine, alright?”

Kamui blinked, surprised, but nodded.

Camilla whisked the gown he’d been holding away from him and exchanged it for a loose tunic.

It was a nice salmon colour and Takumi accepted it gratefully.

The tunic reminded him a bit of Sakura but he pushed that thought away.

*Don’t get sad now…*

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Takumi said, hurrying back into the washroom.

He didn’t want to stay in there alone for longer than was necessary.

*Lest those demons in my head make another debut…*

“What were you saying earlier?” said Camilla, catching Takumi’s attention.

He felt guilty for eavesdropping, but Camilla didn’t seem like the type to try to keep secrets.

*And if she did want this to be a secret, she wouldn’t have brought this back up with me so close…*

“Oh, right,” said Kamui, “I-, I was supposed to give Prince-, give Takumi a tour today.”

“What?” said Camilla.

Takumi could hear the impressed surprise in her voice.

“How did you arrange that? Prince Takumi doesn’t seem too fond of you, Dearest.”

Kamui sighed, “I know. Not that I blame him. He has every right to hate me, especially considering all that I’ve done to him. And his family.”

*‘His family.’*

Even if he said that to Camilla, Takumi hadn’t missed Kamui addressing him accidentally as “Brother.”

“But you did it for us,” said Camilla.

There was silence and Takumi figured that she had embraced Kamui.

“And I’m grateful that you stood with us,” she continued softly, “Nohr needs hope like you. *I* need hope like you.”

Kamui let out another sigh, “Even so…”

“The tour,” Camilla said, directing the conversation away from the grief.
The prince nodded, “Right, right. Well, Aqua set it up.”

“Ah.”

Kamui shrugged, “But I’m really at a loss, Big Sister. What am I supposed to do now? Takumi obviously doesn’t want to spend the time with me—and rightly so—but what am I going to do?”

“How about the archery range?” offered Camilla.

*How does she know me so well...?*

“Do you think that’ll be okay? I don’t want… I wouldn’t want him to get homesick.”

*Even if I think Princess Camilla knows me, Kamui’s ideas have merit too... loathe as I am to admit it.***

But Takumi turned his thoughts elsewhere as he shifted around in the tunic.

The salmon shade drew attention to his darker skin but Takumi didn’t feel as though Camilla had chosen it to alienate him.

*“It compliments your complexion,”* he could hear her say in his head.

Would she have said that? He didn’t really know; he hoped so, at least.

The tunic was loose on his frame, layers billowing out around him like an array of silk scarves.

He was happiest with the length, of course.

*I didn’t think I’d miss the feeling of fabric at my ankles this much and yet here I am...*

The sleeves were blessedly wide, gaping hems like the ones in Hoshido.

*Princess Camilla made it seem like she picked it randomly but...*

It was too comfortable and fitting for Takumi to believe that to be true.

He let out a sigh.

*Tour. With Kamui.***

Gods, he didn’t want to do that. Aqua was one thing; they’d made peace with one another yesterday evening but Kamui...

*That’s different.*

Even so, the thought of holding a bow in his hands again was a tempting one.

*I should get over this and just go. Maybe they’ll let me have the Fuujin Bow if I...*  

He paused, mid-thought.

*If I what?***

Before he could think any more on the sore subject, there was a knock at the door.
“Prince Takumi?”

It was Camilla, thankfully.

“S-sorry,” Takumi said, throwing the door open, flustered.

Camilla blinked and then nodded in approval, “Excellent. The salmon really compliments your complexion.”

Nailed it.

“Look, Kamui, doesn’t he look wonderful?” said Camilla, stepping aside so that the princes could look at one another.

Now beneath Kamui’s gaze, Takumi felt rather foolish.

*I’m in Nohr, playing dress-up with the elder princess.*

It was incomprehensible.

*I’m playing dress-up and I’m enjoying it.*

And he was. Takumi had found that Camilla’s garments suited him better than Leon’s.

*Kamui will still think I look like an idiot… a prince wearing a woman’s tunic, it’s…*

“Pretty…” Kamui said, more under his breath, but Takumi heard it all the same.

Much to his surprise, of course; Takumi wouldn’t have guessed that Kamui would have seen it that way.

“You look-,” Kamui paused, searching for a good word, “very handsome, Pr-., Takumi.

Takumi blinked, “Th-thank you-,”

“Hm, one more thing,” said Camilla, stalking back to the wardrobe and rifling through the drawers.

“What is it?” asked Takumi, nervous.

Camilla let out a victorious noise and lifted a belt overhead.

“Here it is!”

She returned to Takumi’s side and bent, easing onto her knees as though it was very natural.

The thought made Takumi unhappy for some reason.

“Lift your arms a bit,” she said, though it was more of a request than a demand.

Takumi did so and Camilla tucked the belt around his waist, tightening it and knotting it in the front.

The knot looked strange and complicated, nothing like the ones in Hoshido.

But it held together so Takumi didn’t see any reason to complain.
“Ah, yes,” said Camilla as she rose to her full height, nodding, “that’s right. The most stunning prince in Nohr.”

Takumi blinked, taken aback by the wording.

“Seconded,” said Kamui with a shy smile.

He’s… trying at least. Maybe… I should too.

Takumi gave them both a small bow in thanks.

“P-perhaps-, I could see the archery range?”

Kamui brightened at the mention of it and he shot Camilla a look as if to say ‘I told you so!’

She just laughed and mussed his hair.

“Yes, yes!” said Kamui, offering Takumi his hand, “Let’s go see it! It’s lovely; you’ll love it.”

“You two have fun,” said Camilla, waving them off with a pleased look.

“Can I ask you something?” said Kamui as they walked from the castle.

Kamui was barefoot and something about it eased Takumi’s worries; especially given that he was lacking shoes as well.

Thank the Gods for dirt paths…

“Honestly, I thought I would be asking the questions,” said Takumi, studying the ground, “but go ahead.”

Kamui stretched his arms above his head as they walked, seeming like he was trying to relieve some of his tension.

“What do you think of my-, the Nohrian Royals?”

“Your siblings?” said Takumi, hoping to convey that that sort of phrasing was alright, “they’re…”

What were they?

All vastly different. And I haven’t even met the youngest one yet…

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. When he’d first arrived in Nohr, it had been Leon who had broken his arm.

Takumi didn’t remember it all that well.

Gods, the look on Ryouma’s face when I told them my proposition…

He’d never seen his brother look so pained before.

But this was necessary! Can’t you see? I couldn’t possibly rule Hoshido in Mother’s place… Y-you were born for that position while I…
Elise had mended his arm. Or, she’d done what she could; only now was he able to use it properly. At first, the pain had been so intense that Takumi had spent a few days fading in and out of consciousness.

He had really only seen flashes of the blonde girl with the twin-tails.

The only thing that Takumi really knew about her was that she was an efficient healer. She had a kind smile but behind it was a fierce determination.

She reminded him of Sakura in that way.

“They’re all very… unique,” Takumi said finally, settling on a neutral word to describe the royals.

Kamui snorted, “No truer words were ever spoken.”

Takumi glanced over at him, intending to snag only a brief glimpse of the dragon prince. But he found Kamui’s gaze to be centred on him in the same way, ruby red eyes curious.

“Wh-what is it?”

“You look very nice,” Kamui said awkwardly, cheeks reddening.

Takumi snorted, “Because I look like a woman?”

Kamui halted mid-step, seeming surprised. Takumi turned to look at him, expecting an explanation for his pause.

“No,” said Kamui, stepping up and tucking a stray lock of hair behind the prince’s ear, “Because you look like you.”

*I… look like… me? What’s that supposed to mean?*

“Zero told me that yesterday… you were running around in full Nohrian garb, save for some armour,” Kamui said quietly, dropping his gaze, “I couldn’t really believe it. I mean, when we first met, you were so suspicious, thinking I was a Nohrian spy.”

As much as Takumi didn’t want to admit it, Kamui was right.

*I didn’t really think that my attire meant that much but apparently it’s as though I’ve declared myself a Nohrian conquest.*

He sighed.

“It was-, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Takumi said, deciding to let the issue of his clothing go for now.

*Besides, it’s not that big a deal anyway. They already despise me because I’m a Hoshidan; I’m already an outsider. May as well go all the way…*

“Can I… hear you opinion, then?” said Kamui, raising his gaze and beginning to walk again.

“Opinion? On what?”
“My family,” Kamui said, blushing, “I know you haven’t met Elise yet but still… I always wanted my two-, I wanted-, for all of you to meet one another.”

The Nohrian Royal Family meeting my siblings? Impossible. Hinoka would be so angry...

And Takumi certainly didn’t want that Prince Leon anywhere near Sakura.

“Start with Marx,” Kamui said, seeming suddenly enthusiastic.

Takumi hadn’t seen him this excited before.

“Prince Marx is… very noble,” said Takumi.

Lazwald’s comments were rising to his lips but the prince ignored them for a moment.

Best to keep Prince Marx’s dual nature to myself lest I ruin Kamui’s flawless image of him...

“Oh, yes-!” Kamui said, nodding, “Definitely. He looks so strong on the back of his horse. And his sword-,”

Did he ask me my opinion just so he could gloat about his siblings…?

Takumi sighed.

“Oh, and Camilla? She’s-, well, no, you first. What do you think?”

Takumi thought.

What do I think?

“She’s matronly,” he offered, “and very strong. And smart. She’s cunning, has a sharp tongue and a sharp mind.”

“Are you sure you’re not getting her confused with Leon?” said Kamui with a laugh.

At the mention of the Second Prince, Takumi tensed.

Realising his error, Kamui lifted his hands in apology.

“S-sorry-, I didn’t mean-,”

He fell silent when Takumi stopped in his tracks.

“Is that-?”

“Yeah,” said Kamui, sounding a bit smug, “the archery range. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Takumi blinked, unshed tears welling up in his eyes; he’d never been so happy to see a target in his life.

“I-, I want to be there,” he said more to himself than to Kamui.

He hitched up the hem of his gown and sprinted for the range entrance without a backwards glance.

Kamui watched him, awed.
“Oh, I forgot to ask him about Leon…”
Then after a moment, he thought better of it.

*It’s probably better not to ask him anyway,* the dragon prince figured with a shrug.
He shook his head to rid himself of the thought.

“Kamui.”

The prince turned, surprised to find Aqua.

“Aqua,” he said, “what are you doing here? Come to take over the tour with Takumi?”
The princess shook her head, “Though I wish that were the case…”
She seemed rather distressed. Kamui hated to see her that way.

*She’s suffered enough,* he thought, suddenly annoyed.

“What is it?”
Aqua toyed with the end of her hair, apprehensive.

“You recall those things that I told you?”
Kamui nodded, “About the manipulations, yeah. You said that Leon had put some crazy spell on Takumi… but Leon doesn’t know disarming spells like that; it’s not his style.”
Aqua returned the nod, “Exactly. Something devious is going on. And I intend to find out what.”

“You-, you shouldn’t go through with this alone, Aqua,” Kamui said, sounding hurt.

*Does she not trust me enough to ask for my help?*

“No it’s not that,” Aqua said, as though answering Kamui’s unspoken question, “actually, quite the opposite.”

“I’ll help, of course,” Kamui said, sounding suddenly relieved.

*She trusts me…!*
Aqua offered him her hand, “Come, Macbeth arrived earlier this morning, that’s why I asked you to attend to Takumi.”

“Macbeth? What’s *he* doing here? Surely, Father isn’t with him, is he?”
The songstress shook her head, “He came alone. I think perhaps the berserker accompanied him but…”

“Ganz,” Kamui hissed, angry.
He bared his pointed teeth and Aqua squeezed his hand to draw him back into the present.
Kamui’s fierce protectiveness over those close to him had failed him back at the fort on the border. Gunther had paid for that with his life and Kamui’s anger was enough to bring forth his dragon self.

“Macbeth is here to reprimand your-, our-, ah. Leon,” she said.

Kamui frowned, “Hasn’t Marx done enough with him?”

The songstress glanced down at their fingers intertwined, “I thought the same. But apparently, that’s not the case.”

“We should-, we should go. If you think there’s a plot against Takumi-,”

“It’s not just Takumi!” Aqua said suddenly, golden eyes wide, “It’s not just him, Kamui. It’s you as well! And myself also. We are the outcasts here; Hoshidans. Macbeth would do anything to make us the enemy in the eyes of our allies. You know this. King Garon would support him if Macbeth whispered the right words. You’ve seen this before, haven’t you?”

She was right.

Everything was orchestrated silently behind their backs.

*My capture by Hoshidan forces... meeting Aqua... Mother’s death...*

He took a deep breath to control himself.

“But Marx-,” he whispered.

“But Marx may not be able to protect us, Kamui,” Aqua said softly.

That had never occurred to the prince.

*Marx might not be able to...*

“Something sinister is going on,” Aqua reiterated, “and we need to uncover it before it destroys us, Kamui. I would appreciate your help but-,”

“I’ll do it,” Kamui said, “I’ll help you. If you’re right, then this is personal. I want answers.”

He sounded very determined. Aqua nodded slowly.

*Maybe with Kamui’s help... Will I no longer have to bear this burden alone...?*

“Okay,” she said.

Kamui squeezed her hand supportively, “It’ll be fine.”

*I pray you’re right, Kamui. I pray you’re right.*

***
Takumi took in the lingering scent of sweat and split wood. He’d almost forgotten how the ranges smelt.

*Smells like home…*

Glancing around, the prince found a worn bow and a quiver with a few arrows. “This’ll have to do,” he muttered, slinging the quiver over one shoulder and stalking into the field.

He took a deep breath. It felt strange to have a bow in hand again.

*I feel almost… powerful.*

“Deep breath,” he said to himself, drawing the bow.

Mikoto’s voice echoed in his head, her commands and lessons resurfacing in his memory. If he closed his eyes, he could feel her standing at his side, angling his elbow properly and praising his pose.

“Become one with the bow,” he said in unison with the voice from his past.

He notched an arrow, noticing the strange design on the tip.

“Pray to the winds to guide you.”

Mikoto would be smiling silently at his side if she were here.

“Now,” she’d breathe, and Takumi said it aloud, letting the arrow fly.

He opened his eyes and the illusion of his mother at his side disappeared.

*Alone again…*

The arrow perched deeply in the bullseye.

“Struck true,” Takumi said, feeling the last whispers of his memories leave him.

He re-tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, frustrated that he hadn’t tied it back before firing.

*Not that I can even find my personal accessories…*

He’d lost them after the bathtub incident and not been diligent in recovering them.

“Very impressive, little Hoshidan Prince.”

Takumi spun around, hand already moving to snatch another arrow from the quiver.

“Hey now,” said Zero, lifting a halting hand, “no need to get so excited about seeing me, Prince Takumi.”

“Zero,” said the prince, breathing a sigh of relief.
He tucked some more hair behind his ear and drew his hand away from the quiver, “What are you doing here?”

“This an archery range. I’m an archer,” Zero said, as though it should have been self-explanatory.

It was.

“Right,” said Takumi awkwardly.

_Gods, have things always been this… weird between us?_

He hadn’t seen Zero since Marx had arrived but still, the outlaw’s appearance wasn’t unwanted.

“What do you think of that bow ya’ got there?” Zero asked, gesturing to the weapon in Takumi’s hand.

The prince glanced down at it.

“It’s well-made,” he said honestly, “strong wood, durable. Balance is a bit off, but otherwise…”

He weighed it in his hands, fingers gliding over the wood, “Otherwise it’s good.”

“Glad you like it,” said Zero.

There was an emotional gruffness in his voice that surprised Takumi.

“Wh-what, is it yours?”

“You could say that.”

He stalked into the shadows, lock picks dancing in his hands.

“Wh-what do you mean-, wait, what are you doing?”

“I’m a thief,” said Zero as though it were obvious, “I’m thieving.”


“Look,” said Zero, straightening when the lock clicked and the door drifted open, “as much as it flatters me to have a bit of myself in your skilled hands, I’d much prefer keeping my things to myself, little Hoshidan Prince.”

“A piece of-, wait, you-, you made this-?”

“It’s just a hobby,” Zero said with a snort, “maybe I was a woodworker in another life. Not in this one though; I’m an outlaw through and through here.”

“But-, I’m-, I’m sorry about critiquing your work. I didn’t know-,”

“No, it’s good,” Zero said, sounding genuine, “I like your honesty. Don’t come by that much here in Nohr. But, you’ve probably already figured that out by now, haven’t ya’?”

He was right. It seemed that everyone Takumi met had some ulterior motive, a hidden agenda.

Except maybe Camilla.
And now that he was thinking about it...

Zero too.

“Anyway, the reason behind me doing this,” Zero said, tapping the lock with one of his picks, “is because we needed to get in here.”

“We-?”

The outlaw stepped into the room and Takumi slipped in behind him. The space was dark and cramped and the prince could hardly see anything.

“This is where they store the bows,” Zero said, sounding very close.

Was he? Takumi couldn’t tell.

“More importantly,” he continued, but then fell silent.

“Zero-?”

The outlaw hummed, “I’m wondering if maybe I was wrong about earlier.”

Earlier…?

“I said it was Lord Leon who would be swayed by your charm,” he said, laughing jovially, “but perhaps it was me.”

Takumi blinked, words seeming suddenly foreign and slow and impossible to comprehend.

It had almost sounded like Zero had confessed to him.

As unlikely as that is...

“I wanted to return this to you,” Zero whispered.

Takumi could tell now how close the outlaw was to him; Zero’s breath was hot against his skin and it was electrifying.

Maybe I’m just aware of it now because he said that he-

Cool wood pressed into Takumi’s palm and the prince recognised the piece immediately.

“The-, The Fuujin Bow, you’re-? You’re giving it back to me?” he whispered, clenching his fist around the weapon.

The grip was so blessedly familiar and Takumi could feel the bow’s power resonant with him once again.

It’s as though we were never separated...

“It’s yours,” Zero said softly.

Takumi wondered if he’d imagined the quiet pain in the outlaw’s voice.

“Let’s go,” said Zero, pushing past Takumi and back into the open air.
When he noticed that Takumi didn’t follow, he turned to look at the prince over his shoulder.

“Aren’t you coming? Put that bow to good use, little Hoshidan Prince. Show me what you can do.”

Zero offered him a sly smirk and Takumi figured that maybe everything was going to be alright.

“Maybe I’ll learn some nice tricks from the Second Prince of Hoshido,” said Zero, leaning against the fence and watching Takumi drop into his arching stance.

The prince tucked a piece of hair behind his ear with a furious huff and drew up his bow.

“Oh,” said Zero, breaking Takumi’s concentration, “you want me to get that for you?”

“G-get what?”

The outlaw lifted a hand angling his wrist so that the light caught on a few ties.

“I always have some spares,” he offered, “helps me to pull my hair back when I’m training with Odin.”

“Oh-,” said Takumi.

Of course Zero had meant his hair.

The outlaw’s confession had really rattled him.

Zero pushed off from his place against the fence and came behind Takumi, fingers nimbly pulling the prince’s hair back. Something about it was oddly intimate and Takumi hoped that Zero couldn’t see his blush.

He shivered as a breath of cool air hit his exposed neck and Zero chuckled.

“So sensitive there, aren’t ya,’ little Hoshidan Prince?”

Takumi let out a snort, “I thought you were tying my hair, not flirting.”

“Can’t I do both?” teased Zero, slipping the prince’s hair through the tie.

When Zero was done, Takumi’s hair sat in a bun at the base of his neck.

“Better?”

“Better.”

With that done, Takumi turned back to the target ahead and Zero retook his place against the fence.

Something about the arrangement was oddly comforting, Takumi found.

*The Fuujin Bow back in my hands, an empty archery field, and this ally at my side…*

Everything almost felt…

The prince closed his eyes and lifted his bow, feeling the magical energy materialise and shape into an arrow.
“Deep breath,” he whispered to himself, letting the arrow fly.

He heard the satisfying sound of it hitting the target and his eyes flew open, intending to see where it’d landed before the energy fizzled out.

It had hit the bullseye and Takumi turned to get a look at Zero’s expression.

The outlaw was taken aback by the emotions laid so bare across Prince Takumi’s face.

It was as though he were wordlessly saying: ‘I did it! Did you see?’

He was looking for some sort of approval.

It was endearing.

And Zero couldn’t help but toy with him a bit.

“Hm,” he said, pushing off the fence again and coming to stand at Takumi’s side, squinting at the target.

“Well?” said Takumi, sounding a bit too eager.

Zero shrugged, “Well you certainly needed something to do to exercise that arm.”

That hadn’t been the reply that Takumi had been expecting and Zero knew it.

“Oh-oh,” said Takumi, sounding deflated, “y-yeah, you’re probably right.”

*Who hurt you?* Zero wondered silently.

How was it that such a powerful prince could be knocked down so far by such a silly comment? It baffled Zero.

*Perhaps it shouldn’t though,* he thought to himself. *Is Lord Leon not exactly the same?*

They were similar, the second princes. Zero would never say it aloud but Takumi’s reaction had been enough to prove it.

“Hey now,” said Zero, moving to angle Takumi’s face so that the prince had to look at him, “I didn’t mean that.”

“What-?”

Zero held the prince’s chin loosely, suddenly very aware of their positions; Takumi didn’t look like he was intending to pull away.

“You did well,” Zero said, voice husky.

Takumi blinked, amber eyes widening in surprise.

Zero felt like he was falling.

Falling in those eyes… falling into something dangerous… falling for someone I shouldn’t… shouldn’t do this but I…
“Prince Takumi,” he whispered, tipping his head to the side.

The prince leaned forwards a bit.

If Zero hadn’t been so focused on him, he would’ve missed the movement.

“May I kiss you, Prince Takumi?”

And Takumi looked up into his face nervously. There was self-consciousness welling in his eyes and Zero had seen it in the mirror so many times that he wanted to embrace the prince.

_I want to take all the pain away… then no one will end up like me…_

That was how he felt about Lord Leon. And now…

_Now I feel like this towards Prince Takumi. Improper of me, as always…_

But Takumi didn’t reject him when Zero moved to kiss him. The prince stood on his tiptoes just so Zero could close the space quicker.

He smiled against Takumi’s lips just from the sheer silliness of it.

_The fact that I would be—_

Zero moved a hand to Takumi’s waist, pulling the prince against him. Takumi was so hot, even beneath the layer of his tunic—Zero loved the way he looked in it—the heat was still radiating from him.

Zero didn’t want it to stop.

So he kissed the prince deeper. Takumi moaned a bit at the contact and Zero was surprised with how easy he was.

_But then again, he thought, how long has it been since he was able to properly—?_

It wasn’t really fair to judge. And Zero didn’t mind it anyway. He would never have dared to kiss Lord Leon the way he was kissing Takumi now.

And this prince was loving every minute of it.

_And so am I._

Leon wasn’t.

He had snuck to the barracks when Odin had given him word about Zero’s mysterious absence.

The outlaw had been moodier than usual, replies more biting and jokes lacklustre.

And now, as Leon watched him, he finally understood why.

_Of course, thinking with his cock like always… so foolishly… I should have kept a closer eye on him. It’s things like this that I wanted to avoid._

Zero’s hand dipped lower and Leon knew enough about his retainer to know what he intended to do.
To take some woman here in plain sight… I should have sent Kamui to visit him this morning…

Sometimes Zero simply seemed bored of the usual routine in Nohr. That was what drove him to pursue others and tease them as he did.

It drove Leon up the wall.

Zero’s hand slid down the fabric of Takumi’s tunic, hands gripping it at the prince’s hip before sliding further down to cup his ass.

The prince lifted his leg a bit, seeming suddenly desperate for contact.

Fine by me, Zero thought with a pleased grin.

“Zero-,” Takumi whispered when he finally pulled back.

His cheeks were flushed a deep red, eyes hazy with mounting need.

It’s a good look, Zero thought though didn’t say.

“What, desperate for more?” the outlaw said with a teasing smirk.

When Takumi said nothing, Zero wondered if he’d pushed the prince too far.

“I shouldn’t be doing this-,” he said instead, hoping to alleviate some of the tension.

But Takumi cut him off with another kiss, mouth hungry, demanding.

Aggressive.

It wasn’t like him. But Zero found that he didn’t mind it. Takumi wasn’t the only one with who could kiss with such ferocity.

“Hey now,” said Zero, withdrawing so he could get a glimpse at Takumi’s lovely face again.

“Wh-what-?” said Takumi, embarrassed.

Dammit, I’m getting weak-kneed at just his expression…

“If you do that again I’ll have to take you here and now, Prince Takumi,” he said, voice husky.

And Gods be damned if I leave you with a limp… Prince Marx will have my head on a spike…

“Wh-what-?” Takumi said again, reeling from Zero’s words.

“Wh-what-?” Leon whispered, disbelievingly.

That woman in the salmon tunic with the silver hair, that was… Prince Takumi?

It couldn’t possibly-!

But even as Leon was readying himself to deny it, he saw the divine weapon in the woman’s hand.
There was now no way to dispute it; that was Prince Takumi.

Great. He has his weapon again…? And he’s whooping my subordinates…? Surely Zero didn’t… he wouldn’t just give…

But the dark knight had a sneaking suspicion that he already had the answers.

This is unacceptable…

Zero would be Zero and Leon wouldn’t blame him; he never did. But Prince Takumi…

Someone ought to teach that foolish prince a lesson about how things work in Nohr. He’s going to get himself killed if he gives the wrong person that needy look.

“We-, I-,” Takumi stuttered out, taking a step back as though that would help him regain some part of himself.

“Sorry,” Zero said with a small chuckle, “I got ahead of myself there. Didn’t mean to scare ya,’ little Hoshidan Prince.”

Takumi lifted his free hand, “N-no it’s alright. I just-, you surprised me.”

“I could say the same to you,” said Zero with a snicker.

The prince lifted his bow, studying the curve of it idly.

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Zero suddenly, “I-, hm. C’mere.”

Curious, Takumi followed after him as Zero slipped back into the shadows.

“I-, thought this would be a good idea, if you’re going to be carrying that with you now,” Zero said, gesturing to the Fuujin Bow.

He was holding a leather strap in one hand. He offered the other hand to Takumi.

“May I?”

The prince handed him the Fuujin Bow and Zero tied two matching knots on either end.

“That should do it,” he said with a nod as he handed the bow back to Takumi.

The prince accepted it and pulled on the strap, testing the strength.

“It’s pretty fine leather,” Zero supplied, “for all your royal needs, little Hoshidan Prince.”

Takumi nodded awkwardly, “I-It’s nice.”

“You don’t know how to put it on.”

“I don’t know how to put it on.”

Zero smiled at him a bit, naturally, as though Takumi’s confusion was endearing.

It was.
“Like this,” Zero said, taking the strap and slipping it over the prince’s head and one shoulder.

The Fuujin Bow rested against Takumi’s back and he reached behind himself, one hand resting upon the weapon.

It was reassuring to have it so close-by. He didn’t usually carry it back in Hoshido but now in Nohr…

*Now that I finally have it back,* he thought, *I don’t want to be without it anymore.*

“It looks good,” Zero said with a nod.

“Are you going to be here tomorrow?” asked Takumi suddenly.

He seemed rather embarrassed for asking.

Zero didn’t mind it.

“At the range? Yeah. Odin brings his flirty friend and the raging redhead. We all have a good time. You-, might want to join us. It would be fun.”

_Owain and Azure… and Luna, right? Along with Zero… he’s right, it does sound like fun…_*

Feeling a sense of confidence rise within him, Takumi nodded decisively.

“I’ll be there.”

“Then it’s a date,” said Zero with a smirk.

Takumi blinked, “I-I wouldn’t call it-,”

“Relax, little Hoshidan Prince,” the outlaw said, chuckling, “just teasing ya.”

Takumi let out a sigh and nodded, “Yeah, okay.”

“Until tomorrow then,” said Zero, taking Takumi’s hand and leaning down to kiss it chastely.

It was a very gentlemanly gesture, especially in comparison to their earlier endeavours.

Zero stalked off to lock the door to the storage room and Takumi headed back for the Norther Fortress, bounce in his step.

*I almost feel…*

Naturally he couldn’t stay happy. Not in Nohr. He had forgotten.

Seeing Leon’s brooding form in the entryway was enough to remind Takumi of that fact.

“P-Prince Leon,” he said, feeling it would be rude not to acknowledge the prince in some manner.

*Even if I despise him…*
“Prince Takumi,” said Leon, popping a tablet into his mouth before stalking right up to him. The sudden closeness had fear clenching its fist around Takumi’s heart.

“Did you enjoy the taste of my retainer?” Leon hissed, voice venomous. Takumi feared that Leon was being manipulated again; he had that dangerous look in his eye. *That look would kill a weaker man…*

“E-Excuse me?” said Takumi, already reaching to touch the Fuujin Bow for some support. Leon was upon him suddenly, pressing him against the cobblestone wall.

His drove his knee to the space between Takumi’s legs and pinned the Hoshidan’s arms to his sides. The internal panic that was rising within Takumi’s chest was enough to immobilise him.

“What do you need to be taught a lesson about Nohr?” Leon asked, sounding genuinely curious. Even so, Takumi got the distinct feeling that the question was rhetorical.

“Perhaps you think Zero really cares for you,” the Nohrian Prince continued. There was a low mocking tone in his voice.

“He doesn’t. You’re a mere amusement to him; he wants to watch you dance. And so does my Elder Sister, apparently. I never would have pegged you as the type to play dress-up, Prince Takumi.”

Every insult was like a thorn to his heart. *How is it that his words have such an effect…?*

“They all want you for their own gain,” Leon promised, confirming Takumi’s worry from earlier.

“And you-?” Takumi dared.

He wanted to snatch the words back and swallow them down.

Challenging Prince Leon was like playing with fire. Camilla had been able to control it but surely she was just experienced enough to deal with him properly. *Meanwhile, I’m… less equipped…*

Leon watched him unblinkingly for a moment before a slow smile crept onto his face.

“I’m not sure about how I feel about you quite yet. But I’m more than willing to see what other lovely things we can make you wear.” *What other-?*

“Perhaps you’d look nice in garters. Or, are you wearing some already?”
He moved a hand down and squeezed the prince’s thigh over the gown, fingers clenching in the fabric.

“But perhaps lace would be better on you. Don’t worry, you’ll still look lovely, even if it’s me who’s doing your outfit.”

Something about the way he phrased it was unsettling.

“Prince Takumi of Hoshido, dressing like a Nohrian maiden and flirting with the worst scum in all of Nohr. Would it not be more appropriate for you to be with me?”

The way that Leon spoke reminded Takumi of their first conversation.

“You could be my slut.”

Takumi closed his eyes and his mind drifted to Camilla. She wouldn’t take advantage of him, he knew. She had only ever shown him kindness.

Maybe Leon was right about her wanting to dress him up like some sort of foreign doll. But she had been kind, honest.

“I like your honesty,” Zero had said earlier.

I like honesty too, Takumi found himself thinking.

“I heard that I shocked you with a binding spell,” Leon hissed, “wanna see if I can do it again?”

Takumi struggled beneath him. Leon must have seen the fear in his eyes.

“Then I could do as I please with you, Hoshidan Dog. Imagine, I could have you servicing me every night. Maybe I’d even let Zero go a few rounds with you…”

Then, seeming to actually consider it, he shook his head.

“No, I don’t want to share,” he decided, centring his gaze back on Takumi. “I’ll keep you all to myself.”

I won’t even be a captive prince anymore if that happens. I’ll be… something worse.

Takumi didn’t know what that was, exactly. But he didn’t want to find out.

Leon had other plans. He leaned in and kissed Takumi with a forcefulness that didn’t allow for any resistance.

Had the situation been different, Takumi would have compared him to Ryouma. But the thought didn’t sit well given what had happened in the bathtub yesterday.

Leon was searing hot, hotter than anything Takumi had ever tasted. The Fuujin Bow dug into his back painfully.

It was strapped uselessly behind him. Something about that was even worse than not having the bow at all.
It was in his grasp, at last, but he was powerless to use it now.

*Even with my enemy right here...*

It was terrible.

Leon’s tongue pushed into him, invasive, and Takumi felt as though he was going to lose consciousness.

Fear and panic were mingling in his throat, mixing dangerously with Leon’s aggressive actions. The Hoshidan Prince swallowed them down worriedly and only then did Leon withdraw.

Takumi let out a small sigh of relief.

“Don’t be relieved just yet,” Leon hissed with a poisonous look.

Takumi felt his blood chill.

“Did you feel the tablet?” Leon asked, “or were you too caught up in something as silly as a kiss?”

*The... tablet...?*

“They’re incredibly hard to get in Nohr these days,” Leon said idly, “so I hope I didn’t waste one on you for no reason.”

“Wh-what did you-?”

“What did I do to you?” finished Leon, seeming to derive a certain demented pleasure from the prince’s fear, “You’ll feel it soon, I’m sure. You’ll start out feeling too hot.”

Already feeling like that, thanks, Takumi thought though didn’t say.

“That’s the sign that your hormones are imbalanced,” Leon promised, “and you’ll lose control of yourself. Maybe if you’re good, I’ll give you what you want.”

*What I-? And what would that be, exactly...?*

“Maybe if you beg me well enough, I’ll ease your suffering.”

*Even though you’re the one causing it...*

“If you can’t find a suitable outlet,” Leon warned, lip curling, “this evening will be utter hell for you.”

Takumi didn’t like the sound of that.

“But go, run now, Hoshidan Dog,” he said, stepping away and gesturing to the empty hall, “I’ll come find you tonight and we’ll see how you feel about me then.”

Takumi squinted at him for only a second before hurrying off.

He needed some answers.
But even now, he could already feel that impossible heat that Leon had described.

*I’ll be lucky to last until this evening…*

He reached behind himself, feeling the smooth wood of the Fuujin Bow beneath his fingers.

It didn’t reassure him.

He stumbled up the stairwell, practically throwing himself against the chamber door when he finally arrived.

“Princess Camilla-!” he said, flinging the door open.

Surely she could help him. Camilla would know what to do. She would protect him.

*She even said…*

But she wasn’t there.

*No… No…!*

He was alone. Feeling the crippling isolation seize him, Takumi shut the door and locked it, sliding down until he was resting against the floor.

He drew his knees to his chest and set his forehead against them.

*I’m alone… I’m all alone. He was right; Prince Leon was right. They all just want me for their personal gain.*

He’d been treated so well by Lazwald and Odin and even Zero that he’d nearly forgotten his purpose in being here.

*I’m just a bargaining chip to them. I’m the thing that keeps Hoshido at peace, in fear.*

But his situation was the exact same thing.

*I’m no better off than them; I’m here, at peace. But I’m in fear too.*

Night was already approaching and Leon’s warning came back into Takumi’s head like a cruel mockery.

*“This evening will be utter hell for you.”*

*…As if things weren’t already bad enough…*

The prince tore Zero’s tie from his hair, letting it fall around him like a thick blanket, as though that could keep him safe from all the enemies around him.

*They’re all my enemies. That’s all they’ll ever be. I was such a fool to think otherwise…*

He closed his eyes and waited for the worst to be upon him.
Cabbage and Peaches

Chapter Summary

Though Prince Takumi has managed to successfully make some friends in Nohr, he must not forget that there are still plenty of evils awaiting him around the corner. Prince Leon takes it upon himself to remind the captive prince of this fact. Takumi begins to struggle with Leon's tablet and decides to go to Prince Marx for help. A tender time ensues.

Chapter Notes

i suppose ive kept you all waiting for this long enough, ahahah.
my entire family is sick as hell, including me ahhahah, so i decided to go ahead and post this early.
this chapter is pretty heavy in the marx/takumi department so if youre not into that, you may want to wait until the next chapter, which is more leon/takumi oriented.
also my favourite line that i have ever written is in here and takumi says it at the end. i am so proud of my chicken son. <3

Takumi had lost track of time. He’d finally pulled himself up from his place on the floor and made his way back into the hallway.

_I need to find someone who can help_...

He wished he knew where Prince Marx’s quarters were; if Camilla was nowhere to be found, Marx was the next best thing.

The prince put a hand to the wall for support, slowly trekking down the hallway.

Every step sent shockwaves shooting up his legs. Whatever had been in that tablet of Leon’s had made every part of the prince overly sensitive. And the needy fantasies that were swarming within his mind weren’t making things any easier either.

Worse still, the nightmare from yesterday was coming back to him in short bursts.

_“Think only of me, if you must.”_

Marx’s words re-echoed in his head over and over until the prince was ready to give in.

_Fine, he thought, angry, I’ll go to you. Surely you can help me._

Takumi wasn’t exactly sure what Prince Marx would be able to do for him, but at least he wouldn’t have to suffer alone.
There was a woman ascending the staircase when Takumi finally came to it. She had a mass of hair piled atop her head in a giant bun and was clothed beneath a simple creamy chef’s blouse.

Pretty, Takumi thought though he didn’t want to, maybe she could help. Anonymous help… that’d be okay. She won’t even remember me. It’d be okay if we…

He shook his head to dispel the thoughts.

I-I’m not myself right now…

“E-Excuse me,” he said, clenching his fists at his sides, trying to reign in that unchecked desire that Leon’s tablet had released.

The chef turned, fixing her rosy eye upon him.

“Lucky me,” she said, sounding pleased to see him, “yes, I think you’ll do.”

Funny, I was just thinking the same thing…

“Shame though,” she continued, ruffling her skirts, “noblemen are more my taste. I don’t usually go for the girls. But you’re right here… all alone… lost little sheepie…”

Wait, what-?

She shifted and withdrew a cleaver from the folds of her dress, glancing down to stare at her reflection in the metal.

Wh-whoa-, hey now-, what’s she doing with that-?!?

“Hm… red blood on my white blouse,” she mused, “Lord Marx will be unhappy.”

Lord Marx?

“You know Prince Marx?” Takumi said, fumbling for proper words.

Perhaps he could talk his way out of this…

The woman glanced away from the knife and back up at him, “Yes of course. And Ser Lazwald as well. I lost him way back there; he always gets angry about Pieri’s bloodlust. So, so angry. Angry little Lazwald…”

“Lazwald-? As in, Prince Marx’s retainer?”

“You know him?” she said, looking surprised, “Well, guess it’s not so surprising… he’s always flirty… Lord Marx hates that he does that.”

“Pieri!” came a voice from lower in the stairwell.

“Lonely little Lazwald, comin’ to find Pieri, yes he is, here he comes-!” she sang softly, sliding her cleaver out of sight.

Takumi was sure to remember that she still had the damn thing.
Takumi had left the Fuujin Bow back in his quarters. There was no point in carrying the extra weight, especially since he was already having enough trouble simply walking himself.

I’m a fool to have left it. Zero fixed it up for me and yet I-

“Pieri, why’d you run off? Lord Marx is going to lecture us both if we don’t hurry back.”

Azure-?

Lazwald’s voice carried up the stairwell and Takumi caught sight of his shadow as he climbed the stairs.

“Pieri-?” he said again.

The mercenary came to the top of the stairs and into view at last.

Takumi couldn’t have been more relieved to see him.

“Lazwald-!” he breathed, taking a moment to appreciate the calmness that Lazwald’s presence had sent over him.

“P-Prince Takumi-?”

“P-Prince…?” said Pieri, blinking.

She turned and pushed her fringe away from her face, focusing both her eyes upon him, scrutinizing.

Takumi was disturbed by her mismatched gaze. He’d only seen her rosy eye before but now, with her hair pulled away from her face, he saw that her other one was a deep pine colour.

“You’re a-?” she said, frowning.

Lazwald hurried over to the prince, placing a hand on his shoulder in worry.

Even through the fabric, Takumi could feel Lazwald’s touch like a kiss of flame. He gritted his teeth against the feeling.

“I-,”

“What’s going on? Are you alright?”

And then the mercenary turned to Pieri, “Did you do something to him?”

She lifted her free hand in surrender but Takumi spoke up first: “N-no, she didn’t do anything. But I-, I need to see Prince Marx.”

Lazwald squinted a Pieri, trying to decide if Takumi was telling the truth or not.

Pieri seemed equally as surprised at Takumi’s words; she had not expected him to keep quiet about her cleaver. But he did.

She wondered why.
“Don’t we all,” said Lazwald with a sigh.

Realising that it wasn’t the time for jokes, he cleared his throat and straightened.

“We’ll take you to see him. Won’t we, Pieri?”

The cavalier nodded, “Sure, sure. The pretty princess-prince needs an escort and none are better than Pieri and Lazwald.”

For a woman who was previously prepared to end him with her meat cleaver, Pieri sure seemed jolly.

The journey to Marx’s quarters felt incredibly long and Takumi was breathing hard when they finally arrived.

“Your corset too tight?” asked Pieri with a small snicker.

“He’s-, he’s not wearing a corset, Pieri,” said Lazwald with a sigh.

His hand was back on Takumi’s shoulder and the prince clenched his gown in his fists.

“You’re sure this lady’s a prince?” said Pieri, “he’s kinda… fragile. And he’s wearing a dress. Lazwald, are ya’ getting real desperate these days? I could always go on a silly tea-date with you. Because this is sort of-,”

“Pieri,” hissed the mercenary, seeming exasperated, “please just-, please get the door.”

She shrugged off his annoyance and swung Marx’s chamber door open with a strength that surprised Takumi.

“Enter if you dare!” she whispered, rosy eye wide with a crazy look.

She cracked a smile and lifted her hand in a cryptic wave of farewell as the door shut behind Takumi.

“Sorry about Pieri,” said Lazwald when they made their way into the foyer room.

“I-It’s okay,” said Takumi, hoping he didn’t look too shaken.

“You look really shaken,” said Lazwald, “are you okay?”

Dammit…

“I-, I just need to speak with Prince Marx.”

“Did something happen?” asked the mercenary.

Takumi wanted to tell him, really he did.

But I can’t just keep expecting them to fight my battles for me. I may be a captive, but I’m still a prince.

I’ll solve this on my own…
“Right after I talk with Prince Marx, that is.”

“No,” said Takumi, “everything will be alright. I just… it’s about Prince Leon.”

That wasn’t technically a lie.

*He’s responsible for my current state anyway*…

“Alright,” said Lazwald, seeming unconvinced.

But the mercenary didn’t press him. Somehow that made Takumi felt even guiltier.

“Er,” said Lazwald, awkwardly scuffing his shoe against the stone flooring, “Lord Marx is beyond that door in his private chamber. I’ll… be just outside with Pieri, if you… need anything.”

His easiness was making Takumi feel terrible for lying.

*He’s done nothing but show me kindness. And this is how I repay him?*

Lazwald didn’t deserve that.

*He isn’t even from this kingdom… he’s not my enemy. He’s one of the only people here who I can actually trust.*

And yet Takumi was still keeping the truth from him.

*I’m terrible.*

“Thank you,” said Takumi, hoping the hollowness that he felt wasn’t reflected in his voice.

Lazwald gave him a reassuring smile, “Don’t worry. Lord Marx is used to dealing with Prince Leon’s behaviour. You can lean on us for help, it’s no trouble.”

*Even if you say that*…

He was just being polite.

“Well then,” said Lazwald, still seeming lost, “I’ll… be seeing you.”

And he turned promptly on heel and exited, leaving Takumi alone.

The prince let out a relieved sigh as soon as Lazwald shut the door.

Gods, the mercenary’s touch had nearly set him off back there.

*I would have died from embarrassment…*

Even so, the prince straightened and hobbled to Marx’s door, rapping against it and praying that the prince wasn’t too busy.

There was silence for a few moments too long and Takumi felt like he was going to cry.

*Wh-what am I going to do…?*
He had been banking on Prince Marx being available to assist him.

*I didn’t even consider the fact that he might not be able…*

“Come in,” said Marx finally.

Takumi did all in his power to resist the urge to throw himself against the door at full-force in relief. He sucked in a breath and put a trembling hand to the knob, opening the door slowly.

“P-Prince Marx-,” Takumi began, struggling to stay upright and leaning heavily against the doorframe.

The Crowned Prince’s head jerked up as though he’d been slapped.

He’d been wearing a pair of glasses and they tumbled off his face and onto the desk with a deafening sound in the silence.

“P-Prince Takumi-?” Marx said from his place behind his desk.

A look of surprise—and then one of confusion—flitted across his face. Takumi wondered why.

“Oh my, it seems that’s my cue to leave you then, Brother.”

Takumi’s blood ran cold as he realised the reason for Marx’s panicked expression.

“Prince Takumi,” said Leon, getting to a slow stand and taking his time stalking towards the door, “I see you’ve become acquainted with my eldest brother. Good on you.”

Takumi waited for him to say something cruel.

But with Marx there, it seemed that the dark knight was playing nice.

“He’s quite helpful,” Leon whispered, setting a heavy hand on Takumi’s arm.

Gods, it felt like liquid fire.

“Though, I’m sure you’ve already figured that out by now, haven’t you?”

Leon gave him a grin so pretty that it had to be poisonous.

“*Leon,*” said Marx gruffly, getting to a stand.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Leon said, shooting Marx an innocent smile.

“Enjoy yourself, Hoshidan Dog,” he breathed in the same breath towards Takumi.

Before Marx could say another word, the dark knight was out the door.

The Crowned Prince let out a sigh, putting his index finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose and slowly sinking back into his desk chair.

“Gods above,” he breathed, voice low.

Takumi clutched at the front of his gown, wishing the stuttering in his heart would slow down so he could breathe properly.
Leon’s touch and his words—,

*Being killed by Kamui would be gentler than this…*

“Prince Takumi,” said Marx, seeming to have collected himself, “is something the matter?”

“I—I need to—,”

*I need to what?*

How was he going to explain his situation?

If he told Marx the entire truth, the Paladin would simply go after Leon and the entire vicious cycle of torture would just begin again.

*I can’t even imagine what’s worse than this. But that doesn’t guarantee that Prince Leon hasn’t already concocted a worse punishment for me…*

This was all, in some twisted way, just part of Leon’s contorted game.

*This is a test. If I reveal that it’s his fault, I lose. But…*

What could he do instead?

*What’s the alternative…?*

“Prince Takumi,” Marx prompted again, getting to a stand and coming towards him.

*Oh Gods,* thought Takumi, swallowing hard, if he lays a hand on me, I’m not sure I’ll be able to—,

“Is something the matter?”

The prince let out a stuttering breath when Marx moved to part his hair and inspect his face.

“You’re red, are you feeling alright?”

His good intentions would be the end of him.

Takumi bit his lip as Marx moved to place a hand against his forehead.

“Burning up too,” the Crowned Prince observed with a frown.

He withdrew only to reach down and pull on the sleeve of Takumi’s gown, “And, what’s with this?”

Seeming to realise how condescending his wording sounded, the Paladin stumbled to fix them.

“E-er that is to say-, you look lovely but-, I am rather curious as to why-,”

He let out a sigh and took a step back, running a hand through his golden curls.

“My apologies, Prince Takumi,” Marx said finally, “my patience has been wearing thin as of late.”
Takumi had a sneaking suspicion that Leon was at fault for that.

He would have been more certain had he been in his right mind.

But I'm not, he thought.

Every part of his body was aching with that primal need, driving his sanity away in favour of a more lovely pleasure.

“P-Prince Marx-,” he said, voice hoarse.

The worry in his throat wasn’t making this any easier.

The Paladin shook himself as though to get rid of his heavy thoughts so he wouldn’t be distracted.

“I-I am not myself-,” Takumi whispered, glancing away.

Marx came to him again, concern driving their proximity closer than it needed be.

“He’s in his casual garb,” said that unhelpful voice in Takumi’s head, “it wouldn’t take any time at all to get him out of it.”

That was true. And Takumi hated himself all the more for thinking it.

“Look at that foolish cravat, why not just grab it and seal the deal?”

It was looking more promising by the minute.

He is... close enough to kiss, Takumi reasoned unreasonably.

“What’s-?” Marx began.

But Takumi took a big step forward and clenched his fist in the fabric of the prince’s blouse, tugging him forward until Marx’s lips were against his.

It was messy. Unexpected and uncoordinated on Marx’s part but Gods, Takumi didn’t care.

Sweet relief, he thought, pressing himself closer to the Paladin.

Marx’s heat was so blessedly pleasant that Takumi could hardly bring himself to care how terrible the wait had been.

It was worth it-, his muddied mind provided unhelpfully, this was so damn worth it.

Marx withdrew first, letting out the smallest of gasps, and then moved to hold Takumi at an arm’s length away.

He squinted at the archer in silent disbelief.

“Prince Takumi-,” he began, obviously lost for words, “what’s going on-?”

Takumi couldn’t help but notice how red that the Paladin’s cheeks were. Even though he had been the one to break the kiss, Takumi could see that lingering lust in Marx’s gaze.
Do you want me too? He wondered, without regard for the absurdity of it.

“I-I did not mean to force myself upon you,” Takumi said, breath ragged, “but I just can’t deal with this anymore."

Marx blinked slowly, as though some heavy revelation had fallen upon him.

And then the corner of his mouth twitched as though he were keeping back a smile.

Takumi was confused by it all.

“Well,” said Marx with a sheepish sigh, “It’s been quite a while since I helped-,”

Seeming to realise that he didn’t want to reveal the rest of his sentence, he awkwardly trailed off with a shake of his head.

“It’s no matter now.”

The intimate memories that Leon had shared with Takumi when they’d first met came crashing down upon him suddenly.

And Takumi realised that he already knew what Marx had been about to say.

*He doesn’t know that I know... that I know all about his relationship with Prince Leon...*

How many times had the princes stolen kisses in dark corridors and breathed one another’s names like prayers against bare skin?

Takumi was preparing to feign ignorance when Marx leaned in and put his mouth against his.

*Soft...*

Marx tipped his head a bit, tongue positively devilish in Takumi’s mouth. He wrapped an arm around the prince’s middle, drawing Takumi closer to him and moving his free hand to cup the prince’s face gently.

His palm was sweaty against Takumi’s skin but Takumi found he didn’t mind it.

*I’m just relieved to be getting some relief...*

“I-,” said Marx, withdrawing suddenly, “I shouldn’t be doing this. I shouldn’t force myself upon you. Y-you’re in no state to agree to do any of this with me."

He dropped his hands suddenly, seeming disgusted with his own behaviour, “I-I’m taking advantage of you."

*No, no, no-!*

Without Marx’s soft heat, Takumi could feel that painful fire from Leon’s tablet begin to well up inside of him, coiling dangerously in the pit of his stomach.

*D-don’t make me suffer alone-, I-, I can’t-,*

“This isn’t the way it should be,” the Paladin whispered,” I’m sorry.”
Marx dropped his gaze and took a few steps back, retreating to the cover of his desk.

Takumi cursed the piece of furniture between them.

“P-Prince Marx,” he said, taking those few steps forwards so he could plant himself in front of the Paladin.

“It’s not like that. I-, It’s impersonal. But I-, I need your help.”

Marx blinked, seeming surprised to hear the truth so plainly.

“I need your help,” Takumi repeated again, quieter, as though realising how true the words were for himself.

“Impersonal,” Marx mused, seeming to consider Takumi’s offer seriously.

Now that Takumi had laid himself so bare for the Paladin, it was apparent that Marx was having difficulty turning him away.

Y-you’re the only one I have left. I could never ask Azure or Owain… and Gods forbid I see Prince Leon…

“Pl-please-,” said Takumi.

Somewhere, in the deep recesses of his mind, he knew he should have felt ashamed.

Here he was, Second Prince of Hoshido, begging the Crowned Prince of Nohr to take him like some desperate virgin.

Gods, I-, this shouldn’t even-,

But those thoughts of shame were silenced when Marx took the necessary steps to round the desk.

“Tell me everything,” Marx said, “I do not want to hurt you. I will help you, but I will not cause you pain of any sort.”

Seeming to believe that this was appropriate, the Paladin nodded and then finished briefly with: “Understand?”

Takumi nodded slowly, beginning to tremble at the idea of finally getting some relief.

“Say it,” said Marx, commanding lilt sneaking into his tone.

The prince shivered and nodded again, “Y-yes. I understand, Prince Marx.”

The Paladin narrowed his gaze at the title and Takumi wondered if it bothered him for some reason.

“Don’t-,” began Marx.

He frowned and then, seeming to have changed his mind about his phrasing, began again with: “No, I’m not a prince right now. This is… not a princely behaviour. I’m… just Marx.”

Seeming content with that explanation, he deftly slipped the crown from atop his head—as though
words weren’t enough for him—and then laid a chaste kiss against Takumi’s lips.

“Just ‘Marx,’” he reiterated, breath hot against the prince’s face, “for tonight.”

*For tonight. For tonight. For tonight.*

The unspoken implication—intentional or not—of them engaging in this again had Takumi feeling giddy.

Marx hooked his fingers over the belt at Takumi’s waist and drew him closer.

“Impersonal,” he whispered, more to himself than to the archer.

Takumi regretted that choice of wording.

But even if Marx was saying that, the tenderness with which he kissed Takumi was saying something different.

He bent his knees a bit, making up for Takumi’s short stature and put his lips against the prince’s neck.

Takumi shivered against the Paladin’s carefulness.

_Gentle…_

Ryouma hadn’t been like that. Everything between them had been fiery passion, pain and pleasure intermingling until they were simultaneous feelings, interlocked in Takumi’s mind like a sweet drink with too much kick.

Marx was different.

_So very very different… and nice._

Marx was soft. Where Ryouma was just Ryouma through and through, Marx felt multi-layered.

Lazwald had mentioned him having two different faces: the Elder Brother and the Crowned Prince. And now, Takumi was seeing the difference. *Feeling* the difference.

Marx had been so stoic and cold when Takumi had first seen him. He was icy and cruel, the polar opposite to Ryouma’s flaming light.

But now, Takumi could see, there was a soft glow at Marx’s core.

He hid his kindness, his gentleness, behind that mask.

Marx caressed Takumi slowly, seeming intent on mapping out his skin beneath the fabric of his gown.

The prince lifted his leg a bit, more thanks to Marx’s coaxing than anything else, and Marx gripped his thigh, fingers pressing the gown against his skin.

“M-Marx-,” Takumi breathed when the Paladin’s teeth dug into the soft skin at his neck.
Marx’s tongue lolled over the spot he’d teased, never enough to break the skin with his teeth, but enough to send a shockwave straight to Takumi’s core.

Saying the Paladin’s name seemed to only goad him to repeat the action, much to Takumi’s surprise.

Marx took him suddenly into his arms, sweeping him up in one fluid motion and carrying him to the bed.

“M-Marx-?” Takumi breathed, confused, when the Paladin broke their kiss.

“Sorry-,” whispered Marx, fingers easily untying the belt at the prince’s waist, “I don’t mean to be impatient.”

His actions were clumsy and he shifted, putting his big hands on the tops of Takumi’s thighs as though taking a moment to reassure himself that this was reality.

“Sh-should I strip-?” Takumi whispered, nervously fingering the fabric of his gown.

Marx let out a low hum, “Gods-,”

Takumi blinked, momentarily confused as to why the Paladin had that reaction.

“Saying something like that-,” Marx whispered with a shake of his head.

He squeezed the prince’s thighs and bit his lip, “I promised to be gentle with you, Prince Takumi. Please don’t make this any more difficult than it already is.”

Taken aback by Marx’s admission, Takumi simply offered a small nod and got to a slow stand, heaving the hem of the dress into his hands and pulling it slowly over his head.

Marx mumbled something that could have been a prayer before putting a hand against Takumi’s bare chest.

He pushed the prince back down on the bed and Takumi let him; it felt right— in some odd, inconceivable way—to have Marx’s hands on him.

“Are you sure about this-?” Marx asked.

That crease was back between his eyebrows.

Takumi had nicknamed that concerned crease the ‘Marx Manoeuvre.’

“I-I’m sure,” the prince breathed.

How could this be anything other than right?

The Paladin nodded slowly, seeming content with that response.

Takumi was oddly thankful for his kindness.

I didn’t take him for the gentlemanly type…

“You’re built nicely,” Marx breathed, slowly tracing the outlines of Takumi’s muscle.
The Paladin’s ring finger circled around the prince’s stomach and Marx let out a soft sigh, “good bone structure, nice muscle, even distribution.”

He raised his gaze slowly and quirked an eyebrow, “Tell me, are all Hoshidans like this?”

“I-I wouldn’t know,” said Takumi, briefly at a loss for words.

“Then I suppose I’m a lucky man,” Marx breathed, leaning to kiss the prince’s collarbone.

His tongue slipped out and he tasted Takumi’s skin with a low hum of appreciation.

“M-Marx-!”

The Paladin moved, dipping a hand beneath the hem of Takumi’s smallclothes and hooking his hand over the prince’s hip.

With the other, Marx groped for a supple breast that wasn’t there. Seeming unbothered, he settled instead for tweaking the prince’s nipple.

“D-Don’t-!” Takumi hissed out, back arching.

Marx chuckled a bit to himself and pulled back to look into Takumi’s face.

“Wh-what-? Why are you looking at me like that?” the prince whispered, cheeks burning.

Marx’s gaze softened and he leaned down to plant another kiss against Takumi’s lips.

When he withdrew, that look of complete tenderness was still fresh on his face.

It was strange to see such raw emotion in Marx’s eyes.

“You-,” he began.

-look like Kamui.

And then, seeming to realise how inappropriate the rest of his sentence was going to be, simply shook his head.

“No matter the path life takes us down,” said Marx, “I should vow to protect you, Prince Takumi.”

“J-just ‘Takumi,’” Takumi said.

If I’m calling him ‘Marx,’ he’d better extend me the same courtesy…!

“I-, never would have guessed that it would come to this,” Marx admitted softly, fingering a piece of the prince’s hair idly.

The action reminded Takumi of Ryouma which made the entire thing all the worse.

No, don’t think about him right now, Takumi chided himself.

The only way he was going to see this through to the end was with Marx’s help.

It’s too cruel to imagine this is Ryouma instead of-,
He had to remind himself of his reality.

*It won’t be like this forever. This is simply the Crowned Prince offering his aid for my present state. I’m still a captive and he’s still an enemy.*

It was getting harder to think that way.

But if Takumi let his thoughts wander back to that subject—back to his growing inability to see those surrounding him as evil—then he would drift into a dangerous place.

*Not now. I’ll think on it later.*

He wouldn’t. Not if he could help it, anyway.

Takumi was intent on avoiding heavy thoughts of the Nohrians.

Marx hefted him up suddenly and flipped the prince on his stomach. He stood over Takumi for a moment before leaning down to part his hair and trace the curve of his spine.

Takumi let out a small gasp, not expecting Marx to know where he was sensitive.

“Marx-!” the prince hissed, clenching his fists in the sheets.

“S-sorry,” Marx said, though it was more of an afterthought than anything.

“I-I can’t take this anymore,” Takumi whispered into the fabric, “this teasing is too much-!”

Marx chuckled a bit to himself again, seeming amused by Takumi’s impatience.

*Just like Kamui,* the Paladin thought though didn’t dare say aloud.

Even so, it wasn’t so hard to see the similarities.

*They’re definitely there…*

Marx had tried not to think on it too much for fear that he would be unable to distinguish between his feelings for Kamui and those he projected upon Prince Takumi.

*Which is truly unfair; this Hoshidan Prince does not desire my pity or require my aid…*

Not like Kamui had in the past.

But then again, *Then again, he needs me right now, doesn’t he?*

Takumi did need him.

Marx had been rubbing his thumbs in small circles down Takumi’s back as he pondered this.

“M-Marx please-,” Takumi whispered finally, tensing at how his own voice sounded.

It was so deliciously pleading that Marx would have done just about anything Takumi asked of him right then and there.

*I-, I mustn’t forget my place. Even if I say I’m not a prince right now, there is no way to truly abandon that position…*
The Paladin took in a deep breath and prayed for a sense of composure, even in the face of Takumi’s neediness.

Which I won’t soon forget, he thought, troubled.

“Is this what you want-?” Marx asked, one hand ghosting over one of the prince’s ass cheeks. Takumi shivered and nodded slowly.

“Y-yes,” he breathed, scarcely able to push the word past his lips.

“Say it,” said Marx. That commanding tone was back and Takumi faltered beneath it, so easily bending his knee to the Paladin’s superiority.

If I weren’t at the mercy of Prince Leon’s tablet, I would surely be turning my nose up at that, Takumi thought to himself.

But he was at the mercy of Prince Leon’s tablet. And he did love to be commanded.

Yes, Takumi thought though would never say, teach me my place, Prince Marx. Show me where I belong.

Marx paused his ministrations, riffling through his bedside table drawer blindly with one hand. The other stayed at Takumi’s back, fingers running the length of his side.

Those feathery touches dipped a bit between each of his ribs and Takumi longed to have Marx’s mouth on him again.

“Ah,” said Marx, more to himself than to Takumi.

He withdrew entirely to unscrew the lid on the jar and Takumi took a moment to steady himself as he slipped out of his smallclothes.

He could feel the blood roaring in his veins, some primal desire rising up within him, craving Marx’s attention. He’d been wrestling with that feeling—suppressing it—the entire evening but now, with Marx, he felt that he could let go.

“Everything’s okay,” he remembered Marx saying in his dream.

In my dream...

Gods, it was becoming a beautiful reality, Takumi realised. He was even gladder to see that Leon was nowhere in sight.

“Everything’s okay,” Marx said to him, drawing him back into the present.

Marx had taken the opportunity to quickly shed his blouse, tossing it over the closest piece of furniture and dropping trousers.

His smallclothes came soon after and he let out a sigh, seeming grateful to be freed from the
“Yes-,” Marx breathed with a relieved noise.

Takumi wasn’t sure if the Paladin was talking more to himself or not but when Marx’s finger circled around his entrance, Takumi found that none of that mattered anymore.

*This is all that I care about, right now, this moment, let me remember this always*-.

Nohr had been bad. Arriving and receiving such a cold reception from Prince Leon had been enough to solidify Takumi’s feelings of dread, resigned to his miserable fate as Nohr’s stand-in Hoshidan prisoner.

Those feelings had caused him to treat Marx unfairly when they’d met and then to fall prey to some terrible magic that drove his mind into a frenzy.

*Prince Marx saved me then…*

And now he was saving him again.

Takumi had mistrusted Marx but now he saw that the Crowned Prince was only trying to help.

Marx’s arrival had also brought with it Lazwald and Odin, who turned out to be foreign princes assuming the roles of retainers.

For what purpose, Takumi didn’t know. But they were kind to him and they did not fault him for being Hoshidan.

*I… have allies.*

It was a strange revelation to have.

*Especially in my current-,*

The prince’s thought was left unfinished when Marx slipped a finger into him.

Takumi let out a groan at the intrusion and Marx shushed him sweetly.

“You’re alright, it’s alright,” the Paladin reassured, “just take it slow, we’re going to go slow.”

Takumi nodded and willed himself to relax.

*That’s right, there’s nothing for me to fear… Marx is okay.*

“Good, good,” Marx coaxed, finger dipping deeper into the prince.

Takumi couldn’t help but shiver at Marx’s words.

*Gods, not with the-*,

“You’re doing so well,” the Paladin whispered, sounding genuine, “just like that, yeah.”

*I am-, this is too much-, this prince-!*
“M-Marx-,” Takumi whispered, tensing as Marx slipped another finger into him.

“No, you’re okay, look at you, you’re doing great-,”

“Marx-! D-don’t say things like that-,” Takumi hissed, biting his lip.

He immediately wished he’d snatched the words back and eaten them.

_Gods, I am such an idiot._

Marx had paused for a moment as though contemplating something.

“Do you-, is it not customary in Hoshido-,” he seemed unable to find the right phrasing.

He took in a breath, “is it wrong to encourage you, Takumi?”

Hearing his name without the honorific attached was strange; in Hoshido that was usually reserved for family and close friends.

Not even Oboro or Hinata called him that.

To hear Marx say it-

Well, honestly, the name must’ve tasted strange, syllables foreign on Marx’s tongue, but it was beautiful all the same.

“N-no that’s not what I meant-,” Takumi said, shoulders drawing together with embarrassment.

“I am only speaking the truth,” Marx whispered.

He had leaned down to say that, mouth close to Takumi’s ear. His breath was hot against Takumi’s sensitive skin and the prince couldn’t help but shiver.

“Is it wrong of me to speak the truth? After all, you’re doing so beautifully,” Marx said.

Takumi could hear the smile in his voice.

“Gods-,” the archer breathed, “I’m not going to last very long with you at this rate-,”

“Oh-,” said Marx, seeming to only now realise that his words were having an effect.

“Then by all means, if you’d like me to be quicker, all you must do is say,” Marx reminded him with a hint of teasing.

He slid a third finger into Takumi and stretched the prince wide. His fingers didn’t quite reach that sweet spot that so desperately required some attention.

“Marx-,” Takumi hissed, impatience leaking into his tone though he didn’t mean for it to.

“Such impatience,” Marx said, laughing softly to himself as he withdrew his fingers.

Takumi was hopeful that Marx didn’t detect his mounting giddiness.

_What is this-?_ Takumi wondered, _these feelings were never-_
He paused, leaving that thought alone before he could finish it.

“Never present with Ryouma,” he was going to think.

That was damn near sacrilegious.

“Just breathe,” Marx said softly, touching the tip of his cock against Takumi’s entrance.

_Gods yes-_,- Takumi thought.

When he heard Marx’s chuckle, he realised that he’d said it aloud as well.

“So eager,” Marx said, “I like that.”

Gods, this prince was impossible.

Though Takumi couldn’t help but enjoy himself. How long had it been since he’d received such bouts of praise? How long had it been since someone looked upon him with such plain gentleness as Marx did now?

“Marx, please-,” Takumi said, voice scarcely more than a whisper.

“Impersonal,” Marx said, sounding suddenly displeased.

“Excuse me-?” said Takumi, craning his neck and trying to get a look at the Paladin’s face.

_What’s-?

“Prince Takumi,” said Marx—the honorific was back—“I can’t do this.”

An overwhelming sense of wrongness flooded Takumi’s insides and he felt a crushing disappointment take root in his heart.

“What-?” he began.

Marx withdrew for a moment and pulled Takumi up before flipping him onto his back.

“C-could you warn me the next time you’re gonna do that-?” the prince said once he’d gotten his breath back.

Marx seemed good at unwittingly knocking the wind out of him.

“I can’t make love to you and it be so impersonal,” the Paladin explained softly, face much closer to Takumi’s than need be.

His palms rested on either side of the prince’s head. The emotion in Marx’s eyes was impossible to read but Takumi sensed that this exchange was of grave importance to him.

The Paladin’s eyebrows were knit together like this admission was difficult for him. Takumi figured that maybe it was.
“I can’t possibly do as you’ve asked,” Marx continued, “not if I call you ‘Takumi’ and we share my bed. I couldn’t.”

He paused, voice softening, “Please-, allow me to take you this way.”

_He’s… trying. And that’s noble enough for me._

Takumi lifted a hand slowly and cupped the Paladin’s face, “If that’s what you feel is right, Marx.”

Marx blushed at the casual use of his name and Takumi was glad to know that he could also throw the Paladin a curveball like that.

_It’s not just you who can tease me, ya’ know…!_

“Gods-,” Marx breathed with a shake of his head, “how could-,”

He paused, seeming to think better of what he was going to say.

_How could my brother be so cruel to you? Does Leon not see how similar you are to our Kamui?_

Those were not questions to be asked right now, and Marx knew it.

So instead of ponder such difficult things, he allowed himself this single pleasure of being with Takumi.

_‘Making love’? You are incomprehensible, Prince Marx,” said Takumi quietly._

_“As though you Hoshidans are any easier to understand?” Marx shot back, though there was no venom in his voice._

Takumi had never imagined he’d be bantering playfully with the Crowned Prince of Nohr in total nakedness.

_And yet here we are, _he thought.

But he didn’t mind it. The experience was new—that was an understatement—but it was also oddly fulfilling.

_I… don’t mind this…_

Marx massaged Takumi’s hips with his thumbs and lined himself up again.

_“Is this truly alright?” the Paladin wondered aloud._

Takumi nodded. When Marx had nothing to say to that, the prince glanced away, “I-It’s alright, really. Truly.”

Marx closed his eyes and nodded, “Alright.”

He pressed into the prince with a slowness that wasn’t really required and Takumi squirmed beneath him.

_Ryouma never-_,

He had to stop himself again from thinking those thoughts.
“Ryouma never goes this slowly. I’m more than capable of handling him. And if I can handle him, surely I can-,”

“Are you alright, Takumi?” asked Marx.

Marx’s eyebrows did the ‘Marx Manoeuvre’ and Takumi sighed.

“Yes, I’m alright-, but do we have to-,”

“Do we have to what?”

The prince frowned up at him, “why the slowness? Do you think I’m fragile? I can assure you that I’m far from-,”

“That’s not it,” Marx said quickly, seeming bothered by Takumi’s offence.

The Paladin slowed his actions (if slowing any more was even possible) and he glanced away, seeming unable to look Takumi in the eyes for this admission.

“It’s because of Leon,” he admitted so softly that Takumi wasn’t sure he’d heard right.

“P-prince Leon-?” Takumi echoed, more in confusion than anything.

Marx nodded slowly, still determined to look away.

“What he did to you when you arrived-,” he shook his head, clearly angrier than he wanted to be, “It was much too far over the line. That should have never-, you never should have been a position where that sort of behaviour-,”

“Marx-,” Takumi said, worrying that the Paladin was taking everything personally.

You had no idea that that was what had happened-! How were you supposed to stop it-? And besides...

“You’re here now,” said Takumi, “and that is enough.”

Marx blinked, surprise flashing in his hazel eyes. But after only a moment, that shock was replaced by a deep tenderness.

The softness in his gaze wasn’t lost on Takumi.

***

Leon had not made it very far. He had told himself that he was going to leave.

“I’m going to head straight back to my quarters and study. And if I cannot, I will throw myself into my studies in the library.”

He hadn’t.

No, Leon had stepped into Marx’s foyer room and stopped.

Well now this isn’t quite fair, he reasoned senselessly, I wouldn’t have made those plans if I’d known
that Prince Takumi was going to go to Marx for help…

Actually, Leon hadn’t expected that at all.

He’s gone and foiled my plans. …Again.

Leon had expected Takumi to suffer alone in his quarters. Alone and isolated and desperate enough to have Leon when he showed his face.

Except you didn’t do that, did you?

No, Takumi had gone to Marx seeking relief.

My brother… instead of me… It should’ve been me… Damn you, foolish Hoshidan Prince–,

Frustrated, Leon clenched his fists and made to leave.

“I really should,” he whispered to himself, annoyed.

His feet refused to obey him.

I should go… what’s stopping me? What’s holding me back?

He didn’t move. He stood there with his back pressed against Marx’s chamber door, listening to Takumi’s sweet sounds.

Leon put a hand over his mouth and the other around his middle, trying to keep himself from trembling.

I could’ve been the one making him do that… I could’ve had him moaning my name and saying such things… But instead I’m out here…

He shouldn’t. He should go. He should leave now before he did something foolish.

Marx grunted from beyond the door and Leon squeezed his eyes shut, one hand slipping into his trousers to wrap around his cock.

I shouldn’t, I really shouldn’t, but Gods…

Gods, the sounds they were making coupled with Leon being their unknown voyeur–,

Somehow it all works out… Even if it’s not me with Prince Takumi…

Somehow this was sort of what Leon had wanted. His precious older brother being the wonderful relief for Prince Takumi’s craze–,

This is–, this is alright too–,

He tried to concoct the image of them together in his mind.

How was Marx taking him? Was Marx being gentle, tender, loving despite their positions?

Even though we’re enemies… is Marx treating him well? Is Marx giving him the relief he needs?

And then, the darker thought: Is Marx treating him better than I?
Takumi arched again as Marx thrust into him, fingers digging into the Paladin’s forearm.

“I pray that the weather forgives me tomorrow for my layers,” said Marx under his breath.

“S-sorry-,” Takumi got out, wincing as he realised how many marks he’d made on the Paladin.

“Oh no, I’m quite flattered,” Marx said with a small grin.

It was another plain emotion that seemed almost foreign on the Paladin’s face.

Takumi was still astounded by it.

Marx leaned down to kiss the prince’s neck again and Takumi tilted his head back, one hand fisting in the Paladin’s golden curls.

“B-bite me-,” Takumi hissed.

“B-bite-?” Marx repeated, sounding a bit astounded, “Gods, you’re just like-,”

Instead of finishing his sentence with another comparison between the Second Princes, Marx simply did as Takumi commanded.

The prince let out a relieved sigh when Marx ran his tongue over the mark he’d made.

Takumi’s breath was right against Marx’s ear and the Paladin did the action again, seeking to hear some more sweet sounds.

“Guess I’ll be modelling a high-collared tunic tomorrow then,” Takumi breathed with a small laugh.

Gods, it was such a lovely sound.

Marx wanted him to laugh more. Marx wanted him to smile more.

It seemed that every bit of happiness that Takumi released helped brighten the darkness within Marx’s core.

_I don’t want this to end-_, the Paladin thought.

It was bittersweet; he knew this was something that could not be allowed to continue.

_It is bad enough that I-, that Leon-, that we-_,

He closed his eyes, wishing those heavy thoughts would simply dissipate.

_None of this really matters; I am the Crowned Prince_, Marx reminded himself unfairly.

_That’s what I’ll always be, first and foremost._

He wasn’t the Elder Brother, wasn’t the mature lover for this budding Hoshidan Prince.
It was getting harder to remind himself of those facts.

_The lines are blurring and if I’m not careful, I’ll forget who I’m supposed to be._

“M-Marx-,” Takumi whispered, voice low and needy.

_and yet would it be so terrible?_ thought Marx against his better judgment.

“I-, I need-, I need you to-,”

Takumi rolled his hips as though his body could convey what his speech could not.

Marx got the message and wrapped a warm hand around the prince’s cock, jerking him slowly.

“I’ve neglected you,” the Paladin said, as though just realising.

“’S okay now.” Takumi slurred, beginning to lose himself beneath the waves of pleasure.

Marx grunted and then, remembering that this was the Hoshidan Prince he was making love to—and not Leon—he slowed his pace.

“Takumi-,” he said, trying to think of proper phrasing, “I’m-, I’m nearly-,”

The prince looked up into Marx’s face, amber gaze hazy from beneath his long lashes.

“Me too-,” Takumi whispered, “c-cum inside.”

“I-It’s not proper-,” Marx began, already seeming to backtrack, “I-I shouldn’t-,”

Takumi let out a noise in dissent and sat up a bit, forcing Marx to take him at a new angle.

“Whoa-,” he breathed, “didn’t mean to do that.”

He looked up at Marx again, gaze clearer now: “It’s okay, Marx. Alright? I said it’s okay. But I-, I’m gonna need you-,”

_Gods be damned-, Marx thought, grips on Takumi’s hips turning bruising.

“When you say things like that-,” Marx breathed, leaning down to smother the prince’s cry with a kiss.

Takumi came into his hand, back arching again as he pressed himself against the Paladin.

He relaxed then, form falling limp in Marx’s grasp. He was breathing hard, basking in the afterglow of his orgasm and Marx finished inside of him with a low noise.

“Gods-,” the Paladin swore, taking a moment to simply admire Takumi beneath him before pulling out of the prince.

Takumi’s hair was spread out across the sheets like a thousand silvery rivers. His dusky skin was slick with sweat, amber eyes strikingly clearer now that the tablet’s effects had worn off. He was obviously exhausted, worn down by the stress of it all, and completely drained of stamina.
And yet still, you are glowing.

Marx reached down and took a lock of Takumi’s hair in his hand, stroking it idly.

“You have beautiful hair,” he said, more to himself than to Takumi.

The prince blushed at the praise all the same.

“Tell me,” said Marx as he laid down next to Takumi, “is it customary to wear your hair long in Hoshido?”

Takumi liked the way that Marx said the name. It was hard for his tongue to produce the foreign word but Marx didn’t shy away from it.

Takumi was glad.

“I’ve always worn mine this way,” he admitted softly, “and my brother and my father before me. Strange as it seems, I’m a bit proud.”

“It is truly beautiful,” Marx breathed.

“In my kingdom,” said Takumi, “it is customary to cut one’s hair when embarking upon a mission.”

Marx glanced sideways at him, seeming interested but unsure of how to ask Takumi to continue.

Sensing that Marx wanted to know more, Takumi elaborated with: “If I decided to go on a long journey—oh, actually, there’s a better example…”

He smiled a bit at some memory and Marx was glad to see the warm expression.

“When I was younger,” Takumi said, “I-, Gods, can you believe it? I used to aspire to be a Trueblade. I wanted to be stronger than my brother. I never did beat him and one day, I decided to give up. He was obviously the best wielder for the Raijinto Blade.”

“The legendary sword…?” said Marx, trying to follow.

Takumi laughed at the foolish thought—Like I could ever beat Ryouma, hah!—and then nodded, “Yeah, yeah. At the time, it was my mother who kept the Fuujin Bow. She refused to wield it during our time of peace so I decided to take up archery. If I couldn’t beat my brother at swords, I would have to do it another way.”

“You wanted to prove your strength?” said Marx.

The prince nodded again, “I think so, yeah. So on the day that the Fuujin Bow accepted me as its wielder, I asked my mother to cut my hair.”

Marx hummed, seeming to begin to understand.

“I was going to become an archer,” said Takumi, “even if the Fuujin Bow disagreed with me to begin with. That was… like turning over a new leaf. And so I cut my hair.”
“And you’ve worn it this long ever since?” asked Marx, twirling a piece around his finger for emphasis.

Takumi shrugged, “There wasn’t any reason to cut it, not really. Oboro-,”

He cursed himself for speaking of her so lightly.

*What would she think of me if she saw this-? If she knew what I’d done with the Crowned Prince of Nohr…?*

“O-bo-ro-?” said Marx, trying to say the name.

He wasn’t very good at it and Oboro’s name was awkward on his lips.

“One of my retainers,” said Takumi, suddenly withdrawn, “she would trim it when it got too long but other than that-, I’ve never cut it symbolically like I did in my youth.”

Marx hummed again.

After a moment of silence he said: “We don’t have anything like that in Nohr. It is very noble. A physical reminder of a change you’ve decided for yourself…”

He nodded, “I do rather like it. Although…”

He glanced away sheepishly, “I wondered how I’d cut mine? I think I’d end up scaring Elise and then never do it again.”

Marx was trying to lighten the mood and Takumi wondered if the Paladin had detected his momentary sorrow.

*I would hope not; I don’t need another prince who can read me like a book…*

Now he was thinking of Leon.

He really wished he weren’t.

They laid together in silence for a bit, both too tired to do much of anything else.

“I-I’m sorry,” Takumi said finally.

Marx glanced at him sideways, “Curious, I was about to say the same thing.”

Takumi smiled sheepishly, “Now I’m disappointed in both of us.”

Marx sighed, “Alright this isn’t going to sit well with me; why are you sorry?”

Takumi looked over at him for a moment, seeming to gauge whether or not to voice his concerns aloud.

Then, seeming to decide that yes, that was alright, he closed his eyes and explained.

“*It wasn’t my intention to come to you for help. I put you in quite the position. Actually, I made it seem to cruel to refuse me. I’m… ashamed.*”

He seemed genuinely upset by this.
Marx didn’t like the way his frown made his face look.

Why frown when you look so handsome with a smile instead? The Paladin thought, frowning himself.

“Don’t be ashamed,” Marx said quickly, “although admittedly, your reasoning is much sounder than mine. You make my worries seem insignificant.”

“Cabbage and peaches,” said Takumi with a shrug.

“Pardon?”

The Hoshidan Prince blinked, seeming to realise that he’d used a Hoshidan phrase.

Oops-,

“Cabbage and-?”

“Sorry,” Takumi said again, “It’s Hoshidan slang; I slipped up. It’s like-, our problems aren’t comparable. I’m talking cabbage and you’re talking peaches.”

“Meat and milk,” said Marx.

“You’ve lost me.”

The Paladin’s face broke into a smile, “It’s ‘meat and milk’ in Nohr. The saying, that is.”

Takumi shook his head, disbelieving, “No, you’re kidding.”

“Serious.”

Takumi leaned over and shoved him in the arm. The gesture was one of such familiarity that Marx tensed at it.

Realising how foolish it seemed now, to behave so easily with the Crowned Prince, Takumi pulled his hand away and averted his gaze.

Marx wished the moment had lasted longer.

It was almost like-,

The Paladin cleared his throat as if to clear the air and got to a slow stand.

“What are you doing?” asked Takumi, turning his amber gaze upon the Crowned Prince.

Marx offered his hand and Takumi took it without hesitation.

The Paladin pulled him to a stand and gestured, “The bath-?”

Takumi blinked at him, uncomprehending.

The crease between Marx’s eyebrows was back.

They’re doing the Marx Manoeuvre again… thought Takumi, trying to hold back his smile.
“Do you-? In Hoshido-,” Marx frowned.

He seemed intent on not offending Takumi.

*But it’s difficult to try to decipher what he’s saying… just go right out and say it, dammit…*

The Crowned Prince sighed and began again with: “In Nohr, it’s customary to bathe after lovemaking…”

He trailed off, though seemed to want to say more.

Takumi frowned.

*Ryouma and I never did that, he thought, just a quick wipe down with a hot towel and that was enough… Sometimes a soak in the hot spring but…*

But now he was in Nohr and things here were different. With that in mind, Takumi nodded.

“A bath sounds nice,” he said.

Marx, seeming relieved, nodded a bit and gestured for Takumi to follow him.

Marx’s washroom wasn’t much more spacious than Takumi’s but the prince found he didn’t mind it.

*I’m too tired to be concerned with something as silly as that anyways…*

“Er-,” Marx leaned to turn on the tap but hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at Takumi.

“What is it?” the prince asked, blinking at him.

Marx glanced away, seeming unable to look Takumi in the eye for this: “Er-, the last time you and I were near a tub-,”

*Oh yeah, I was getting intimately familiar with a hallucination of my brother. Right. That happened.*

Takumi sighed.

He’d nearly forgotten about all that madness now that Marx was with him; the Paladin had a sort of calming presence that made Takumi feel safe.

“It’s alright,” he said instead of voicing the worries that had crept back into his mind, “I’m alright.”

Marx watched him for a few more seconds but then nodded and turned on the tap. He withdrew to stalk over to what looked like a medicine cabinet.

It was not a medicine cabinet.

When Marx drew the small wooden doors open, Takumi saw that there were an assortment of different bottles and vials of varying sizes within.
“C’mere,” said Marx, gesturing lazily and bending a bit so he could inspect the labels properly. Takumi trotted over to him, feeling a bit awkward in all his nakedness but Marx didn’t seem to mind it at all.

*Maybe I’m just self-conscious…?*

“I can’t read these,” Marx said softly.

He seemed a bit embarrassed.

*Wait is he… asking for my help?*

Earlier when Takumi had come into Marx’s chamber, the Paladin had been wearing a pair of glasses. *I… guess he can’t read the labels well?*

“Er-,” said Marx, awkwardly, “maybe you should just pick whichever catches your fancy.”

He stepped to the side and Takumi took his place in front of the cabinet, squinting at the labels on the various bath soaps.

“Y-you’ve sure got a lot of these things,” Takumi commented as Marx made his way to the tub.

“Most of them are Camilla’s,” Marx replied as he eased into the bath, “she leaves them in here hoping that I’ll use them as well.”

He let out a small sound of relief as he got comfortable in the bath and Takumi jolted at such an intimate noise.

*Don’t. Don’t. Be cool. Relax. We just had sex. And now we’re going to bathe. Together. Gods, don’t be weird. Don’t make it weird, Takumi.*

He was gonna make it weird.

Takumi let out a sigh and collected himself before looking at the labels again.

“Oh, I like this one,” he said with a small grin.

“Which one is it?” asked Marx, inclining his head.

Takumi tried not to look at him. The way that his golden hair curled right above his shoulders was kind of distracting.

“How bad I can’t shed you of your crown for a moment to see those lovely golden curls framing your face,” Lazwald had said to Marx quietly in the cover of Takumi’s quarters.

*N-not that I’m supposed to know… I was meant to be changing into my nightclothes anyway…*

But Lazwald was right.

*He does have nice hair. Even if he can’t do much with it like I can with mine, and even if he can’t cut in symbolically like in Hoshido…*

*It’s still nice.*
“Takumi?”

“Raging Rose: Embrace Your Inner Feminine Philanderer.”

Marx snorted, “Yes, that’s what I’ll do. I can see it revealed now to the masses: the Crowned Prince of Nohr, truly a filthy femme philanderer.”

After a second of silence, he added, completely deadpan: “Camilla knows me so well. Her bath soap is really speaking to my inner whore.”

Takumi laughed a bit and picked up a different bottle.

“Oh, how’s this one? Flame’s Kiss: A Deeper Scent to Encourage Twice the Lovemaking.”

Marx’s face broke into a smile as he set his chin on his arm, leaning over the lip of the tub.

Takumi glanced over his shoulder and tried to hide his grin, “Did you use this one today, Marx?”

The Paladin snorted, “Oh, yes, of course. I’m always in the mood for encouraging twice the lovemaking, Takumi.”

The Hoshidan Prince shook his head, “Gods, are any of these… normal?”

Marx inclined his head a bit, “Camilla said Kamui likes the pink one. Bottom shelf, far left.”

Takumi bent and nudged a few bottles out of the way.

“It’d be a waste to use Flame’s Kiss anyway,” said Marx.

“Oh?” said Takumi, inspecting the next label, “And why’s that?”

“This view is enough to encourage me,” Marx whispered.

Takumi whipped around to stare at him, red-faced, “Wh-what?”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Marx with an apologetic smile, “it was too easy.”

The prince rolled his eyes and came to the edge of the tub, handing Marx the bottle.

“Is this one normal? Enough…?” asked the Paladin.

Takumi shrugged, “I’m surprised Kamui picked a decent one, if I’m being honest.”

“Why, what did you think he’d have picked?”

Marx gestured and Takumi clambered into the tub with him.

When he’d settled, he let out a sigh.

“Oh I don’t know,” Takumi said with a shrug, “I think Kamui’s more of a… Dragon’s Den: Now with the New and Improved Scent of Sweat and Scales, Smell like Your Winged Brother Today
“That was oddly specific,” said Marx, unscrewing the lid and dumping the contents into the bath.

“Oh you caught me,” Takumi said, completely deadpan, “I’m always a slut for dragons. Smelling like one is just an added bonus.”

“You are disgusting,” said Marx with a small laugh, though there was no venom in his voice. Takumi splashed at him.

Marx closed his eyes and leaned back, resting his head against the lip of the tub.

Takumi watched him quietly, just taking a moment to observe the Crowned Prince.

After all, this guy’s been my enemy for... how long? Long enough. And now I’m bathing with him. After we just-.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Marx said, hazel eyes opening slowly and focusing on the prince across from him.

Takumi drew his knees up closer to his chin.

“No,” he said, “I’m alright. Everything was alright.”

“Good,” said Marx with an attempted nod.

It seemed hard to nod with his head resting on the tub’s edge like it was.

“Do you have enough room?” asked Marx.

Takumi didn’t.

“Yeah,” he said.

Marx squinted at him, “In Hoshido... is that a-, did you say that out of respect? Because I know you don’t have enough room.”

Takumi glanced away, “There’s no solution.”

Marx lifted a hand from beneath the water and gestured, “C’mere. Put your back here, it’s okay.”

This is just like-,

Takumi had to remind himself not to compare Prince Marx to Ryouma.

As tempting as that is...

The prince rested his head against Marx, feeling the Paladin’s heartbeat against his back.

It was slow, steady, a sure sign that he was alive and that this was reality.

Takumi closed his eyes and allowed himself the first real moment of peace.
“Asleep…? Well, I suppose I can’t blame you. After everything you’ve been through…”

Marx sighed tiredly and got to a slow stand, heaving Takumi up with him.

The prince didn’t wake and Marx, feeling somewhat responsible for his exhaustion, took it upon himself to dry the prince quickly and find him some proper clothing.

“What is it about you?” the Paladin whispered to himself as he set Takumi down on the bed, “What is it about you that needs to be protected? You may look a bit like Kamui but you’re very different from him. So then why?”

Unable to find a proper gown for the prince, Marx simply decided that one of his own night blouses would have to do.

“Father would be furious if he knew what I’ve done,” said Marx softly, leaning Takumi against his chest so he could pull the blouse onto him.

“Even if I say I’m not the Crowned Prince when I’m with you, that doesn’t erase that fact that that’s all I’ll ever be. Even if I want to set aside my crown and help you, I cannot.”

It was a mistake to help the Hoshidan Prince.

“But even so, I don’t regret my choices. I think… that you’re worth protecting. Even if you don’t trust me right now, even if you see me and those I love as your enemies… I want to become someone you can trust.”

The Paladin pulled the sleeves up on Takumi’s arms and leaned him back against the pillows, bending to button up the blouse.

“I hope you’ll rely on me if ever you need something, Little Prince.”

Marx parted Takumi’s hair and braided it quickly. Something about the action reminded him of Elise and he wondered what she would say if she knew what they’d done.

She’d been so excited to meet Aqua when the princess had arrived with Kamui.

Of course she’d love Prince Takumi just as much as the rest of us. It would be wonderful for her to have another sibling.

The Paladin shook his head, determined to keep such impossible thoughts away.

It’s no use trying to envision a healthy future with you in it, Marx thought.

It will only cause all of us more pain; you most of all.

And yet he couldn’t stop himself from it. Despite everything, Marx had to remind himself to be adamant in his beliefs, in his resolve.
Yes. Everything I do, I do for Nohr.

“Normally, it would be rude to do this,” said Marx softly, pulling the sleeping prince into his arms, “but this is not so normal.”

He made his way to the chamber door, awkwardly getting it open and then heading into the foyer room.

It was empty. Not that Marx expected any different.

“Maybe we can simply move past this and forget this. I only helped you because you needed it, nothing more.”

It felt like something more, though. And Marx didn’t want to feel like that.

There are enough complications already…

“I don’t want to cause you pain,” he whispered, stepping into the empty hallway, “I think you’ve endured enough already, more than you ever needed to endure.”

He made his way down the dim corridor, keeping his gaze straight ahead and fighting the urge to study Takumi’s face in the silence. Now that the prince was sleeping, this was the best time to observe him, to notice the dark circles under his eyes and how long his eyelashes were, and even the way that his nose sloped up at the tip.

Gods, I shouldn’t even be…

Marx was relieved when he got to Kamui’s chamber, as it was the mental marker that they were nearly to Camilla’s chambers where Takumi currently resided.

Leon had expected Marx to remain with Takumi for the entire evening and even into the early morning until his training sessions forced him to leave the prince’s side.

He was pleasantly surprised to find that that was not the case.

Instead, Marx had bathed the prince and was now presently carrying him back to his quarters.

Where he’ll be alone. For me. At last.

Leon had crept down the corridor behind Marx, trailing a safe distance behind so as not to allow his brother to realise his plot.

“If only Lazwald were here to get the door for us,” Marx muttered.

Leon had been tempted to spell the door open but then, realising that that would be a dead-giveaway to his presence, he elected to remain where he was.

When Marx had made it into the chamber, Leon hurried to put his ear against the door, grateful for the first time that Takumi didn’t have retainers of his own to keep watch.

And cause trouble for me…

There was the sound of rustling sheets and Leon assumed Marx was putting the prince into the bed.
How slowly did you walk, Brother, in order to keep that little Hoshidan Prince asleep? You are so nobly sacrificial as usual…

“I shouldn’t have helped you,” Marx admitted softly as he undid the braid he’d done in Takumi’s hair.

“But I couldn’t leave you to suffer alone. You have already suffered so much. And… you remind me of my siblings, of each of them in their own way.”

He sighed and smoothed the prince’s hair.

“Those bits of yourself that you shared with me,” mused Marx, “I won’t forget them. Even though we ought to be enemies—even though we are enemies—I won’t forget.”

He leaned down against his better judgment and kissed Takumi tenderly on the forehead.

“You may be like cabbage and I like peaches, but I’d like to believe that maybe-, with time-, we could meet halfway.”

He straightened, shaking his head.

There was no need to get sorrowful over this.

“I’m sorry,” said Marx, “you can’t even hear me and yet I’m drawling on and on and being a bore. Ah, some things don’t change. Even without my crown, I can’t be free from my prince-hood. But I suppose you’re the same, aren’t you? Still a prisoner, even if you’re comfortable around your captors.”

The Paladin shook his head again and turned on heel, heading for the door: “It seems we’re both stuck like this. I wonder, what would happen if we decided to break free of these bonds?”

Marx sighed, hand resting on the doorknob, “There is no need to consider that; it’s an impossibility.”

And with that, he turned the handle, opening the door and stepping into the hallway.

After a safe moment had passed, Takumi opened his eyes.

***

Leon had hurried to the library as soon as he’d seen Marx step into the hallway.

Thankfully, the shelves were deserted, ensuring that Leon wouldn’t be disturbed while he worked.

“Which is good,” he said to himself, “for I can make no errors. It’s bad enough that I’ve got to deal with that wild card of a Hoshidan Prince.”

Prince Takumi was already weaving his way effortlessly—annoyingly so—around Leon’s plots.

“Better to neutralise that pain than allow it to continue to ruin my plans.”
Leon was relieved to find all his resources exactly where he’d left them, shoved between the tomes on the upper shelves.

“No one ever looks up here anyway,” he muttered, pushing the footstool across the rug and stepping up onto it with ease.

He withdrew the worn stationary, running his fingers over the small initial in the corner.

“Brother,” Leon whispered as his grip around the parchment tightened, “I’m doing this to protect you too. I will do what the others will not, in order to protect us. It’s only natural that this falls to me; it always does.”

He returned to the long table, setting down the stationary gently and stirring the quill in his ink; the top layer had gotten filmy in his absence.

The prince sat there for a moment, trying to imagine that he was Marx.

“And I’m writing to that Hoshidan Prince to… apologise for my absence in the morning?”

He frowned. How was he going to write that?

“Dearest Prince Takumi,” Leon said, lifting his quill and holding it above the parchment.

Then, as if just remembering, he manoeuvred it into his left hand.

“Almost forgot,” he muttered to himself, “forging Brother’s neat handwriting is damn near impossible.”

Thankfully he’d trained his left hand to do it well enough.

*Looks like my childhood misadventures are finally paying off…*

“I suppose he’d simply write: ‘Dearest Takumi;’ no reason to use titles after what they’ve done.”

“Dearest Takumi,” Leon wrote in Marx’s gentle curving script, “It is with heartfelt regret that I send Lazwald bearing this message. But I must attend Kamui in the morning for our session in swordplay.”

Leon nodded, “Yeah, yeah, that’s good. Sounds reasonable.”

“It is my hope that you are well. I do not wish to leave you imperfect or incapable in your present state so I have requested this elixir be brought to your quarters.”

“My elixir,” said Leon aloud, slowing.

He withdrew the quill to dab it into the ink and sat thinking for a moment, trying to decide what to say next.

“Don’t be too obvious now, Leon,” he hissed to himself, “You’re pretending to be Marx. What sort of graceful ending does he write?”
“I feel inclined to warn you of the sweetness prior. Please do not hesitate to-,”

“To what?” said Leon, lifting the pen, “-trust me? No, that’s too forced. Marx wouldn’t say it like that. No, maybe, instead he’d say something like-,”

“Please do not hesitate to reach out to one of my retainers if ever you require something. They are both capable and loyal; you may trust them as if they were me. Wishing Grace upon you Always, Marx.”

The signature was a bit too stilted and awkward for Leon’s taste.

“But it’ll have to do; I can’t afford to waste what little of this I have left.”

He hadn’t snatched a piece of Marx’s personal stationary in a long time for fear that the Paladin would get suspicious and switch to a new one.

And then I’d be back to square one…

But now, Leon had finally found a proper use for it.

And Kamui almost convinced me to use this for a prank…

He was relieved that he had been steadfast against his dragon brother.

“Now we’ll see if you can avoid my trap, Hoshidan Prince.”

With that done, Leon got to a stand and hid his materials back on the shelf.

“Until tomorrow morning,” he said softly, patting them gently and then heading to exit the library.

“But first,” he said, once in the hallway, “I’ll need my precious Brother out of the way tomorrow.”

A sleeping spell should suffice. I hope you don’t mind a dream of swordplay with Kamui, Marx.

***

The following morning, Takumi awoke feeling out of place.

“More so than usual,” he muttered, blinking sleep from his eyes.

He glanced down, realising that he was wearing an unfamiliar gown. Upon further inspection, he saw that it was simply a long blouse.

It hung off his frame as though he were a child in his father’s robes.

“Marx-?” he wondered quietly.

Takumi put his nose to the sleeve, sniffing at it. It smelled like Kamui’s favourite bath soap that they’d used together last night.

It was Marx’s blouse.
“I really was asleep for that part,” he murmured, sitting up and stretching his arms above his head.

Realising that he was back in his own quarters—technically shared with Camilla—he glanced around for the Fuujin Bow, suddenly fearing for its absence.

But there was no need for worry; the divine weapon was perched against the bedside table, right where Takumi had left it.

“Thank the Gods,” he breathed softly.

There was a knock at the door and the prince straightened, clearing his throat and hurriedly pulling his hair into a bun, grateful for Zero’s hair ties.

Zero…

That was right, Zero had invited him to a small gathering that evening.

Zero and the… and Azure and Owain… and their redheaded companion… Luna…

He wondered if Luna was her real name. Though, he thought it best not to dwell on it; she would tell him who she was if she felt like it.

*From what Azure and Owain said, it seems like keeping their identities a secret is important… Best not to push her, then.*

“Prince Takumi-?”

*Speak of the devil…*

“S-sorry-!” said Takumi, “Come in, come in!”

It was Lazwald who came shuffling in, seeming burdened with a large tray.

“What in the-? G-Good morning, what is-? What’s that-?”

The mercenary shrugged and sighed, “L-Lord Marx asked that I bring it to you.”

“To me?”

Lazwald nodded, “Yes. He said something like: ‘See to it that this finds its way to Prince Takumi; I’m sure he’s keeping an eye out for it.’”

*An eye out for it? I don’t even know what the hell it is…!*

Not wanting to appear confused, he simply nodded.

“Th-thank you.”

Lazwald came to his side and handed it to him easily. When he took a step back, his gaze fell on the Fuujin Bow; he seemed momentarily captivated by it.

“My legendary weapon,” said Takumi, seeming delighted to see Lazwald’s interest, “it’s called the Fuujin Bow.”
“It’s lovely,” breathed Lazwald.

“You can hold it if you’d like,” offered Takumi.

He trusted Lazwald enough to allow the mercenary to touch the weapon.

*Besides, it doesn’t matter anyway; it’s not like he can’t fire it…*

“I ought not,” said Lazwald, “a mere mercenary like myself shouldn’t lay a hand on a holy weapon.”

*You’re a prince yourself, are you not, Azure?*

“Nonsense,” said Takumi, “if you’d like to see it, you’re more than welcome to.”

Lazwald blinked at him and then nodded, bending to wrap a hand around the bow. He lifted it slowly—with a carefulness that Takumi appreciated—and turned, aiming it at the wall.

The spiritual string leapt to life, electric blue line materialising at Lazwald’s fingertips.

Startled, he released the bow and then ducked to catch it, realising how foolish it was to let go of it.

“Whoa-,” the mercenary breathed, “I-,”

He turned, stricken, to face Takumi, whose expression mirrored his own.

“I-I wasn’t expecting that-!” Lazwald breathed sheepishly, “Guess your bow doesn’t like me too much.”

“Guess it doesn’t,” said Takumi, a bit too distracted to do anything other than echo him.

“Well,” said Lazwald, leaning it back against the bedside table and turning on heel, “I’d better get going.”

“Hey, wait,” said Takumi, freezing the mercenary in his footsteps, “you’re going to that little get-together tonight, right?”

“Get-together?”

“Zero told me about it,” Takumi supplied easily, “he said you and Odin and Luna were going to be there.”

“O-oh! Right, yes, that. Yeah. Did Zero invite you too then?”

The prince nodded, “Y-yes. It was a bit surprising; I didn’t expect you guys to do stuff like that in Nohr. But it sounds fun.”

“I’m glad you’re excited,” said Lazwald.

Something about his tone was off but Takumi couldn’t say what.

“I-, I really should be off then,” the mercenary said, “Lord Marx despises tardiness.”

Takumi nodded, “Sure, sure. Thanks for bringing this, I really appreciate it.”
“No, thank you,” said Lazwald.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m excited for tonight,” the mercenary said, offering Takumi a small smile.

There was something about his eyes, something wrong but Takumi couldn’t remember what was missing.

_Maybe he’s just nervous and that’s making me paranoid_, the prince decided as Lazwald exited.

_I shouldn’t worry. It’s Azure. He’s safe. And he’s Marx’s retainer. And Marx is safe._

It had been strange to see the Fuujin Bow recognise Lazwald though, Takumi hadn’t expected that.

But upon further thought, he didn’t find it too odd.

_Since Azure is a prince, the Fuujin Bow must have resonated with his dragon’s blood. Even if he’s a mercenary in this realm, you can’t hide your blood from the divine…_

“Guess I just got too surprised; I keep forgetting he’s a prince too.”

Takumi shrugged the thought aside and reached to retrieve the folded letter on the tray. It was accompanied by a small vial and a glass of water.

_Dearest Takumi,_ it read, _“It is with heartfelt regret that I send Lazwald bearing this message…”_

“Training with Kamui, of course. He’s so dutiful.”

That reminded him a bit of Ryouma. If Kamui had stayed in Hoshido, there was no doubt in Takumi’s mind that it would be the High Prince who was sword fighting with Kamui.

The prince shrugged off the impossible idea, “Regardless, Marx is considerate to send this elixir my way. I didn’t expect him to…”

_To bother with trying to keep up with his kindness. I thought it was just last night, just because he “wasn’t the Crowned Prince.” But maybe I was wrong in thinking that…?_

He manoeuvred the tray to sit it at his side and uncorked the vial.

“At least Marx thought to warn me of the taste,” Takumi said before swallowing it down.

_Gods, he was right, this is sickeningly sweet._

Takumi shook himself again, wincing at the taste, and reached for the glass of water.

He took a sip, hoping to clear the taste from his mouth. His lips were tingling.

“Well isn’t that an odd sensation-?” he muttered.

He shrugged and got to a stand, stretching his arms above his head and stifling a yawn.

Deciding that he’d spend enough time in Marx’s blouse, he made his way over to the wardrobe, intending to find a tunic that would hug his throat.
And hide those marks...

His head was beginning to pound and the prince decided he'd try to find Lazwald again after he'd dressed.

“I could use some tea right about now,” he muttered, rifling through the wardrobe.

The chamber door came open softly and Lazwald entered into Takumi’s chamber again.

“What- did you forget something-?” Takumi asked, feeling cold sweat slide down his back.

*Maybe something stronger than tea…? I was lying about being ill but now…*

That’s what he got for lying to Marx, he supposed.

“Sorry,” said Lazwald quietly, “I didn’t want to scare you just yet.”

Takumi blinked at him, uncomprehending, “Excuse me-?”

Lazwald came up to him and his skin began to shimmer as though he were slipping out of it.

Takumi saw, through the haze, that the mercenary was emerging from beneath a spell.

The prince’s heart was in his throat with worry.

*Why would he need a…?*

“I was afraid you wouldn’t take that elixir unless Ser Lazwald delivered it to you. I even went to the trouble of forging a handwritten note from Marx.”

*His eyes…* Takumi thought, with a sickening realisation, *he didn’t have the Brand in his eye... It-, It wasn’t Azure-;*

“Oh, have you figured it out already, Hoshidan Prince? I suppose I ought to give you a little more credit. I thought I’d fooled you well enough.”

“L-Leon-,” Takumi hissed furiously, taking a step back.

“I’m impressed,” Leon said, voice venomous, “I would’ve expected you to be on the ground by now. But here you are, fighting it. Fighting me. Why do you resist? Am I truly so terrible?”

Yeah, you are.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Takumi whispered.

He collapsed then, and Leon caught him with a heavy sigh.

“Incorrigible until the end, huh? Typical. You foolish Hoshidan Prince. I warned you but you didn’t listen.”

He struggled to lift Takumi up into his arms, “Though I suppose it doesn’t matter now; I have what I
came for. You were a fool to trust in my brother so blindly. And you’re a fool to think you have allies in Nohr. Nohr betrays everyone without regard for their status or their stance.”

Leon sighed, “Including you and me, Prince Takumi.”

Chapter End Notes

i told you it was my favourite line :>
Chapter Summary

Determined to get some answers, Prince Leon takes Takumi to his private quarters. Frustrated and impatient, he tries a different tactic in dealing with this troublesome Hoshidan Prince. Meanwhile, Aqua and Kamui get closer to the truth. Takumi forms an alliance and gets even closer to said truth. (After several months, it seems that the plot thickens yet again).

Chapter Notes

the alternative title to this chapter was: leon loses his fucking mind
(i love him but he is bonkers okay)
also i hate filler chapters so instead of this chapter being a cool chill time, im throwing this fic into maXIMUM OVERDRIVE
enjoy friendos :>

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Takumi’s unconscious form hung limply in Leon’s grasp as he carried the prince to his private quarters.

He kicked the door open gracelessly and hurried to drop Takumi unceremoniously into the nearest chair. In truth, Leon was simply relieved to have gotten the prince here without anyone’s knowledge of it. (Though it was an added bonus that both Odin and Zero were presently absent).

“You’re heavier than you look,” the knight mumbled down to Takumi’s sleeping form as he stretched his arms up and over his head.

Leon had worried, at first, that even the slightest jostle would be enough to wake the prince from his elixir-induced slumber.

But, seeing as I managed to get him all the way here without any trouble…

It seemed Leon’s worries had been over nothing.

Of course there were always other things to worry about.

Marx will come looking for answers eventually. So I’d better keep that in mind…

Leon turned and took a moment to study Takumi’s face. He approached and bent to brush a stray hair from the prince’s face with a trembling hand.

Why am I…?

The knight retracted his hand and clenched his fist.
Leon turned on heel and crossed the room, kneeling before his bedside table and rifling through one of the drawers.

“Ah,” he said finally, withdrawing a coil of rope.

It had been awhile since he’d last used it. But even so, it seemed that the memories were still fresh on his mind; they leapt back at him suddenly, unbidden.

“Leon-,”

“I-it’s fine, Marx.”

“I don’t want to hurt-,”

“You won’t hurt me. I trust you.”

Leon could feel the ghost of Marx’s touches against his skin even beneath his layers of Nohrian garb.

When he closed his eyes, he could feel the Crowned Prince’s mouth against the column of his neck, feel the delicious burn of the rope digging into his wrists as Marx fucked up into him roughly.

“Gods-,” Leon breathed, putting a hand to his head in dismay, “Not now… there’s so much left to be done. I can’t waste my time thinking about…”

He shook his head as if to clear it and returned to where Takumi was slumbering in the chair.

“Leon-,” Marx’s breathless moan echoed in his mind again.

The knight growled, “Not now-, go away-, I have things to do.”

It had been years since Leon had had such trouble keeping sensations in his memories where they belonged.

Thanks to my magic they tend to get out of hand…

And though the knight was used to dealing with such distractions, it was irritating enough to try to balance them with a captive Hoshidan Prince.

Leon knelt again and tried to dismiss the memory of Marx as he threaded the rope through the complicated design on the chair’s arms before wrapping it over Takumi’s wrists.

When he was satisfied with his work, Leon got to a stand and dusted off his knees with a sigh.

“I’m sure you would’ve laughed, seeing me on my knees for you again,” he muttered, gazing down at Takumi’s face.

The prince looked oddly peaceful despite his current situation.
His hair tumbled down his frame in flowing strands like some elegant stream of liquid quicksilver.

The few times that Leon had actually seen Takumi, the prince had always worn it up high and out of his face.

*Which is sort of a waste,* Leon thought, *because it's so lovely…*

He reached out and took a lock of it, rubbing the hair between his fingers thoughtfully.

> *You want full control over him, do you not?*

Leon released Takumi’s hair with a start and stumbled back, eyes scanning the room for the intruder. But he was alone.

> *Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten me, Leon.*

> *Who’s there?* he hissed, taking a step towards his desk, fingers already stretching out to grasp at the Brynhildr.

> *Answer me, Leon.*

> *I could say the same to you,* he hissed.

There was the sound of bitter laughter in Leon’s head and he shook himself.

> *You want to control him, don’t you? To utterly dominate this Hoshidan, yes?*

Leon couldn’t deny it; he did want total control over Takumi. It would be a victory that not even Marx could achieve.

*It’s all that I want…* Leon thought.

> *You have a goal. That’s good. I can see that my lessons stuck with you. Now, let’s put some more to good use, shall we?*

...Your… lessons-?

Leon blinked, icy fear clenching its fist around his heart.

> *Mother-?*

***

> *Yes, very good, Leon. Take away his sight and he will be yours to mould as you please.*

The blindfold. Leon was holding the blindfold. He’d taken it from his bedside table drawer.

*Did I?*

Now, of course, Leon couldn’t remember.

It was strange enough to hear his mother’s voice in his mind, stranger still to hear her goading him
onwards, and towards a Hoshidan Prince, no less.

Leon looked down at the strip of fabric in his fist. He had used that with Marx in the past too.

“Reteach him everything, Leon. He will become our perfect creation.”

Leon clenched his fist, willing the panic in his chest to ease.

It didn’t.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself the one thing he usually never did: Marx.

The Crowned Prince was his secret pleasure, the single thing that made him hear to his heart and mute his mind.

All of my imperfections, brought forth by him and yet...

And yet it was Marx who calmed him. The memories alone would work; they could push down that fear rising within the knight.

And that was enough.

“Imagine it, Leon-,” his mother began but Leon’s memory of Marx was louder.

“Leon-,”

It was The Paladin’s voice then, drowning out Leon’s mother and his fear.

Marx. Quiet, tired. Pleasant all the same, though.

“I heard,” Leon had said softly, “I heard about your argument with Father. I’m sorry.”

“You are not to blame.”

“You’re tired,” Leon had said, caressing the Paladin’s face.

“It’s to be expected.”

“Let me help you,” Leon had offered, “I’ll do everything for you. Please. Let me ease your pain.”

Marx had relented, too tired to object to the knight’s offer; not that he seemed to want to object in the first place.

“What’s that-?”

“A blindfold,” Leon remembered himself saying, “I want you to feel everything. I’ll do it all, whatever you want. But I want you to remember it, Brother.”

“So be it,” Marx had said, keeping still so that Leon could tie the fabric around his head.

Leon smiled a bit at the memory.

“Pay attention-!”
His mother’s voice cut through the memory like a knife to butter and Leon flinched beneath her harsh tone.

The memories of her strict lessons came tumbling back over his memories of Marx, drowning out the calmness he had worked so hard to obtain.

_N-no, I’m slipping—_,

Leon squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the last time he’d felt so lost.

It had been when the Brynhildr had first rejected him; his mother had never been so angry.

“Nothing like Katerina’s son, no! I thought surely, if not a blade then a tome! And yet! My Brynhildr dare not choose a weak wielder. And if you’re too weak, Little Lion, then you’re no son of mine.”

Leon bit his lip until it bled, willing the memories to sink back into the deep recesses of his mind.

_Please, no-, not again. I don’t want to think about it again._

If he became frightened, the Brynhildr would sense it. And there was always that chance that she would reject him, even now.

_After everything I’ve done… she would still reject me if I weren’t…_

“You have to be stronger, Leon,” said his mother, authoritative and exploitative as always.

How was it that she always voiced his worries so easily?

_Even though she’s dead and gone, still I can’t escape her…_

“So be stronger than this filthy dog. Let’s show your father how wonderful we are. Then he will have no choice but to look upon our accomplishments.”

Leon closed his eyes.

The way his mother had spoken, it was as though she considered her mere presence to be enough to warrant a portion of the success.

It was quiet for a moment, save for the soft sound of Takumi’s light snores.

_Prince Takumi, Leon thought._

_Not someone to be touched by you, Mother._

“No,” said Leon, raising his head slowly.

“What-?” his mother whispered, voice incredulous, “you dare defy me-?!”

Leon straightened and imagined that Marx was by his side.

_I can stand up to her if Marx is with me…_

“You’ll have no part in this,” he said, “you’re long dead and gone. This success shall be mine alone, Mother.”
There was silence but then she simply snickered within his head, the sound bouncing around like a
wordless taunt in his mind.

“Greedy for the glory, just like your father. Perhaps you truly are my son after all.”

And then she was quiet.

And Leon stumbled backwards, slumping down into his desk chair and putting his head in his hands.

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When he’d regained his usual composure, Leon found himself to be angry, angry that he’d been
so small beneath his mother and angrier still that he’d let her—dead as she was—still have any
control over him.

Another move like that and the Brynhildr would reject him for sure.

And that’s a shame I cannot bear…

Leon got to a slow stand, forcing his limbs into motion.

Marx wouldn’t be weak.

So I… I have to be strong too. I can’t fail, it’s not an option. Not now. Not after…

“She wasn’t real,” Leon whispered to himself, “she’s been dead for a long time. And the dead
don’t speak.”

But even so, he couldn’t help consider his mother’s suggestions seriously. She’d been a devious
mage in her time at Garon’s side, that much was all that Leon dared remember.

As much as I want to go against her… against everything she said… her ideas have some merit…
loathe as I am to admit it, that is…

But if Leon did as his mother had suggested, if he really did fix Takumi’s mind and made the prince
into something that he liked…

Well, that’ll be success enough for me.

And Leon liked the sound of that.

So he put the blindfold into his mouth for a moment and drew Takumi’s hair back from his face,
braiding it with ease just as Zero had taught him.

With that done, he made his way back around to the prince’s front and slipped the blindfold over his
face.

“You could have joined me quietly,” Leon muttered as he reached and tied the fabric behind
Takumi’s head, “you could have just accepted me when I offered.”
He took a step back and traced Takumi’s jawline, studying how differently the prince looked when his face wasn’t twisted in a disapproving scowl.

“But you didn’t join me. So, you see, now I must force your hand.”

“Takumi.”

The voice was far off.

Who was calling to him?

The prince inclined his head and took a moment to listen.

“Takumi.”

Closer now.

He frowned and felt fingers lace through his own.

Beside me… who is it?

He struggled to look up. It was so hard. Why was it so hard?

“Ryouma-,” he whispered, realising dumbly that it was his brother.

Of course it was. Of course Ryouma was with him; they were always together.

And then they were in the High Prince’s living quarters. Ryouma was above him, searing hot and blessedly close.

How did we… get here? Takumi wondered.

But it didn’t matter, he realised, not when Ryouma touched him. His hands were bathed in some sacred flame, searing away all the horrors that Takumi had been touched by.

The High Prince bent and pressed a kiss to Takumi’s lips and the archer leant into it, so relieved to feel the familiar touch of his brother.

Cleansing me… healing me…

And Takumi remembered what it was like to feel safe.

There was pain, then, the feeling of teeth sinking into the skin at his throat. Takumi choked out a moan and when he went to clutch Ryouma’s hair, it was gone.

Confused, the prince blinked and glanced down, reaching until his fingers tangled in golden curls.

“Takumi-, you’re doing so beautifully.”

The prince jerked backwards, separating Marx’s mouth from its place at his throat.

“M-Marx-?”
“Are you alright, Takumi?” asked the Paladin.

Wh-what’s-? What's going on-?

He blinked slowly, wondering which dream was the real one.

“You seem quite lovely to me.”

Wait, that’s not-,

When Takumi opened his eyes again it was Camilla’s face that greeted him. Gods, he could feel her heat clenching around him, over him, even inside of him.

And she kissed him wordlessly with an ease that didn’t need anything else to convey such feelings.

Wh-why is she here-? What’s-, where’s Ryouma-? A-and Marx-?

And then it was over.

Takumi jerked awake, feeling a line of cold sweat slide down his back.

He shook himself a bit and then found a weight over his eyes. He went to reach for it-,

“Wh-what’s-,”

His hands. He couldn’t move his hands; they’d been restrained by something.

Why…?

Takumi tried to remember what had happened.

The dreams—was that what they were?—had distorted his memory and he had a hard time retracing his steps.

He… had been with Marx.

Oh Gods, Marx. Oh Gods I slept with the Crowned Prince.

Panic and embarrassment tumbled over one another inside of him and just as they threatened to burst, he clenched his fists.

No.

He couldn’t think about that right now.

Panic about Marx later. Panic about restraints now.

But his mind went blank again when there was heat against his lips.

Welcoming. Comforting.

Marx…?

It had to be. So Takumi kissed him back, silently willing the Paladin to deepen it. Some part of him recognised that he wanted to make that dream a reality, wanted Marx to make love to him again.
He was so... gentle...

And Takumi wanted more of that, needed more of it.

He couldn’t help but notice—maybe it was his own desperation getting to him—how good Marx was with his tongue.

No, why am I thinking that?-

And then the Paladin’s hand was on his bare thigh.

It took Takumi a minute to remember why he was so sparsely dressed; he was in Marx’s blouse from the evening prior.

Was it really...?

Marx’s hand moved up his thigh and Takumi parted his legs easily.

I’m-, I want... to have him inside of me again...

Marx kissed him harder and the prince made a small sound in surprise.

Was he always this... domineering...?

“Hm,” the Paladin hummed when he drew back.

Takumi took a moment to catch his breath.

“M-Marx-,” he gasped, reeling from the Paladin’s touch and the fading flashes of his dream.

“Oh,” said a voice that definitely did not belong to Marx, “so that’s who you thought I was. Figures.”

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Takumi knew that voice, hated that voice.

“Prince Leon,” he seethed, gritting his teeth.

Leon simply chuckled softly, “Yes, there’s the reaction I was expecting. As much I’ve come to adore your harshness, I think you’re quite lovely as a blushing maid as well.”

The prince was struggling against his bindings in earnest now.

“Hm,” said Leon, “this is what I wanted to avoid; I don’t want to put you under another binding spell. Did you misbehave like this in your homeland?”

“O-of course not! I never had some... magical freak trying to subjugate me-!” Takumi hissed, clenching his fists.

Leon sighed in disapproval.
This isn’t as fun now that I’ve got him trapped… Leon thought with a frown.

“Tell me,” he said, leaning in close, breath hot against the prince’s ear, “did you open up so easily to my brother like this yesterday?”

Takumi closed his legs and bit his lip, falling silent with embarrassment. He’d spoken without thinking; the prince had nearly forgotten what a poisonous prince that Leon was.

I-, I wasn’t in my proper mind. That wasn’t… it wasn’t the real me with M-, with the Crowned Prince.

Leon ran his knuckles down the side of Takumi’s face and the prince recoiled.

“No matter,” the knight whispered, “you’ll learn to love me in time.”

“Keep dreaming,” Takumi muttered.

Leon seized him in another kiss, one hand coming to cup the prince’s face tightly, holding him in place.

Takumi forced himself to go limp beneath Leon’s mouth.

Feel nothing, feel nothing, feel nothing…

When Leon finally withdrew, Takumi let out a small sigh of relief.

“You could at least pretend to enjoy this,” the knight murmured.

Takumi snorted, “As if. Why would I give you anything? After all that you’ve done to me?”

“If you won’t give anything, I’ll simply take it from you,” Leon said.

His hand was back on Takumi’s thigh.

The prince squared his shoulders, “You can take whatever you want but you’ll never have it. Not from me.”

Leon kissed him again. Angrier this time.

And then he withdrew and promptly relocated his mouth to Takumi’s neck, biting over the spot that Marx had so tenderly touched yesterday.

“Don’t-,” Takumi hissed.

His voice was weak, pleading tone sneaking back in as though it were a natural development.

“Did you plead like this for your brother?” Leon asked, slowly undoing the buttons on Takumi’s borrowed blouse.

“Or how about my brother, did you beg him to take you?”

Takumi screwed his eyes closed tighter, silently pleading the gods to send Marx to rescue him.
Or Camilla, or anyone. Even Kamui. I'll even take Kamui at this point. Just let this end...

“Perhaps it’s only a matter of time before you crawl into Camilla’s lap, or you bend your knee to Kamui and Aqua. Or maybe you wouldn’t even mind being with Zero and Odin.”

“It’s not like that-,” said Takumi with a bit more strength.

“Is it not? Tell me how it is then,” Leon said, pushing the open blouse away from Takumi’s dusky skin.

The prince shivered against the cool air and Leon, who was admiring Takumi in all his nakedness, was grateful that the prince couldn’t see him gawking.

In truth, Leon was simply surprised. He been taken a bit off-guard by Takumi’s beauty.

*It’s an immediate observation but even so... is there any part of this prince that isn’t... attractive?*

The answer was no, Leon was learning.

*As if it weren’t already bad enough to see your sweet sensitive side, no, now I’m realising why my brother was so willing to help you.*

*How can you be so irresistible?*

In Takumi’s silence, Leon moved and kissed him softly on the lips. The prince’s mouth hung open a bit in disbelief at Leon’s gentleness.

Something about how a kiss so simple surprised Takumi so much sat poorly in Leon’s mind but he couldn’t figure out why.

“What-?” the prince whispered, breathless with unsureness.

Unable to control himself, Leon yanked the blindfold down until it perched around Takumi’s throat.

The prince was staring up at him, amber eyes wide with surprise.

*Yes! Thought Leon with some odd feeling of triumph, that’s the expression I so wanted to see... those lovely eyes gazing at me...*

The surprise fell from Takumi’s face as he confirmed that it was Leon who had come onto him.

“Prince Leon,” he said, more as a confirmation than anything else.

It was strange to hear Takumi speak to him directly without a tone laced with hatred.

Leon nodded, “Yes, surprised? I suppose my spell earlier was quite convincing.”

*That’s right...! He... pretended to be Lazwald...*

Takumi narrowed his eyes, remembering.

Then, of course, he wondered if Leon had ever done it previously.
Could he have been Zero… returning the Fuujin Bow to me back there at the archery-, the archery range-!

“Hey-,” began Takumi.

The rest of his sentence, which was originally going to be: “I have somewhere to be,” devolved into silence as his gaze slid past Leon’s shoulder.

There was a worryingly familiar silhouette in the dim light behind the Nohrian Prince.

Leon turned and glanced over his shoulder, his own gaze following Takumi’s.

“Oh, yes,” said Leon, tone smug.

Takumi got a distinctly sinking feeling in his stomach.

“I was so surprised that your divine weapon reacted to my blood, do you remember?”

Takumi did.

It was back when Leon was pretending to be Lazwald. He’d picked up the Fuujin Bow and the weapon had acknowledged him as a worthy wielder.

And when Leon came closer again, Takumi could see his bow in the knight’s hand.

“Wh-why do you-, why do you have that-?”

Leon studied the weapon and handled it with a carefulness that Takumi did not associate with him, “I just thought about how much you hated to be separated from it. So I brought it with me.”

Wait, what-?

That didn’t sound right. Well, it did. It was true that Takumi hated being separated from his weapon. But…

But why does Prince Leon suddenly seem to care about my feelings at all…?

“You looked so glad when Zero returned it to you,” Leon mused quietly, returning the bow to its place against the wall.

Takumi blinked.

Did I… miss something…? Why is he suddenly acting so…

“Good, you’re not screaming bloody murder at me,” Leon muttered, turning back to him.

Takumi was quiet, still trying to determine the reasoning behind Leon’s uncharacteristic kindness.

“Though I suppose it doesn’t matter now,” the knight said with a shrug.

The tips of his fingers were glowing with the beginnings of a spell.

He came back and caressed Takumi’s face. There was a hurt in his eyes that the prince couldn’t
“Wh-what are you doing-?” Takumi whispered, amber eyes growing wide with worry as Leon’s magic danced across his skin.

“My duty,” Leon breathed, expression suddenly cold.

Tiny pricks of pain scattered up the prince’s arms as Leon’s spell sank into him.

Takumi could only bring himself to sigh, disappointed.

Of course Leon’s earlier kindness had been a ruse.

*I keep letting him… fool me. I hate him. And this place. I hate Nohr. And I hate Nohrians.*

And he was so disappointed that he’d ever even thought things could be different.

“So that’s…it, huh?” he whispered, looking elsewhere so he didn’t have to gaze upon Leon’s face.

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“Now then,” said Leon, “Prince Takumi I want you to obey me.”

Takumi’s gaze flicked back up to him and a small incredulous smile skittered across his lips before devolving into a snarl.

“Ex-**c**use me?” he said, squinting.

The prince didn’t bother to hide his disgust and so there it sat, plastered in plain sight across his face.

“I want you to obey me,” Leon said again, closing his eyes, undeterred.

Takumi straightened as much as he could in his chair and fixed the knight with a disinterested stare.

“Do you think I would just submit to you? Especially *now*, of all times? You’ve caused me so much anguish and now what, are you all out of ideas?”

Leon raised his gaze slowly and observed Takumi unblinkingly in the silence.

It was a bit unusual for him to lack a snarky reply.

Takumi didn’t like it.

“I want you to obey me,” Leon said for a third time.

Takumi opened his mouth to argue and found that his resolve was wavering.

The prince hoped he didn’t look as panicked as he felt. But when his amber gaze landed on Leon, the knight just gave him a slow smile.
“What did you do to me? What was that spell?”

Leon tried again: “I want you to obey me.”

“N-no,” Takumi answered.

It sounded more like a question.

“What’s the matter, Hoshidan Prince? Have you decided submitting to me isn’t all that bad?”

“Th-that’s not it-!” Takumi hissed.

He clenched his fists.

What’s happening to me-?

After another stretch of torturous silence, Leon crossed his arms over his chest and took a deep breath.

“I’ll say it once more,” he said.

“Go ahead,” Takumi spat out through gritted teeth.

Leon fixed the prince beneath his chestnut gaze: “I want you to obey me.”

When Takumi didn’t answer, Leon knew he’d won.

But he waited. Just to be sure.

“Prince Takumi?”

And the prince, who had previously screwed his eyes shut, thinking that that could stop Leon’s spell, slowly opened them.

There was a fragile pleading look in that amber gaze of his as he met Leon’s eyes.

“Please-,” he whispered, “please, don’t-,”

Leon watched him impassively.

“Leon-,” Takumi pleaded, straining against his bindings.

Fuck.

Just seeing the prince with such a doe-eyed look, bottom lip trembling, and resolve faltering was nearly enough to have Leon leaping upon him.

He’s so...

Gods, he looked so lovely.

Begging for me so beautifully.

And Marx had been privy to such a delightful sight.
I want… that. I want… you.

“Please-,” Takumi choked out again.

“I want you to obey me,” said Leon.

The look of utter disbelief in Takumi’s eyes was palpable. His mouth hung open from the sheer shock of it all. Leon closed his eyes so that he didn’t have to see the prince’s face.

Only after there was a great silence, did Leon finally allow himself to look upon the prince again.

Takumi had slumped back against the chair, amber eyes hazy.

“I want you to obey me,” Leon whispered.

The prince gave the smallest of nods, no longer able to resist Leon’s magic in his head.

With a simple flick of his wrist, Leon sent a spell from his fingertips and it leapt to sever Takumi’s restraints.

Leon only sighed.

That look of betrayal…

Earlier, he would have loved to see that expression. Something about that gaze, that look of dismay and minute hopelessness, was beautiful.

Earlier, Leon would have frozen time at his own expense, just to take in that complex look.

So then why do I feel… empty?

That look of shock had always resonated with him in the past, he’d always revelled in his enemies’ expressions at their own defeat.

But this time it had been different.

And for some reason, this time, it hadn’t been fun.

“Prince Takumi,” he said.

And then, deciding he could drop the title, simply said: “Takumi.”

The prince raised his head, eyes seeing nothing.

“Now you have the control you so desperately wanted.”

That was right; Leon finally had the Hoshidan Prince right where he wanted him.

“You know,” he said, though in his present state, Takumi couldn’t hear him, “my mother spoke to me. She wanted me to turn you against your own and send you back into your kingdom to wreak havoc on your people.”

Leon shrugged, “I think my father did enough of that already. And yet Kamui still returned to us.
So I’ve decided that you’ll stay here with me as well.”

He tipped his head to one side.

“Takumi. Come here.”

The prince got to a slow stand and trotted over to Leon, pressing himself close. Leon realised just how small he was.

_Not really built like a proper prince, even if you are the second…_

“Is this how you naturally behave?” Leon wondered, distracted by their sudden closeness.

_You’re so desperate for contact…_

And the knight couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps back in his homeland, Takumi was very close with those around him.

_We are so cold here in Nohr… are things better in Hoshido?_

Deciding that he need not have such thoughts, Leon shook his head and hooked an arm around the prince’s middle.

“Kiss me, Takumi,” he said, just to test the waters of his spell.

Admittedly, Leon had no idea what sort of strength his own power had, especially over other people. His mother had always been the one to manipulate others; Leon himself preferred just getting rid of troublesome pests.

_No need to beat around the bush…_

But Takumi rested a hand against Leon’s chest and stood on his tip-toes, pressing his mouth to Leon’s.

When they parted, the knight watched him for a moment more.

“On the lips, huh?”

That was unexpected.

Leon drew Takumi closer and they paced over to the desk together.

He pulled the prince into his lap easily and waved his hand in an oddly practiced motion. A quill leapt to perch between his awaiting fingers and Leon scripted out what he’d learnt.

_“Wants proximity to be close.”_

_“Is forward without specific command.”_

The knight paused and backed the chair away from his desk.

“Takumi,” he said, “get on your knees.”

The prince slipped out of his grasp and went easily onto the ground.
“Obeys quietly,” Leon wrote.

“Get under the desk,” the knight said.

He didn’t use a very commanding voice but Takumi did it all the same.

The prince rested his head against Leon’s thigh, seeming to be awaiting further instruction.

“Waits patiently.”

This was the moment of truth.

“Show me how you pleasure your brother.”

Takumi nudged himself further between Leon’s thighs and the knight opened them easily, curious to see what the Hoshidan would do.

The prince leant in close, cupping a hand over Leon’s clothed cock and massaging him ever so slightly.

Leon bit back a groan at the attention. It felt so different to have Prince Takumi almost… desperate to pleasure him.

Was this how he had always felt with the High Prince? Leon was fascinated by it.

“Leon-,” Takumi breathed, looking up into Leon’s face with a half-lidded expression.

His cheeks were rosy, lips plush, and hands already at the hem of Leon’s trousers.

The knight crossed out a previous observation and rewrote: “Is very forward without specific command.”

Leon frowned at the shakiness of his handwriting.

No matter; I’ll rewrite it neater this evening.

Takumi let out a frustrated whine and Leon stepped from his thoughts to see what the problem was.

“You could use your voice, you know,” he muttered.

“Please,” whispered Takumi, “let me pleasure you-,”

The knight blinked and felt his cheeks heat.

Why am I… so easily…?

“I-, y-yes, of course-,” Leon stuttered out, caught off-guard by Takumi’s forwardness.

And his submissiveness… Does he think he’s unworthy to offer love to another?

Leon had asked the prince to pleasure him as if he were the High Prince.

So then… does that mean he doesn’t think he can love his brother?
Though he’d never admit it, Leon could relate to the feeling.

An inferior… I… I feel that lowliness with my own brothers as well…

“Leon-,” Takumi whispered, drawing the knight’s cock from the confines of his trousers.

He began jerking him slowly without preamble and Leon was taken aback yet again by the prince’s forwardness.

“G-Gods-,” Leon hissed, tensing as arousal coiled tightly in his belly.

Takumi’s grip was loose and gentle and the pace he took was so pleasingly slow that Leon couldn’t help but release a low moan.

He leant backwards a bit in the chair so Takumi could take him at a better angle.

“Are you always-, like this-?” Leon whispered, now unable to concentrate on anything but Takumi’s hand upon him.

He discarded the pen in his hand in favour of slipping his fingers into Takumi’s hair.

The prince nestled closer, taking Leon’s hand upon him to be an invitation to proceed. He leant forwards and moved his hand from Leon’s cock to his thigh.

For a moment, Leon thought Takumi was stopping.

Not-, not so soon-,

But the prince had only relocated his hand so he could replace the spot with his mouth.

Leon jolted at the sweet warmth as Takumi put his lips to the knight’s cock.

“T-Takumi-,” he choked out, fingers curling in the prince’s hair.

Gods, he was so uncharacteristically gentle and deliciously eager. Leon had never expected him to be such an attentive lover.

But the prince glanced up every few moments to observe Leon’s expression, as if trying to determine what made him feel good.

Everything you’re doing makes me feel good, the knight thought hazily.

The rest of his thoughts were drowned out beneath his dizziness as Takumi ran his tongue over Leon’s slit.

“S-Slower-,” the knight whispered, cursing himself for sounding so needy.

But Takumi did as he’d asked and his pacing slowed to a crawl.

He let out a low moan around Leon’s cock and the knight trembled at the pleasant vibration.

“G-Gods-, I-, please, I can’t-,”
How had Takumi hidden this side of himself for so long?

*He’s… Pretty good for a Hoshidan…*

Leon choked back a cry as Takumi took him deeper, amber eyes beginning to water.

The knight had thought he’d seen all parts of the prince, especially since his bout of eavesdropping on Takumi and Marx. But it appeared that that was not the case.

*Much to my… delighted surprise…*

Leon bucked into the prince’s mouth and Takumi let him, seeming almost eager to have the knight use him.

“D-Dammit-,” Leon hissed, hunching over as his orgasm rose up inside of him.

He’d wanted this to last a bit longer. But with Takumi sucking at him so insistently, it would be a miracle if Leon didn’t spill all over the prince’s face.

Takumi shut his eyes and pushed up against Leon until his nose tickled between Leon’s blond hairs.

“S-Stop-, y-you’re a fool to think you can just-,”

But the prince wasn’t paying him any mind, intent on only a single thing.

Takumi let out another whorish moan around Leon’s cock and the knight pushed his chair backwards.

“Th-that’s enough-, I don’t want to spill all over-,”

But the prince didn’t release him.

He pressed close until Leon came with a stifled cry.

The knight blinked a few times, breath coming hard and fast. And then he wondered yet again:

*How?*

Takumi drew away from him slowly, seeming almost unwilling to go.

But once he’d taken his mouth from atop Leon’s softening cock, he replaced it with his hand, intending to repeat the process.

“No-, no, don’t-,” Leon choked out, hand curling in Takumi’s hair, “st-stop-,”

When the prince didn’t react, Leon bit his own lip hard enough to draw blood. That unbearably familiar flat taste of iron brought him back to his senses.

“*Takumi,*” he said, forcing a commanding tone into his voice, “*Stop.*”

The word seemed finally to register through the prince’s hazy thoughts and he leant back to rest patiently on his knees, awaiting further instruction.

Leon took a moment to regain his composure, willing his heartbeat to slow and his breath to even out. He waved his hand in the laziest clean-up spell he could manage and did up his trousers in a
practiced motion.

“Gods,” Leon whispered, “it’s as though you’re-;”

An entirely different person.
The way in which Takumi had acted was not that of a prince or even a prisoner.

He’s both and yet neither…

“What… are you?”

He hadn’t been expecting a reply, not with Takumi bowing beneath his spell.

And yet the prince’s words were clear as crystal in his mind.

“I’m stronger than this.”

Leon blinked, taken aback yet again by Takumi’s voice. Or perhaps more appropriately, his lack thereof.

He hadn’t spoken, at least not through his lips. And yet Leon knew that the voice he’d heard belonged to the prince.

“And I’m stronger than you.”

Leon tensed, displeased with the unspoken challenge in Takumi’s tone.

He was preparing to spit a poisonous reply when the door to his private chamber came flying open.

Aqua and Kamui stood in the doorway, both out of breath and cheeks rosy.

“What are they doing here-?

Leon had anticipated Marx’s arrival and eventual confrontation about the sleeping spell perhaps. But these two…

“Leon-,” Aqua began softly, taking a step into the bedchamber.

She lifted a hand slowly, lance point nearly dragging across the ground in her other hand.

The knight tensed; if Aqua came much closer, she would see Takumi crouched at Leon’s foot.

He couldn’t let the songstress near him.

Then all my efforts will be for nothing…!

He lifted a hand and Aqua drew her lance in front of herself as though it would properly shield her.

“No closer, Sister,” he said, frowning.
“Brother-!” Kamui hissed, gaping.

I can’t have him see either...

Magic smoked from the tips of Leon’s fingers and he watched Aqua warily.

“No closer. I don’t want to do anything to you.”

“You don’t have to,” Aqua said, taking another step.

One more pace would grant her enough space to see Takumi.

Leon closed his eyes and let his spell snake into the air.

Aqua let out a small cry of surprise as it struck her and Kamui gasped, immediately going to her side.

The princess pushed away from him and leant upon her lance.

She was trembling beneath her own weight and when Leon turned his gaze upon her, it was evident that she was struggling to stay conscious.

“What are you-, planning-?” she whispered, “Why are you-, using-, Leon-?”

Leon recoiled from the comment, confusion turning to annoyance.

“I’m not using anyone,” he hissed, “I’m myself and I’m doing all of this of my own free will.”

“Leave him alone-,” Aqua spat, “he’s not-, your enemy-, it’s us you want-, right?”

“Aqua-!” Kamui whispered, one arm coming around her as she slipped to her knees, lance clanging loudly against the cobblestone flooring.

Kamui pulled her into his arms and then turned his gaze upon Leon.

And the knight had never seen his brother look so hurt.

“You-, you hit her with your spell-,” Kamui whispered.

“I had to,” said Leon, “she disobeyed my-,”

“No-!” Kamui said, heavy voice ringing through the chamber, “she is our sister! Have you no shame?”

Leon tensed as Kamui’s dragon wings unfurled from his back, antlers shooting up from his snowy hair and tail flicking into existence to dust against the floor with irritation.

“First you put your magic upon Marx,” he said, “then you deceived Takumi.”

Kamui’s voice was quiet but no less dangerous.

“And now you’ve hit Aqua without even batting an eye… I didn’t want to believe it to be true. But now…”

“Brother-,” Leon began, beginning to feel rather angered himself.
He can’t begin to understand-!

One of Kamui’s hands shifted into a dragon’s paw and he drew that hand away from Aqua so as not to accidentally cut into her dark skin.

“And now you dare call yourself my brother?” the dragon prince seethed.

His fangs were poking out over his bottom lip and his pupils were so thin that his eyes looked like pools of blood.

“If you harm the ones I hold dear,” Kamui swore, clutching Aqua tighter to his chest, “then you’re no brother of mine.”

And with that, he readjusted his grip on Aqua and her lance before turning on heel and stalking from Leon’s quarters.

The knight sat there in the silence.

“You’re no brother of mine.”

Takumi leant against Leon’s knee and when the knight looked down at him, he felt the overwhelming urge to strike the prince.

Yes, this is all his fault…

Leon raised his hand, some nameless spell already materialising, but then he let his hand drop to his side.

The magic at his fingers dissipated and Leon shoved his desk chair back, stalking away from Takumi.

He put a hand over his mouth to stifle the sob that had risen in his throat.

“Kamui-,”

“You’re no son of mine.”

“Mother-,”

Were they both right?

“Wh-what have I been doing this entire time-?”

Leon had said such awful things to Takumi when they’d first met; hurled insults just to try to get some information from him.

But he didn’t betray them, wouldn’t give that High Prince’s weakness up. Of course not.

Takumi protected his siblings.

While I…

He’d struck Aqua with a spell.

Wh-what’s wrong with me-?
Takumi got to a slow stand and, seeming to sense Leon’s growing distress, made his way to the knight’s side.

“N-no-,” Leon whispered, stumbling away from him, “I-, this is-, this is wrong-,”

Takumi blinked slowly, hurt by Leon’s words.

*Even this prince… I-, I’ve hurt everyone-, they’re right-, I-.*

The desire to succeed, to triumph over his opposing equal had become so disgustingly necessary and Leon realised that it had not been Takumi’s hand he’d forced but instead his own.

*I-, I did everything. It was all me… Just because I wanted… what?*

What did he want?

*Was my success really so important that I would…*

That he would risk everything?

Leon smudged the tears on his cheeks with the back of his hand and magic curled in his palm.

“One Takumi, I’m-,”

He shook his head, deciding it was best not to speak.

*As if I can ever apologise for what I’ve done…*

Instead, he simply broke the spell he’d held over Takumi and turned away so that the prince wouldn’t see his tears.

Takumi blinked and took several steps back wordlessly, too startled by his present predicament to say much.

“One-, Elise arrived earlier,” said Leon gruffly, “she’s awaiting you in the garden.”

She was the only one that Leon hadn’t seen yet. She was the only one who Leon hadn’t said something awful towards, the only one to be spared from his jealous whims.

*Our precious light… at least she won’t have to see this side of me…*

Takumi stood there in stunned silence, trying to comprehend Leon’s words.

“*Go.*”

The knight spat the word out and his voice broke beneath the sadness in his throat.

Genuine worry kept Takumi rooted to the spot.

Despite everything, some part of him felt drawn to Leon, felt compelled to help the knight.

*He’s too good for someone like me…* Leon thought, putting his arms around himself.

*After everything I’ve done, still, he wants to help-? Go, you deserve someone better-, you should be with Marx-, at least you two seemed…*
“I said go!” Leon shouted.

That sent Takumi careening backwards and he stumbled out into the dim hallway, not looking back.

***

The fortress was eerily quiet as Takumi traversed the winding corridors.

He hadn’t known that the Northern Fortress had a garden, let alone where it was.

A redheaded woman was headed his way and he stopped her quickly.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I’m looking for-,”

“Oh,” she said, looking him up and down, “it’s you.”

The corners of her mouth turned down in slight distaste.

“Yes, well, the-,”

“Lady Camilla was just looking for you,” she said, interrupting him again.

“Lady-,”

He blinked.

Camilla-?

The redheaded woman hooked her arm through Takumi’s.

“C’mon, don’t just stand there. She’s been worrying herself sick over your absence.”

“My-?”

How long had he been gone? And what had he been doing in Leon’s quarters?

Why can’t I… remember?

“In any case,” said the redhead, “let’s go. I doubt you’ll want to meet Princess Elise looking like that.”

Takumi blinked again.

“Looking like-?”

He glanced down and saw that he was still clothed in Marx’s nightshirt.

“Oh Gods,” he breathed.

Oh Gods, I slept with Nohr’s Crowned Prince-!

“Yeah,” said the redhead.
“Sorry,” Takumi said, feeling his cheeks heat, “I don’t think I caught your name.”

“I didn’t give it.”

The prince nodded stiffly, “Right.”

The redhead turned to study him quietly. Takumi felt scrutinised beneath her crimson gaze.

*Crimson eyes…*

There was something about that red gaze that reminded Takumi of…

“Kamui-?”

The redhead frowned at him.

“Yeah, what about him? A bit of a lost little kid if you ask me.”

Takumi, having realised he’d said his thought aloud, stuttered out a hasty reply.

“Y-yes, I agree.”

“I’m Luna.”

The prince nodded again.

She wasn’t much for conversation, it seemed.

Though there was something nagging him. There was something about Luna that he was supposed to remember…

“I serve Lady Camilla,” she said, “in case that wasn’t apparent.”

It was.

“Right, yes. I got that.”

Luna let out a tired sigh as they climbed the stairwell together.

“Oh-!” said Takumi, halting suddenly.

Luna stopped too, more out of necessity than anything else. She pulled her arm from where it had been hooked through Takumi’s.

“What’s your deal?”

“You’re Luna.”

She lifted a single brow, unimpressed.

“That’s what I said, yeah. Glad you were paying attention.”

Takumi shook his head, “N-no, no. That’s not what I meant.”
“Oh, so you didn’t even pay attention. Dunno what I was expecting, honestly.”

“You’re Lucina’s fiancée,” Takumi finally managed to get out.

Luna spun, eyes bright with a wild fire and she was upon him in only a moment, fists bunching in the fabric of his shirtfront.

Her knuckles were white from the strength of her grip on him and Takumi let out a hiss as the cobblestone wall behind him grated up uncomfortably against him.

“Don’t speak her name,” Luna hissed, breath hot against the prince’s face.

He blinked and then nodded slowly, momentarily caught off-guard by her furious display.

And only then did Luna take a step back and continue up the stairwell silently. Takumi padded after her, wondering if he’d done something terribly wrong; she’d suddenly been so angry at the mention of Lucina.

*Her entire demeanour changed…*

“Owain and Azure told me-,”

“Sweet Naga,” Luna swore, exasperated, “they gave their real names? And to you, no less.”

She shook her head, disappointed.

“It’s not like I’m gonna let the secret slip,” said Takumi matter-of-factly.

“You’d better not.”

The prince had nothing to say to that.

The rest of the climb to Camilla’s chamber was a quiet one.

And Takumi had never been so relieved to see the Nohrian Princess in his life when she flung open the door and pulled him into a bone-crushing embrace.

“Oh, Darling-!” Camilla breathed into his hair, brushing a thumb across his cheek, “I was so worried for you-!”

Takumi moved to see if Luna would enter the conversation but she’d made herself scarce.

“I-it’s a relief to see you as well, Lady Camilla.”

The princess pushed back from him and silently took him in for a moment.

Takumi felt his cheeks burn beneath her gaze.

“Come now,” she said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze, “let’s get you changed, hm?”

The prince nodded and let her pull him into her chamber.

“No, wait,” he said, slowing.

Camilla glanced at him over her shoulder, confused.
“Something wrong, Darling?”

“N-no, it’s just-, I thought your chamber was-, was the other one.”

Camilla shrugged, “Does it even really matter?”

Takumi supposed that with a castle as big (and empty) as the Northern Fortress, Camilla could have any chamber she well liked.

“I guess not,” he said.

“Regardless,” said the princess, “I’ve finally settled on the perfect outfit for you.”

Takumi blinked, “O-oh really?”

Camilla’s comment could’ve meant a thousand different things so he waited patiently to see what she’d picked out for his meeting with Elise.

Elise was the youngest of the Nohrian Royals, Takumi remembered. She was the blonde troubadour with the twin-tails who had first mended his arm when he’d arrived in Nohr, not that the prince could remember much of that.

But Xander and Camilla cared fiercely for her and Takumi hoped she was as kind as she’d seemed when they’d first met.

“I’m not quite sure how you feel about wearing another one of my gowns,” said Camilla, “so I selected something a bit different.”

Though he’d never say, Takumi was relieved at the news; he’d felt too exposed in Camilla’s garments. And his run-in with Leon last night hadn’t exactly helped him self-consciousness.

_Freedom at a price, I guess…_

“Come, here,” said Camilla, gesturing, “get comfortable, you must be exhausted.”

He was, but that nagging feeling didn’t let up, even as Takumi reclined back on Camilla’s plush bed.

_What was I doing in Prince Leon’s chamber? And why can’t I remember?_

“Oh,” said Camilla, “you’re frowning. Is this not to your liking?”

Takumi blinked, “Oh-, n-no, sorry. That’s-,”

He got to a hasty stand and accepted the clothing from her quickly.

“I was thinking about something else, Princess, I’m sorry.”

“Not to worry, Darling,” Camilla said, tucking a stray piece of hair behind his ear with a kind smile.

With that done, she stepped back and allowed him the space to step into the washroom.

Takumi was pleasantly surprised to find that Camilla’s choice in garb consisted of heavy layers
and a pair of trousers.

The prince pulled them on and turned, observing himself in one of her full-length mirrors.

It wasn’t an outfit that the prince was familiar with but he found that it was dark and comfortable so he didn’t see anything to fuss over.

Although, as he studied his reflection, he realised just how Nohrian he looked.

As if the clothing were not enough, the prince saw that his hair had been done up in a braid.

Frowning, he undid it and instead tied it in its usual bun.

_How did I…?_

He couldn’t remember who had done his hair up like that. It wasn’t Camilla.

*And it definitely wasn’t Prince Leon.*

The idea of Leon doing anyone’s hair—especially his own—nearly had Takumi snorting.

*So then who…?*

Whoever it was had been careful with it and Takumi respected that, even if he couldn’t remember who it’d been.

Camilla knocked on the door and the prince jumped at the stark sound.

“I hope you’re quite alright in there,” the princess said, worry bleeding into her tone.

Takumi let out a relieved sigh.

*I guess it doesn’t really matter what I was doing in Prince Leon’s chambers. I know I’m safe with Camilla. And soon I’ll be with the youngest one… and that sorcerous prince wouldn’t dare pull a stunt in front of her.*

“Y-yes-,” Takumi stuttered out, hurrying to open the door so that Camilla wouldn’t fret over him.

“Oh yes-!” the princess said, nodding approvingly, “you look lovely.”

Takumi turned around in front of her, somewhat embarrassed, “Y-you really think so?”

“Darling, I wouldn’t lie to you. I had a feeling that the fliers’ outfit would suit you best.”

“Fliers?” echoed Takumi, curious.

Camilla herself rode a wyvern and the prince wondered if that was a different class than flier.

“Yes, the dark fliers. There aren’t many of them in our army these days. Although…” she tipped her head to one side, thinking.

Takumi lifted a brow, hoping for her to continue.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter now,” she said with a shrug.
The prince didn’t dare push her.

*I’m just relieved to be with her again.*

Even with the broken remains of his dream, Takumi was glad to be by Camilla’s side once again.

No matter how well Prince Leon had impersonated Azure, he couldn’t possibly impersonate Camilla.

*Which means I won’t be fooled again…*

> “Now then,” said the princess, pulling Takumi from his thoughts, “shall I have Belka take you to the garden to meet my darling little sister?”
>
> “Belka?”
>
> “One of my retainers.”

The prince nodded, “Right. What about-,”

He had wanted a chance to speak with Luna again and ask about the Brand that Owain and Azure had been speaking about.

> “Yes, what is it?”
>
> “W-well, I was just hoping to speak with Luna again-,” Takumi said, hoping it didn’t sound too suspicious.

Camilla blinked, seeming surprised.

> “Oh,” she said, “now that’s a bit different. But if you’ve taken a shine to my dearest Luna, I won’t keep you from your fun. She will accompany you to the garden.”

Takumi nodded and gave her a small bow as he headed for the chamber door.

> “She should be just outside,” Camilla said, giving the prince another kind smile.

And Takumi finally felt the worry in his heart settle.

*I’ll be alright. I’m stronger than this.*

***

Luna had been adamant about keeping silent for the entire trek to the garden.

She had told Takumi that he looked nice and proper and a bit too Nohrian for her liking. And that had been the end of their conversation. (If it could even be called that).

The prince wasn’t sure how to ask about the Brands and Luna didn’t seem eager to discuss her past, let alone those of her companions.

Although, as Takumi’s thoughts returned to him, he distinctly remembered Zero inviting him to a
That’s right, maybe I can get some answers this evening. Zero said that Owain and Azure will be there. And Luna too.

“Hey, Luna-,” he said, hoping she wouldn’t outright ignore him.

She glanced down at him, frown deepening: “What?”

“I-, er-, tonight. There’s that little gathering-, you’re going, right?”

She blinked, seeming surprised that Takumi wanted to discuss something other than the hidden half-truth he’d heard from Owain and Azure.

“Y-yeah,” she said, “yeah, I’m going. And if you know about it, I guess you are too.”

“Zero invited me.”

Luna watched him quietly for a moment.

“Not Ow- er-, Odin? And Lazwald?”

Takumi slowed his pace and looked up at her, “You don’t have to use their new names. It’s alright. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m the last person anyone is paying attention to, Lady Luna.”

“Just ‘Luna,’” the mercenary said, “don’t say ‘Lady Luna.’ It’s weird.”

The prince nodded, “Okay.”

“But you’re wrong,” she said, and Takumi lifted a brow.

Luna smoothed her shirtfront, looking suddenly nervous.

“You’re wrong about no one paying you any mind, Prince Takumi. It’s quite the opposite; you’re in Nohr’s spotlight now.”

As far as the prince could tell, the only one who really had it out for him was Prince Leon.

And one prince doesn’t seem like ‘all of Nohr…’

“Ever since you surrendered yourself as Nohr’s prisoner in place of your brother,” she said softly, “all eyes have been on you.”

She looked away from him.

“It’s really awful, isn’t it?”

Takumi wondered if she was trying to joke with him but when he looked at her, she was studying the cobblestone flooring, expression unreadable.

And the prince couldn’t help but wonder if her arrival in Nohr, even becoming Camilla’s retainer, had arisen from a situation similar to his own.

“Everybody’s watching,” she whispered.
“It’s okay,” said Takumi, feeling odd for comforting her, for it was she who needed the comforting.

Even if she isn’t the prisoner here.
And then he wondered if maybe she was, in her own way.

“This isn’t your first war, is it?” he asked.
She turned to look at him, “What would you know?”
That biting tone was back in her voice. But Takumi knew he hadn’t imagined that self-conscious woman underneath such a tough exterior.

She’s… like me… isn’t she?

“You fight like a seasoned warrior. And you have that look…”
It was true.

He’d first seen that gaze of death when he’d met her in the corridor. She’d looked so much like Kamui with those crimson eyes, haunted by decisions past.

“What look?”
He turned to her. “You know what look. Don’t try to tell me that you haven’t killed before. It takes a part of you away that you don’t get back.”

“My world was plagued by war,” she admitted, dropping her gaze and beginning to walk again, “much like this one. Our war was one between differing peoples, much like this one. But there is one thing that separates my war from yours. In my world, an ancient force thought to be long-dead suddenly rose up and seized control of Owain’s father. He had been a renowned tactician and a splendid ally to all. And yet when that force infused him, he betrayed all of those he held most dear.”

“Betrayed… how?”

“He was no longer himself,” Luna said quietly, “and our mundane war became one waged like never before.”

Takumi wondered if he should stop her.

It’s obviously painful to recount…
And yet he wanted to know, needed to know.

“But there was word of an ancient spell, the power that a divine goddess could grant to change the tide of the war and to rewrite history.”

Luna paused and took a breath.

“My wife-, well,” she pinked, “I s’pose she’s just my fiancée for now-, she performed the spell
and we travelled back to mend what had been broken.”

“Travelled back how?”

Luna looked at him, “In time.”

Takumi blinked.

“I’ve never heard of a spell that-,”

“It’s crazy, I know. But, Gods, you wouldn’t believe it. I met my mother-, all of us did. And it was-, it was so incredible to see them all together, happy and alive and well.”

Luna was smiling a bit at the memory.

“And your wife?” said Takumi, enamoured with her story.

“Lucina,” Luna breathed out, as if saying the name any louder was against some ancient law.

“It was hardest on her, I’m sure. Even though she and Azure are siblings, she was closer with her father. And yet she had to keep her identity a secret until the proper time came. But she was so delighted to see him, and her mother, both of them happy, it was more than any of us could imagine.”

Takumi watched her, awestruck.

“We made our future a happy one,” she whispered, “and so when the three of us came to this place, it wasn’t too different. We’re just here to mend what’s broken.”

They were both quiet for a long while as the garden came into view.

“And what is it that’s broken?” the prince asked.

Luna looked at him, “That’s what we’re here to find out.”

***

Luna ran her hand across her face so quickly that Takumi didn’t know if she was wiping away a stray tear or a speck of dust.

She straightened and took his hand in her own.

“C’mon, you’ve got a princess to meet.”

Takumi dug his heels into the ground and she stopped to frown at him.

“What’s your deal?”

“Thanks,” he said, “for sharing your story with me.”

Luna’s frown slipped into something different, mixing with surprise on her face.

“D-don’t mention it,” she said, though there was no bite to her tone.
“And thanks for bringing me all this way to meet Princess Elise.”

“I’ll… I’ll see you tonight, then,” said Luna.

Takumi nodded and squeezed her hand, “Yeah.”

When Luna had left him, Takumi turned and stepped into the garden, determined to face Princess Elise.

Regardless of what had happened between him and the other Nohrian Royals, Takumi felt it necessary to thank the youngest princess, at least, for all that she’d done for him.

_Sakura was always so exhausted after healing our troops…_

He imagined that Elise had to have felt similar.

_And to heal an enemy prince, no less… It’s only proper that I thank her._

Takumi was confident that she was not commanded to heal him but rather chose to do so of her own will.

_Which makes my gratitude all the more important._

The prince caught sight of her sitting serenely on one of the stone benches in the centre of the garden. She was alone, leaning back with her weight rested on her palms and letting the pale sun shine upon her face.

Her eyes were closed and a gentle smile perched upon her pink lips.

Just as Takumi was readying himself to call out a greeting, another voice beat him to it.

“Princess Elise.”

The prince felt a chill skirt down his spine and he froze right where he stood, paralysed by a sudden panic.

A sorcerer cloaked in heavily decorated garb stepped into the prince’s line of sight and Takumi felt his heart stop.

_Wh-who-_,

He’d never met the mage and yet…

_That voice…_

“Your father is pleased with your return,” the mage said to Elise, offering the princess a smile.

There was no warmth in it.

_I know that voice…_

“Hit him.”
Takumi closed his eyes and remembered suddenly, with painfully clear clarity where he’d heard that voice.

When the prince had first met Marx, the Paladin had shown him to his own personal chamber that was much better suited to him than a prison cell.

But when Takumi had gone to bathe, a spell had been waiting for him within the watery depths.

*I’d thought that it was Leon, at first, who’d sent that terrible spell… but-,*

But it had been all wrong; it might’ve been Leon’s face, sure, but had Ryouma’s not been there as well?

*So surely… someone else…*

It was possible.

*Could it really be… is this person… that unseen hand…?*

“All is my hope that you had easy travels,” the mage said, his voice drawing Takumi back to the present.

And the prince stumbled backwards, hurrying for the cover of the corridor.

Luna was idling at the foot of the staircase when Takumi came whipping around the corner, hand reaching for a bow that wasn’t there.

“Allumi-?” she said, blinking.

“Allumi-?” he mirrored, panic finally slowing at the sight of her.

His gaze fell upon the bulky sword at her side. He recognised it to be one of the special types, this particular one used to cut through the tough metal of armour but-,

*I have to get rid of that sorcerer-,*

“I need your sword,” he said.

Luna took a step back and lifted her hands.

“Whoa-, hold up there-, why do you need it?”

“I-, outside-, there’s-,”

How could he explain it to her?

Luna frowned and her hand fell to the hilt of her sword. Then she stepped forwards, took the prince’s hand in her own, and charged for the doorway.

“Allumi-, no, wait-, we can’t just-,”

She drew her sword and Takumi yanked her back into the shadows.
“What are you doing-?” he whispered, expression panicked.

Luna lifted her free hand in confusion.

“You said there was an enemy in the garden-?”

“Just-, okay-,” Takumi let out a breath, “just-, look.”

She pouted but ducked to peek around the corner.

“Oh,” she said in disdain, “him.”

Takumi stared at her, shocked by her blasé attitude.

*This sorcerer…*

This sorcerer who was speaking to the princess, he had been the one in the bath, the one controlling Leon-,

“It all makes sense-,” Takumi said suddenly, as the broken pieces of his memory began to fit together in his mind.

*The missing piece… the spider that weaves this whole web of lies together…*

“What is it?” Luna asked, turning to look at him.

Concern flashed across her face and Takumi fought the overwhelming urge to latch onto her; he would’ve liked one of Camilla’s grand embraces right about now.

“Oh Gods,” he breathed, “I’m right; it’s him. He’s the one who-,”

He paused and straightened and forced himself to appear calm.

“Luna, just who is that guy?”

Luna, seeming to sense that Takumi was no longer planning to rush into a foolish confrontation with a half-baked plan, sheathed her armourslayer.

She folded her arms over her chest and hunched her back.

“That’s Garon’s sly sorcerer of an advisor,” she said, disgust evident in her tone, “I think his name’s Macbeth.”

Takumi clenched his fist, feeling the fleeting stings of pain that still remained from where Leon had broken his arm.

The pain would serve as a reminder.

*Macbeth…*

“Hey, Luna,” Takumi said, voice soft but serious.

The mercenary glanced down at him, curious, “Yeah?”

“I think I’m starting to figure out how you guys can mend what’s broken.”
Luna studied him for a long moment in the silence.

“‘You guys,’ huh?”

The prince blinked, “Yeah, it’s the three of you, right?”

“W-we could always use more allies,” she said.

Takumi blinked again, wondering how foolish he’d have to be to think she was actually asking him to join them.

“Guess I outta tell ya’,” she said, uncrossing her arms and putting them to her hips, “My real name’s Selena.”

She dusted off her shirtfront and turned to him, offering him her hand.

“So, you in? You gonna help us save this world or what?”

Takumi looked down at her hand and then back up at her face.

Selena’s cheeks were a bit pink with embarrassment and he wondered how hard it’d been for her to work up the courage to ask him for his alliance.

She glanced away, as though beginning to doubt herself.

But Takumi took her hand.

“You know what, Selena?”

She glanced back at him and it was obvious that she didn’t trust herself to speak. Takumi saw a familiar hope in her crimson eyes, the hope that she could save another world.

She wants to make this future a happy one too…

And that was good enough for him.

“I’m in.”

Chapter End Notes

once again i am so proud of my fluffy chicken son look at him go

in summary:

fuck macbeth and also spoilers: takumi isnt gonna get to go to that party :/
The Iceblade

Chapter Summary

Though Prince Takumi has finally found the source of evil within the Northern Fortress, his debt to Elise is more pressing a matter to which he must attend. Meanwhile, Kamui and Aqua search for answers to their mounting questions. Mysterious travelers arrive under the guise of becoming a princess's retainers. Leon discovers a new power and cultivates a fine distaste for a particular sorcerer.

Chapter Notes

ts this chapter is really fucking long,,,,

anyway uh,,, the Freyja character is borrowed from unassumingvenusaur's Awakening!AU.

and so the plot thickens!
(also fair warning: theres a vaguely marx/camilla scene towards the end; its not a recurring thing).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a well-known fact that Leon’s magic tended to distort the mind. Memories and dreams twisted together in one’s brain and deep-seated traumas mingled with the suppressed fears that inevitably rose to the surface.

No one knew why such a thing occurred, but most everyone was wary of the Greatest Mage in Nohr for that very reason.

And Aqua, in her spell-induced slumber, experienced this poor aftereffect quite vividly…

***

…The place where she’d ended up was a sea of darkness, an impossible plane of existence where that Aqua herself felt suspended in time.

And as she stood there, unmoving, and perhaps even un-alive, she relived the instant where Leon’s magic struck her, over and over.

It was so very painful.

And every time that Leon’s magic pierced her, she heard a cry that was not her own. The songstress recognised it, distantly, as if the yowl had been hidden away in her memories.
She tried to remember who it was. But she didn’t have to, for the child appeared before her quite suddenly.

A…boy?

His back was to her, shoulders hunched, and Aqua sensed that he was standing before something too terrible to observe, hidden just beyond her sight in the darkness.

She felt as though she were invading as she bore witness to the boy’s struggle; she knew it was something that she was never meant to see.

Even the veiled evil in itself, Aqua knew she was not meant to know of its existence, despite it only living here; the mere knowledge that this unbridled wickedness was possible was more than she should’ve had.

And as Aqua stood there, afraid and yet also unable to flee, she heard the unseen evil speak to the little boy.

“You’re not good enough-!”

The princess squinted through the darkness, trying to glimpse the manifestation of such terror. And yet, the icy realisation that the evil was the great darkness itself—surrounding both Aqua and the boy—fell upon her with the uncomfortable weight of truth.

“If you’re too weak, Little Lion, then you’re no son of mine-!”

Aqua watched as the boy stood there alone, holding himself as the madness in the blackness belittled him.

And then he began to cry.

The princess longed to run to him, to comfort him, and yet she stood rooted to the spot; every one of her senses warning her not to go near him.

‘Something terrible is going to happen,’ her senses would’ve said. And Aqua had learnt to never ignore them.

As she watched, pained by the boy’s obvious anguish, the unseen ground beneath him began to crumble.

“N-no-, I’m slipping-,” he whispered.

When the ground gave way entirely, he let out a small cry and tumbled downwards into the abyss.

Aqua feared that the evil around them would swallow him whole.

And without a second thought, she leapt in after him.

“Wait-!” she cried, stretching out her arms as though she could catch him, as though she could save him.
As he fell, the boy opened an eye and then blinked, startled to see Aqua come tumbling after him.

“Wh-who-?”

“Give me your hand-!” she shouted and she stretched hers down, willing him to return the action.

There was a frightened look in his pale eyes and Aqua waved her arms emphatically.

“You are… safe?” the boy asked, tipping his head to the side and studying her with those pale green eyes of his.

He seemed so familiar and yet Aqua knew she did not recognise him.

With those eyes, I would remember those eyes...

“I-,”

She wondered what he meant, asking if she was safe; she had wanted to ask him the same thing.

“Yes,” he said, seeming to decide on the answer himself, “you are safe.”

And he leant against her, tiny hands bunching in the fabric of her songstress gown. When he touched her, Aqua saw light bloom beneath her feet, and the boy took a slow step back, surprised.

“You are… safe?” the boy asked, tipping his head to the side and studying her with those pale green eyes of his.

He seemed so familiar and yet Aqua knew she did not recognise him.

With those eyes, I would remember those eyes...

“Warm…” he whispered, looking down at the pool of light and then back up at Aqua.

“Do you need my help-?” she finally asked, glad to have found her voice.

“Yes,” said the boy with a fragile honesty, “But you’ll get in trouble if you help me.”
Aqua blinked, “Wh-what?”

“How-?” the boy whispered, voice soft and sad, “Why can’t anyone help me-?”

Aqua stared at him.

“I want to-,”

“No-,” he whispered, “if you help me, she’ll get you too. She’s an evil witch and she devours souls. And you’re very lovely so I don’t want her to take you.”

“D-don’t want her to-?”

Aqua blinked, trying to decipher the meaning.

Was the boy talking about the voice from before? The woman in the darkness?

Who are you?

The boy took a step back then, away from Aqua and away from her light.

“Wait-!” she whispered, worried what would happen if he stepped back into the darkness.

But instead, the boy simply stood there before her. And in only a moment, he had aged rapidly until Aqua realised who that child had become.

The hands that the boy had bunched up in the fabric of Aqua’s gown were now trembling at his sides, metallic gauntlets clicking.

He hung his head low but Aqua could see his tears as they dripped from his chin and into the dark grass beneath them.

And then suddenly, seemingly overcome by sadness, he sank to his knees and then curled in on himself, forehead resting against the ground.

As he moved, the armour that he wore began to disintegrate until he was left in his plainclothes.

He lifted a bare fist and then brought it down heavily upon the earth, a broken sob ripping from his throat.

In the infinite silence of the blackness, the shattered sound echoed for an eternity, taunting both of them unendingly.

“Please-,” he whispered, voice so faint and weak that Aqua almost hadn’t heard him.

And he raised his head slowly, tears streaming down his face as he gazed up into hers.

“Help me.”

***
“Leon-!” Aqua cried, launching upright with electrifying speed. She was breathing hard and her vision swam, dotting dangerously with little flecks of white.

“Wh-what-, what happened-?”

She’d had a dream—nightmare, really—and she’d met-,

*But... how?*

“Heya.”

A single word in greeting, and yet it halted the whirlwind of thoughts spinning furiously within Aqua’s head.

*Safe,* she thought, the automatic response to that calm voice.

And just as she thought that, she remembered that Leon had said the same thing.

*He said that I was-,*

“Kamui,” she breathed, “Kamui, it’s you.”

Aqua reached up to cup his face but her arm didn’t respond and she turned to look down at where it lay uselessly at her side.

“How’s your arm?” the prince asked, seeming to notice Aqua eyeing it.

She raised her golden gaze, unspoken confusion in her eyes.

Kamui brushed a stray strand of hair from her face and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Leon hit you with his spell,” he whispered, and that jogged Aqua’s memory a bit.

She recalled how she and Kamui had gone to confront the knight about Marx’s sleeping spell and Takumi’s disappearance and then-,

*I lifted my lance, but-,*

“Even if you shielded his magic with your lance,” Kamui continued, “your arm still bruised pretty badly so I-, I thought I’d bandage it up.”

She stared at the lines of gauze, how they curved around her hand and curled up her arm, embracing her dark skin and keeping Leon’s offence against her from sight.

“Take it off,” Aqua said, voice gruff from disuse.

Kamui blinked; her request was rather unexpected. But he didn’t say anything and simply did as she’d asked.

When the dragon prince exited to discard the bandages, only then did Aqua dare look upon the spell’s remnants.
Though she’d deflected a portion of Leon’s magic with her lance, it was still much too powerful and had left a ragged mark up the length of her forearm.

The angry scratch stretched across her dark skin like a thousand bolts of lightning, all fighting one another for a place on her arm.

And for a moment, Aqua remembered the pain she’d felt when she’d caught child-Leon in the dark abyss. She’d asked him to grab her hand and when he did, searing pain had shot up her arm like-

“Like lightning-,” she mumbled.

“It does look a bit like lightning, doesn’t it?” said Kamui, re-entering and returning to his place at her side.

Aqua hummed in agreement, still trying to work through all she’d seen, heard, experienced in her dream.

Which was, by the moment, beginning to feel less and less like a dream.

But if not a dream… what was it?

“Aqua, it’s okay,” the prince comforted, patting her hand awkwardly.

She nodded, only half-listening.

“I know that Leon-, I know that he hurt you but-, maybe we were wrong-,”

“Right, yeah,” said Aqua, still trying to sift through her half-baked theories.

Kamui bristled at her side and she slowly turned to look at him.

Only then, when Aqua got a good look at the dragon prince, did she realise that his wings were hanging limply behind him, tail dusting across the cobblestone flooring.

“K-Kamui-,” she said, “are you okay?”

“No,” he said after a tense moment, “no, I’m not okay. I’m really not okay, Aqua.”

She blinked and then tipped her head to the side, “What’s wrong?”

“Wh-what’s-, what’s wrong-?” hissed Kamui, incredulous.

He got to a stand, seeming to need the extra space. His antlers shot up between tufts of his snowy hair and he clenched his fists.

“My brother-, laid a spell upon you-, marked you with his magic and I-,”

He turned back, eyes alight with fiery rage, “and I witnessed it-! I carried you back here and had to see that awful scar on your arm-, and I just-!”

The dragon prince put a hand to his head and took a moment to collect himself.

“I didn’t know what he’d done to you-! I was so ready to kill him-! I-!”

He faltered, anger devolving into crushing sadness.
“I thought… you were going to sleep for an eternity.”

He was quiet and then, refusing to meet her gaze whispered out: “Please, don’t ever leave me.”

The princess lifted her untouched hand and beckoned him.

Kamui returned to her side once again and she sat up slowly, moving to brush his fringe from his face so she could press a kiss to his forehead.

“It’s okay, Kamui,” she soothed, “it’s going to be okay.”

“How can you say that?” he whispered, and the princess feared he was going to cry.

“How can you say that after everything that-, after what Leon-,”

Aqua shushed him quietly and ran her hand through his hair, cupping his face and giving him a small smile.

“I had a strange dream,” she said softly, “and I think Leon needs our help, even if he doesn’t know it.”

Kamui watched her wordlessly, unsure of what to say.

After a great silence, the dragon prince nodded slowly.

“Alright,” he said, “tell me what we need to do.”

The princess offered him a gentle smile.

“Help me up, we need to get to the library.”

***

When they were sure that Macbeth had gone, Luna escorted Takumi back outside and into the garden.

She had the smallest of bounces in her step and the prince couldn’t help but feel giddy as well.

To have allies, even in a place like this…!

“I can’t wait for tonight,” he said to her softly.

And it was the truth.

Luna pinked and nodded, seeming to show a bit of her true self now that Takumi was at ease with her.

“M-me too,” she mumbled.

The mercenary gestured a bit towards where Elise was perched, silently enjoying the gentle breeze across her skin.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it, then.”
Luna seemed a bit lost now, unsure of what had changed between them. Takumi wasn’t quite sure himself but it felt nice and that was enough.

He turned to her.

“Thanks, Selena.”

“D-don’t mention it. I’ll… see you later, Takumi.”

The prince allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

“Yeah.”

When Luna had gone, Takumi turned back slowly and gave himself a few moments to take in the princess.

This time, without any distractions.

She was so very small, perhaps even smaller than Sakura, with loose hair that pooled around her on the stone bench in lovely blonde ringlets. A few of her locks were streaked with a lavender that reminded Takumi of Camilla, though he knew the sisters couldn’t be more different.

He stepped towards her purposefully and cleared his throat.

“P-Princess Elise-,” he said softly, already moving to bow.

His voice was a bit hoarse and the prince wondered if the climate of Nohr was finally getting to him.

Elise opened her eyes and Takumi’s worries were momentarily forgotten as he remembered that violet gaze from when she’d mended his arm, working tirelessly at his side.

_Those concerned eyes… those unshed tears and that frown of uncertainty…_

“Heya,” she said, voice quiet yet kind, “how’s your arm?”

Takumi blinked.

He wasn’t sure what he’d thought the youngest princess of Nohr was going to say to him at their first proper meeting, but that had not been it.

“I-It’s-, it’s good,” he said, and then cursed himself for sounding so ungrateful.

No, I have to properly thank her. She did me a great service in healing my arm.

Takumi cleared his throat again.

“She did me a great service in healing my arm.

Takumi cleared his throat again.

“I-It’s-, it’s good,” he said, and then cursed himself for sounding so ungrateful.

_No, I have to properly thank her. She did me a great service in healing my arm._

Takumi cleared his throat again.

“S-sorry,” he said, “I know how rude it must be to keep a lady waiting. But before we discuss anything else, I- I want you to know that I’m grateful for what you did for me.”

Elise watched him quietly for a moment and then, as Takumi’s words registered, her eyes widened and a small smile spread across her face.

“Hey now,” she said, letting the grin rest naturally upon her lips, “it’s just what I do.”

Takumi looked down at his palm and remembered how he’d drawn Zero’s bow back at the archery
range.

When I first arrived in this place… I was sure I would be unable to wield a bow ever again after Prince Leon broke my arm… but this Princess…

She had made all the difference. And in some strange way, she had saved him.

She and Camilla, and even Marx. …especially Marx…

And when Takumi thought about it, Aqua had helped him as well; perhaps he had never been as alone as he’d thought.

Never as alone as Prince Leon makes me… makes me think that I am…

And there was also Selena along with Owain and Azure, they had no real, personal gripe with this war; they’d simply come to try to mend things.

Which means that those three, at least, I can count on as my allies.

“You didn’t have to do it,” Takumi said, looking out at the flowers, “and that’s why I want to thank you.”

Elise got to a slow stand and her hair hung loosely around her hips.

“You’re very welcome, Prince Takumi.”

The prince saw, as she stood, that her dress was not the traditional Nohrian garb. Instead, she was wearing a gown from his homeland.

“How did I not see it until now…?”

“Aqua gave it to me,” she said softly, running a hand along the edge of one of the wide sleeves, “she said it made her a bit sad to look at.”

Takumi could understand why; Hoshido had been Aqua’s home for so many years and in only a moment, it had turned against her.

If it hadn’t been for Kamui showing up when he did…

But then again… he’s the reason all of this started in the first place… so, really…

“Camilla’s more the one for playing dress-up,” Elise said with a small giggle, bringing Takumi out of his thoughts, “but-,”

She glanced off for a moment, as though trying to decide whether to voice her thoughts or not. Her expression had turned serious again.

“But I thought perhaps now would be the best opportunity to wear this,” she finished, looking back at him.

Takumi blinked and then took a step towards her, fingers grazing one of the sleeves.
“I-It suits you.”

“Does it?” asked Elise in earnest, glancing down at the gown.

She stepped back and turned in it, “I don’t know what sort of shoes to wear with it so I’ve just been going barefoot. It’s weird but… I can see why Kamui likes it so much.”

She laughed and then, seeming to realise she’d mentioned her brother in front of Takumi, turned to him with a stricken expression.

“I-It’s alright-,” he said, “you can say whatever you want, Princess. I-,”

He shook his head.

“I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable by mentioning-,”

“I could say the same thing, ya’ know,” said Elise.

Somehow, she had a way of making him feel alright in his own shoes; he didn’t feel like the Hoshidan Prince with her. They were just two royals admiring a garden together.

It was new. And nice.

Elise took Takumi’s hand and led him further into the garden wordlessly.

“Oh, these ones are my favourites,” Elise said, pointing to a small bundle of creamy blooms.

She turned to look up at Takumi, “Do you have these in Hoshido?”

Takumi was surprised by how she said the word easily. Her siblings—even Marx—scarcely dared to say the name. For Elise’s tongue to utter it without any charge was… new.

*And nice.*

“W-we don’t,” the prince hurried to say, hoping he hadn’t been silent for too long.

“They’re called lilies,” Elise said, letting go of Takumi so she could crouch and tilt one of the blooms upwards.

She sighed and Takumi bent to crouch beside her. A strand of her blonde hair slid over her shoulder towards the dirt and the prince reflexively moved to catch it and then tucked it easily behind her ear.

Elise blinked and turned to look at him, lips parted in soft surprise.

“S-sorry-,” Takumi said quickly, wondering if he’d crossed a forbidden barrier by touching her.

“I guess it *is* getting in the way, huh?” she said with a laugh.

Whatever had happened in that moment was gone now, though Takumi wasn’t sure how it made him feel.

Elise got to a stand and brought her curtain of hair over one shoulder, braiding it quickly before wrapping it into a bun behind her head.

Takumi couldn’t help but notice how secure it looked.
The princess offered Takumi her hand and after a moment, he took it.

She led him back to the stone bench and gestured to the flowers.

“Do you like any of these?”

It was a genuine question and Takumi nearly snapped back with a sarcastic: “Do I like any of them? Yes. Gods, yes. They’re so vivid and bright, and alive. And I almost want to… eat them? That sounds absolutely mad, I know, but they’re very-, Gods-,”

Instead, he reminded himself just who he was speaking to, and simply said: “Y-yeah.”

“I was hoping,” said Elise, sounding a bit self-conscious, “that perhaps you’d let me braid them into your hair.”

“The flowers?” said Takumi, seeking clarification.

“I-I know it’s silly,” the princess admitted, looking away, “but I think you’d look great.”

Sometimes at the festivals in Hoshido, Sakura and her ever-present retainers made flower crowns and wore them in the streets, celebrating and dancing about like forest creatures.

Takumi had even been pulled into the madness on occasion when Oboro and Hinata begged him to partake in the crowning of the flowercrowns. Aqua too, had seen a few daisy chains in her day as well.

Aqua… he thought, hoping she was well; he still hadn’t forgotten how glad she’d been when he’d apologised to her.

I feel… so…

He finally felt at peace with her and the entire trouble between them, easily forgotten.

In only a moment… we were able to move past such harshness…

“He’d been inside his own mind for too long; Elise was beginning to notice.

The prince straightened and then nodded, letting his hair down from where he’d done it up earlier in Camilla’s washroom.

It had been braided before too…

Elise trailed her hands through the strands carefully, seeming to consider which flowers to use.

“Any preferences?” she asked quietly.

Takumi shrugged, “I don’t know the names. Maybe I’ll just point-? Uh, if that’s-, if that’s alright with you, Princess.”
Elise laughed softly and got to a stand, “Just tell me where to go, Prince Takumi!”

“Hm, okay,” the Hoshidan glanced around, truly taking in the flowers themselves for the first time.

He pointed first to a bundle of yellow blossoms.

“What are those?”

“These?” Elise hurried over and crouched beside the patch, freeing one from the soil, “this is a daffodil-!”

She turned and spun the single stem in her hand, “A single one symbolises misfortune though, you know.”

Takumi frowned a bit at that and Elise lifted her hands in surrender, “B-but a bundle symbolises joy and happiness-!”

“Flowers have meaning in this kingdom as well?” he said, seeming surprised.

Elise nodded, “Yes, daffodils are nice. I suppose you must be innately chivalrous if you’re picking this one.”

“What about those ones?”

Elise handed him the bundle of daffodils and then turned to follow where the prince was pointing.

“Those violet ones, there.”

The princess squatted and gathered a few into her hands quietly.

“Do they have a meaning too?” Takumi asked when she returned to him.

Elise straightened and nodded, “These would be anemones. They symbolise… anticipation.”

And with Takumi looking so bright and eager to learn about the flowers and their secret language, the princess couldn’t bring herself to tell him the other meanings.

With flowers, they were always two-faced little blooms and Elise couldn’t help but compare them to her siblings whenever she sat in the garden.

It brought her peace, being surrounded by the bundles of colour but they always did remind her of the unpleasant past.

“So we’ve got the yellow… daffodils, right? And the violet… anen-uh-, anem-ones. What else?”

Elise shook herself and looked between the two bundles.

“You want me to pick one for us, Prince Takumi?”

The prince nodded and Elise turned to survey the collection of flowers for a moment.

“Yellow and violet… let’s go with…”
She turned, gaze settling on the smallest bundle of asters.

“Perfect-!” she breathed.

*A beautiful flower with beautiful meanings…

“Aster,” Elise said, holding one of the rosy blooms up for Takumi to see.

He nodded, seeming pleased.

“They symbolise patience, and elegance,” she said, deciding to avoid mentioning daintiness lest she offend the foreign prince.

“Three’s a good number,” Takumi said, voicing Elise’s unsaid thoughts aloud.

“I agree,” she said with a decisive nod as she returned to his side.

Takumi shook his head and let his hair tumble down his back as Elise positioned herself behind him, running her fingers through his thick mane again.

“Your hair is so beautiful,” she said quietly, “thanks for letting me braid it.”

“I think I should be the one thanking you, Princess.”

Elise smiled at that.

***

“Daffodils and Anemones, hm?”

From his spot within the shadow of the Northern Fortress, Leon watched his sister play nice with Prince Takumi.

“The yellow of an unrequited love and the violet of fading hope,” the knight breathed, “how oddly fitting for a Hoshidan Prince.”

Leon, not so unlike Elise, was able to gather himself best when he was near the garden.

After the unexpected trauma of his past had come creeping into his mind and shook him to his core, the knight found it necessary to take a breath beneath the great trees.

And yet he could not.

Not with that-, not with Prince Takumi as close as he is.

Leon still hadn’t recovered from his previous exchange with the Hoshidan.

“And though you are blissfully unaware of it… we have unfinished business, you and I.”

“Odin. Odin… where have I heard that name before?”
Leon blinked, momentarily distracted by a voice that was not his own.

He detected movement out of the corner of his eye and the knight pressed his back to the wall, holding his breath and praying the shadow that cradled him would be enough to remain unseen.

“Odin,” breathed the stranger, slowing when her gaze landed upon Elise in the garden.

“I’m back here again it seems,” she said to herself, “and yet no sign of him. Nor the others. Perhaps the library-?”

She frowned and tucked a strand of snowy hair behind her ear. It was pointed, Leon noticed, just like Kamui’s.

But why would her-?

She lifted her head and glanced skyward, grey eyes sad.

“Was I wrong then?”

Wrong about-?

She sighed and shook herself.

“No, mustn’t be that way now. Father would be-,”

Instead of finishing her thought aloud, she sniffed as if to reassure herself and made her way towards one of the Fortress’s entrances.

“Yes, perhaps he’ll be in the library with that darling book of his.”

“She seems rather-,” Leon trailed off, still watching her, “I wonder what she wants with Odin.”

She was clearly a stranger here.

She wouldn’t happen to be…

Odin never spoke much of his past and Leon had never pressed him for it, not since Zero had been so open about his own atrocious existence.

But then, with this mysterious woman about, Leon wondered if she was a threat.

An old friend come to stab him in the back?

Odin did have a bad habit of stepping into trouble…

The knight felt a spell rise to his lips and magic dance at his fingertips. He lifted his hand slowly, so as not to draw the mystery woman’s attention, but she stopped in her tracks.

“If you are indeed a threat to anything here,” he breathed, “I will have to stop you before you can harm anyone.”

The woman turned slowly and eyed him, a dark judgment crowding in her grey gaze.

“Would you strike an unarmed woman?” she asked softly.

Leon felt a line of cold sweat slide down his back at her words as he recalled his last encounter with his siblings.
He’d struck Aqua.

But now, here was this mysterious woman standing before the knight, so still and so quiet.

And Leon faltered.

She nodded once and then turned to leave. Leon could only watch her go.

And when she was out of his sight, he wondered again, what she wanted with Odin.

Deciding he’d seen enough of Elise and that-, and Prince Takumi, Leon turned to follow her.

*If her answers lay in the library, then so do mine.*

---

Takumi got to a stand and turned, feeling the weight of his braid down his back.

“Does it look alright?” he asked.

Elise clapped and nodded, “Yes, yes! You look perfect, Prince Takumi!”

He reddened and bowed his head a bit in embarrassment, “O-oh, thank you, Elise.”

She blinked and Takumi, seeming to only realise he’d left off her title, stumbled to fix it.

“N-no, it’s okay,” said Elise reassuringly, “I-, that was pretty nice. Does this mean I can call you ‘Takumi’?”

After her words registered, the prince nodded, “Y-yeah. That works.”

There was movement out of the corner of Takumi’s eye and he spun, gaze flickering worriedly over the flowers.

“Is something wrong?”

“There was-, there was someone-,”

Elise stood and tapped her chin with her index finger. A teasing smile played at her lips and she put her hands to her hips, glancing at the branches overhead.

“Freyja? Is that you?”

There was a moment of silence and then a masked figure dropped from the tree overhead, landing easily before them.

“My apologies, Lady Elise.”

“M-Mask-,” said Takumi, distracted.

Elise turned to him and lifted a hand towards the stranger.
“Takumi, this is my newest companion Freyja. Well-, my companion for now, anyway. I think she’s much better suited to serve my sister.”

“Sister-?”

“Lady Elise tells me that Lady Aqua is in need of retainers,” said Freyja, propping her mask up on her head.

A strange sword sat at her hip and Takumi was momentarily distracted by it. But Freyja’s words registered all the same and he nodded.

“That’s-, that’s good. And Elise is right, Aqua really does need some retainers.”

“Speaking of,” said Elise, “where’s Eir?”

Freyja glanced around and frowned, “She was just here a moment ago-,”

She let out a sigh and Elise giggled, “Not one for conversation now, is she?”

“She gets that from her father, I’m sure,” said Freyja with a roll of her eyes.

Takumi was watching her carefully and quietly. There was something about her that reminded him of-

“Azure-,” he mumbled.

Freyja turned to stare at him, incredulous. And in that stare, Takumi observed the single thing that solidified her identity in his mind: the Brand.

“Azure-?” echoed Elise.

“I-I only meant to say that Lady Freyja’s hair is very lovely,” Takumi said, “perhaps we should put flowers in it too, hm?”

Elise turned to Freyja, who laughed nervously.

“I-I’m afraid my hair isn’t long enough for all that,” she said.

With Elise pleased, Freyja set her gaze back upon Takumi and he knew that by uttering Lazwald’s true name, he’d set himself up for an evening of harsh scrutiny.

Why do I do this to myself?

“Oh-!” the prince said, glancing to Elise, “Speaking of, who’s Eir?”

It was Freyja who answered.

“She’s my-, she’s my travelling companion. We met early on and have been staying with the Flame Tribe. However, we happened to encounter Lady Elise during our trip into Cyrkensia.”

She was going to call Eir something else… if Freyja really is who I think she is… does that mean that Eir is… that Eir comes from their world too-?

“I see.”
It was awfully convenient for the two of them to stay with the Flame Tribe, so far from Nohr that no one would dare make the effort to go and see if their stories were true.

And Takumi had a sneaking suspicion that they weren’t.

_They’re from that other place, just like Owain and the others…_

But he wondered why they’d chosen to arrive now.

_Why not with Owain and Azure? And Selena?_

And then, as he thought of her, Takumi realised just how important it was that Freyja was now in Nohr.

“Excuse me,” he said, studying her.

Freyja watched him, distrusting, “Yes?”

“If you aren’t busy this evening,” he said, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet. On the rooftop patio.”

She eyed him cautiously; throwing Azure’s name out so causally had made her wary.

_Please, just agree. I need you to come with me so I can have you meet up with Selena._

“Perhaps if I have no duties to attend to,” Freyja answered stiffly.

_Oh, you are a piece of work, aren’t you?_

Takumi sighed and nodded, “Fair enough.”

Elise laughed softly, “Oh, Freyja, no need to worry. Prince Takumi is from our neighbouring kingdom: Hoshido. I’m sure he just wants to be friends.”

She turned to look at him.

“Right?”

Takumi set his gaze upon Freyja, “If it so pleases my lady.”

“The lady is pleased,” Freyja deadpanned.

_I can see why Selena likes you._

The prince coughed and frowned, clearing his throat.

_Stupid Nohrian weather…_

“Oh,” said Elise with a frown, “are you coming down with something, Takumi?”

The prince mirrored her expression, “Maybe.”

But he didn’t recall leaving the fortress.
So then how did I…?

“Perhaps you simply have a sore throat,” Freyja suggested.

Elise nodded, “Yeah, maybe it’s not so bad, Takumi!”

The prince hoped they were right.

But, still…

“Milk tea works best, I’ve found,” Freyja supplied softly.

Oh and of course, you know just what to say, don’t you?

“Perhaps you can show me a fine recipe from your homeland then,” said Takumi, watching Freyja intently.

A shadow flitted across her face but she offered him a cold smile and a small shrug, “If my Lady so desires it, I will happily assist you, Prince Takumi.”

“If it means the two of you will be friends,” said Elise, “then I’m all for it!”

“That sounds lovely,” said Takumi.

“Then I could not be more pleased,” agreed Freyja, voice gruff against the weight of the lie.

“Oh yeah, Freyja!”

The mercenary turned and glanced down at Elise, “Yes, My Lady?”

“Do you mind coming to meet Aqua with me?”

She nodded and then Elise turned to Takumi, “You wanna come with, Takumi?”

He lifted a hand in surrender, “N-no thanks.”

Elise frowned a bit and Takumi hastily gestured to his outfit before supplying her with: “I should really go to see Camilla and thank her for all this. The flier uniform is surprisingly comfortable.”

The small princess nodded in understanding and offered her hand to Freyja, “Let’s go then, yeah?”

Freyja blinked, surprised, but then she smiled softly and took Elise’s hand.

“Yes, My Lady.”

***

Though Kamui seemed much calmer than he had earlier, Aqua couldn’t help but notice that his wings were still hanging low down his back.

“Kamui,” she said, touching his arm gently.

The dragon prince blinked and turned to her, ruby eyes wide, “What is it? Do you need to rest for a
minute?"

  "I- no, I'm fine. I'm not made of glass," she said with a small laugh.

The prince pinked and Aqua reached to push his fringe from his face.

  "Thank you for the concern, though," she said, pressing a gentle kiss to his forehead.

  "I-I don't mean to be so-," Kamui stepped back and gestured to himself.

  "It's okay," Aqua said,swiping a laugh from her face before it could slip from her lips, "I do rather like your tail, Kamui."

  "My-?"

The prince shook his head and sighed, clearly upset with his present half-shifted appearance.

Aqua was about to reassure him but Kamui stopped and the songstress realised that they'd arrived. The dragon prince drew open the great door to the library and bowed slightly, "Ladies first, My Lady."

With her uninjured arm, Aqua lifted her songstress gown and curtsied fancifully at him.

  "Very kind of you, My Lord."

Kamui laughed as Aqua slid past him and ducked into the room.

  "I-, I said I'd help but-," Kamui sighed, "what exactly are we looking for? You think Leon's problems are coming from one of these books?"

Aqua frowned, "I hadn't thought of that, though I suppose it's possible. But, rather, I came here thinking one of these tomes would have some sort of an explanation."

  "You think he's under a spell?" Kamui whispered, disbelieving.

The songstress nodded, "He's surrounded by magic, surely it's easy for him to be blindsided by it."

  "B-but he's the greatest mage in all of Nohr," said Kamui, "there's no one better than him; he couldn't be blindsided-!"

Aqua let out a small sigh and nodded again.

Undeterred, the dragon prince fell into step beside her: "I mean, who could put a spell on Leon that he didn't know about? That's impossible-!"

  "Is it, Kamui?"

She turned to centre her golden gaze upon him, "Because I don't think it's impossible. I think that you, and Leon as well, seem to think so. Which is why he's so vulnerable."

With that, Aqua turned back around and paced purposefully towards one of the dusted shelves in the corner of the library.
“I-, I don’t think I’ve ever come to this part,” Kamui admitted, trailing Aqua with a troubled look on his face.

Aqua turned to glance at him over her shoulder.

“What do you mean? The library is big but surely not big enough for you to have missed an entire corner, Kamui.”

The prince frowned, “I-I know. But-, it-it’s weird, Aqua. I feel like-, I know that seems impossible but I really don’t remember it at all.”

He turned and inspected some of the books.

“I’ve never seen any of these titles before either.”

Aqua took a look for herself.

“They’re-, they’re forbidden tomes,” she whispered, “but why are they-, what are they doing in plain sight? These should’ve been destroyed decades ago-,”

She shook her head, confused. If Queen Katerina had known that such things were kept in her favourite library-, Aqua shook her head again, willing herself not to get distracted.

“Aqua,” breathed Kamui, “I think we should leave.”

“What are you talking about? We only just arrived, Kamui-,”

The prince gestured hurriedly, “Grab some of those fancy tomes and let’s get out of here. I think someone just came in.”

“Who?”

“Can’t tell,” Kamui said, “but I’m worried that it’s-,”

Aqua nodded, “Macbeth. Right.”

He was stalking around these parts as of late. Aiming to end Takumi, no doubt.

“Whatever looks important, let’s just take it with us,” Kamui said, trying to spy the intruder as Aqua gathered up a few tomes.

Takumi finally found himself in front of Camilla’s chamber, annoyed by how confusing the corridors in this damned fortress were.

He should’ve known that Camilla’s quarters were the ones that smelt of foreign spices. The inside of his nose tingled and he wrinkled it as though that would be enough to dispel such a sensation.

*How did I miss such a scent before…?*

Deciding it wasn’t important, Takumi knocked at the princess’s door, eager to see her again and share all that he’d learnt.

Finally, he thought, he could talk about Elise. She had been wonderful, just as Marx and Camilla had made her out to be.
Marx...

The prince shook himself from his thoughts, unwilling to examine his rising feelings for the Crowned Prince any closer than was required.

He sighed and knocked on Camilla’s door again. When there was no answer, Takumi found himself frowning; it was unlike Camilla to leave her room without some sort of warning.

Curiosity drove him to open the door and push into the room cautiously.

“Takumi-,” breathed Camilla, turning to catch a glimpse of him.

There was a genuinely bright smile plastered across her face. He’d never seen her look so openly delighted before.

The prince blinked, startled by her elaborate gown.

“Would you care to dance with us?” she offered, slowing to a stop.

In place of her usual crown was a decorative diadem inlaid with rubies. Golden ribbons streaked down from it and disappeared into the mass of her lavender hair.

“I-,” Takumi blinked again.

“Marx always likes to keep us on our toes,” she said softly, light teasing creeping into her tone.

And Takumi realised that he’d been so caught up in observing her gown that he’d nearly missed the Crown Prince’s presence.

“Pr-Prince Marx-!” he said, startled, as though the Paladin had only just materialised.

“Takumi,” Marx returned with a gentleness that the prince hadn’t realised he’d missed.

“What are you two doing-?” he asked, taking a moment to observe Marx in all his violet and golden garments.

A small ruby pendant sat betwixt the ruffles of his cravat like a single drop of blood.

Camilla turned to eye Marx as though there was some shared secret between them.

“I’ve been dying to have a ball,” she admitted, “though it’s always ultimately Marx’s decision to make.”

“The war has made things difficult,” Marx agreed, though the warmth had not faded from his tone, “yet now, with you here, I think it’s the perfect opportunity.”

“A… party?” said Takumi, dumbfounded.

Camilla nodded and that smile returned to her lips, “Yes, wonderful isn’t it?”

Was it?

Takumi was growing to appreciate the siblings but at the same time he couldn’t help but think of his own. And how quickly he wanted to return to them.
The Nohrians were free to do as they pleased but all Takumi wanted was to see his family again.

“Y-Yes,” he said and the word sounded hollow, “it sounds quite lovely to me.”

The phrase tasted strange in his mouth and he wondered where he had picked it up. The more time he spent in Nohr, the more Nohrian he became.

And the thought of it frightened him.

“Can you dance?” asked Marx, coming to offer Takumi his hand.

He wasn’t wearing his gauntlets or gloves, it was just his bare hand. A hand that had been on Takumi’s bare skin.

The prince swallowed and then shook his head.

“N-no Nohrian dances,” he said, “I learnt the necessary Hoshidan ones when I was a child.”

But he was an avid avoider of all celebrations in Hoshido, Second Prince or not.

“Oh, Marx,” said Camilla, hitching up her gown and curtsying towards him, “shall we teach him one now?”

An amused look danced across the Crowned Prince’s face and he bowed to Camilla.

“If it so pleases you,” he breathed, taking her hand and pulling her close.

“Hold a moment.”

The snowy-haired mystery woman slowed and turned her attention upon-,

“It’s you,” she said, “why have you followed me, Apparition?”

“Appa-? I’m no ghost, My Lady, I am Leon, Second Prince of Nohr. And I should like to inquire as to your purpose in being here.”

She blinked, grey eyes widening.

“You’re Leon? Elise has spoken fondly of you,” she said, offering his an approving look.

“You must be one of my sister’s latest recruits,” Leon concluded with a weighty look.

She nodded, “Eir of-, my name’s Eir. I’m to serve Aqua.”

“That’s ‘Lady’ Aqua to you, My Dear,” said Leon without warmth.

She frowned at him.

“I see. I don’t suppose you happen to know of a certain Ser Odin, do you?”

She had no problem using a title for him, yet couldn’t remember the titles for Nohr’s own royalty?

*Just who is this woman?*

“Odin is one of my retainers,” said Leon, eyeing her curiously.
He’d decided she wasn’t a threat so much as a nuisance.

“Odin? Serving a Prince of Nohr?”

A disbelieving smile skittered across her face, “Yes, that is most like him. Tell me, how does his cursed sword hand fare these days?”

“Sword-Hand-? You must be mistaken, Lady Eir, for Odin is a sorcerer. If you’re speaking of his Tome-Hand, it’s-, as good as it can be. I think.”

Eir stared at him.

“You haven’t given him a sword?”

Leon blinked owlishly at her, “It’s not that. He came to me with a display of immense magical power, Lady Eir. All he seems to be interested in are tomes and magic. I don’t know what sort of a person Odin was before he came here, but perhaps he is not who he seems to you.”

Eir chuckled and gave him a tight smile, “I could say the same to you, little lion.”

Leon recoiled at the title and he could almost hear his mother’s voice shouting it from the dark depths of his memories.

What a strange thing to remember, especially now of all times.

“But it appears Odin is not here,” Eir commented, glancing around slowly, “so there is no reason for me to be here either. I bid you a nice evening, Leon.”

And then she promptly exited, leaving the prince standing shell-shocked and alone.

“Th-that’s ‘Lord’ Leon to you,” he said into the silence, stepping back blindly until his hip met one of the empty tables.

What had just happened-?

“Did you hear that?” breathed Kamui, turning to stare wide-eyed at Aqua.

She nodded, seeming equally surprised.

“We’ve got what we need,” she whispered, “let’s go now, quickly-!”

Kamui got to a stand and hurried after her, praying they wouldn’t be stopped by Leon.

They pounded up the stairs to Kamui’s personal chamber and flung open the door, dumping their collected tomes across his duvet.

“Aqua, can you believe it? You’re getting a retainer!”

Kamui looked happier than Aqua felt and she smiled at him, “Yes, what an interesting turn of events.”

“Eir,” the prince considered, “she seems kinda informal for a retainer.”

He turned to look at Aqua, “Is that gonna be okay with you?”
Aqua rolled her eyes and chuckled, “Yes, I don’t care much for those silly titles anyway. Though perhaps someone so informal is better suited to being your retainer, Kamui.”

He shoved her gently, “Hey what’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged, “Who can say?”

“Oh, wait,” said Aqua, lifting her uninjured hand to halt Kamui’s excitement, “this looks strange.”

“What, what is it?”

He came closer and she traced a line with her finger, “Look here, this part isn’t in Common.”

“It’s not Nohrian script either,” the prince whispered, frowning, “What does it mean?”

Aqua stared at it unblinking.

“Aqua?”

“The reason you couldn’t remember that part of the library, the reasons these books are in plain sight-,” she shook her head, “such an elaborate setup…”

“What are you-?”

“Kamui,” said Aqua, raising her golden gaze, “how often does Macbeth visit the library?”

The prince blinked and then frowned, deep in thought.

“He-, he used to come a lot when I was younger. And then stopped for a while. But lately, now that Takumi’s here, I feel like I see Macbeth everywhere.”

Aqua nodded, “It all makes sense. Of course. He would keep his personal library away from Krakenburg. Of course. It’s natural to keep it here. You’re not well-versed in magic so you’re easy to manipulate… your memories of the library, they’ve all been distorted, maybe even erased-,”

“What? You’re telling me that Macbeth’s the one collecting all those weird books? What for?”

The princess shook her head, “I- I’m not sure. But-, but this here-, this language-, it shouldn’t be here, Kamui. My mother vowed to destroy all artefacts-, all artefacts containing this language.”

Kamui blinked at her, “Why?”

“It’s dangerous. It poisons minds and souls. Such a language harkens back to a darker time for this world, Kamui. For Macbeth to possess this tome, any of these tomes-, it could spell disaster for us.”

“What about Leon?”

Aqua traced the line in the tome again, “Yes, that’s here too. This is-, in Nohrian it would be-, Heben.”

“Enhance-?”
The princess nodded, “Yes. Though hardly a single historical text exists with the evidence, the Heben spell would be used as a way to motivate an army to fight.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” said Kamui, not understanding the danger.

Aqua nodded solemnly, “Yes you would think so. But in capable hands, Heben was used to manipulate armies into fighting wars they didn’t choose to fight.”

She shook her head, “I can’t imagine-, if this is really what’s afflicting Leon-, I can’t imagine what sort of toll it’s taking on him.”

“B-But he’s just one person-,” said Kamui with a frown.

Aqua nodded again, “I know. In order to best him in a battle of magic, perhaps it was necessary to use such a dangerous tool.”

“Okay,” said Kamui with forced calmness, “so what’s next?”

The princess looked him in the eyes and the smallest of determined smiles slipped onto her face.

“We save our brother.”

***

Marx dipped Camilla low to the ground and put his mouth to her sternum before pulling her upright again.

Takumi had sunk into a nearby chair, distracted by the sudden erotic air that their dance emitted. Dances in Hoshido were never this-, sexual.

“Faster-,” Camilla breathed and Marx twirled her twice before returning her to the spot against his breast.

“Like the old days,” she whispered with a victorious smile.

Marx nodded and pressed closer to her for a deep kiss.

“Yes,” he returned, breath hot against her lips, “like the old days.”

“When it was just us,” Camilla whispered, as they slowed to a gentle sway.

Marx traced the line of her spine through her gown and she rested her head on his shoulder with a tired sigh.

“Just us.”

Takumi sat trembling, watching them. Some part of him wanted to shout: ‘Yes! I am here also!’ But he found himself unable to speak. They’d invited him to watch their dance yet still he felt as though he were invading.

“Wear the gown I selected,” Marx murmured, though Takumi could hear him all the same.
Camilla nodded against him wordlessly.

“And wear your hair up,” he said, “I love you best when I can see your face.”

The princess was still for a moment.

“Marx-,” she breathed, “I-, I couldn’t-,”

The prince drew backwards and looked into her face, gaze searching hers.

“Camilla,” he whispered, “you are so very beautiful. My most darling younger sister.”

He reached down and pushed her fringe away from her face. She squeezed her eyes shut as Marx tucked her hair behind her ear.

Takumi saw that a nasty scar stretched up the length of her face. Burn marks sat around her eye, the skin wrinkled and discoloured.

Camilla refused to look at Marx.

He caressed her face and pressed a thousand small kisses to her scarred skin.

“I love you,” he breathed, “every part of you. This part too.”

Camilla nodded wordlessly.

“I want to see you,” he whispered.

She lifted her head and looked into his eyes.

“I want to see you in all your glory at the ball with me, Love,” Marx said.

A small smile teased at Camilla’s lips and she nodded, “How could I ever deny my big brother?”

“Oh, Takumi,” said Camilla, separating herself from Marx, “we never meant to make you feel left out.”

She opened her arms, “Come here and let me hug you, Darling.”

Takumi got to a shaky stand, still reeling from all that he’d seen, heard.

“I hope we didn’t make you too uncomfortable,” Marx said, seeming genuinely apologetic.

It was strange to see him so cordial after being so open with Camilla only moments prior.

Takumi couldn’t understand how Marx switched between Elder Brother and Crowned Prince so quickly sometimes.

Camilla pulled him into a warm embrace before he had much more time to think on the matter. She withdrew only to press a small kiss to his lips.

“You look so darling in that uniform, truly,” she breathed.
Takumi blinked, taken aback by her sudden affection. He blamed her closeness on that strange dance she’d performed with Marx.

Nohrian dances. More like ancient Nohrian mating rituals, Takumi had really had enough of that.

“Perhaps even more darling out of it,” Camilla admitted, fingers playing with the laces up Takumi’s sides.

It took him a moment to realise what she was implying and he pinked.

“So cute,” Camilla breathed, pulling him to the bed.

He let her, still somewhat dazed.

Marx reclined next to him and marvelled at his thick braid.

“It’s beautiful,” he admitted softly, fingers tangling in the silvery ends of the prince’s hair.

Takumi pinked again, surprised by the sudden praise.

Marx lifted one of the prince’s hands and brought it to his mouth, watching Takumi’s face carefully. The prince said nothing for a moment, only mirroring Marx’s gaze as the Paladin pressed his lips to Takumi’s knuckle.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered against the prince’s skin.

Takumi looked to Camilla for help but she only hummed in agreement with her brother.

“Wh-what is going on-?” Takumi whispered, more to himself than either of them.

“We could love you too,” Camilla said quietly, “just like how we love each other.”

“You’re perfect,” Marx agreed, “and we’d be made more perfect with you.”

Takumi gazed up at him, feeling suddenly captured by the Paladin’s stare.

As he moved to look at Camilla, he caught an eerily familiar aura out of the corner of his eye.

Violet.

An aura of violet smoke.

It had been so long ago, it seemed… Takumi’s memories had been hazy as of late but suddenly they were crystal clear for a moment, even in the face of the Nohrian siblings, and he sat bolt upright.

*Run.*

A chill turned his blood to ice and the prince turned to look down at them. Even now, without him between them, Camilla and Marx simply gazed at one another.

“Gods-,” Takumi breathed as realisation hit him.

*It’s just like with Prince Leon-*, like that time… in front of the mirror…

His worse fears had suddenly become a reality: Marx and Camilla were under the spell.
Takumi scrambled off the bed, taking a cautious step backwards.

His gaze darted between Marx and Camilla, worried they would leap to a stand and come for him. But they simply closed the space between themselves.

Camilla brought herself up over Marx and he shifted to allow her a place atop his middle.

“Oh, my precious big brother,” she whispered, caressing his face, “how darling you are.”

“Camilla-,” Marx breathed, propping himself up on one elbow.

The princess ducked her head to press a kiss to his lips as Marx ran his fingers through her hair. They seemed well and taken with one another and Takumi decided it was time for him to take his leave.

“I’d rather not overstay my welcome with you two,” he murmured, hand on the doorknob.

When they didn’t respond, he slipped out silently into the corridor with a shaky breath.

Leon stood alone in the library for a long time. He wasn’t there for any reason, now that Eir had deserted him with a biting reference to an ancient wound.

Ever since his engagement with that Hoshidan Prince, it felt as though Leon’s past—the past he’d tried so hard to separate himself from—was returning to haunt him.

“Why now-?” he whispered.

He’d been so close to making some real progress with his magic. But then it had all gone to hell when Kamui and Aqua appeared.

“You’re no brother of mine!”

Kamui had been so angry. Leon had… struck Aqua with a spell. He’d cut her down like she was nothing.

He looked down at his hands. They were callused from years of swordplay and spellflings. But they were not bloodstained.

No, that honour had been bestowed upon his late siblings.

“You whose names I cannot even recall,” he whispered.

Those numerous terrible children, each cutting one another down like savages, no regard for the blood that they shared.

“You whose names I cannot even recall,” he whispered.

But he’d done the same thing, hadn’t he? Aqua, the lost princess who had finally returned to Nohr,
Leon had struck her with a spell.

“I’m no better than my kin in their graves,” he choked out, suddenly dismayed.

A sob threatened to escape between his lips and Leon clapped a gauntleted hand over his mouth to silence it.

“No-,” he breathed, squeezing his eyes shut.

He was stronger than this.

He wasn’t weak. He was a Nohrian Prince. And the Greatest Mage in Nohr. Perhaps he had faltered, but when it came to his magic, Leon’s power was absolute.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said to himself, relaxing a fraction, “yes, there is no greater power than mine.”

He was the wielder of the legendary Brynhildr tome, master of all magic. There wasn’t anything in this world that Leon couldn’t do.

But that wasn’t true, was it?

“I-It is true-,” he whispered.

Except the Brynhildr has rejected him before. And given the way he’d lost control with Prince Takumi, there was no way to know if the Brynhildr wouldn’t simply reject him again.

And then he’d also hurt Aqua. He’d hurled some nameless spell at her with only a single intent: Go.

It was sloppy. How had he gotten this sloppy? Leon had learnt the ways of magic exclusively knowing that there would come a day where he could break the rules with confidence.

Yet he’d done it only when he’d lost control of himself.

Leon’s bottom lip trembled.

“I-, I can’t even-,”

He couldn’t even control himself any longer.

What have I become?

As sadness threatened to sully him once again, the scent of exotic spices met Leon’s nose and he straightened immediately.

That wave of misery that had risen within him was suddenly shoved aside in place of much-needed collection.

Those spices…

The doors to the library came open and Leon clenched his fists.

“Hello Prince Leon,” said Macbeth.
Leon would know what to do.

Takumi wasn’t sure what had made him think this; as far as he could recall, he hated Prince Leon. And yet, so long ago in front of the mirror in the washroom, Takumi had seen Leon brush away that magical miasma like it was nothing.

If he could do it once, he could do it again.

“He has to do it,” Takumi reasoned, mounting the stairs to Leon’s chambers, “I’ll make him do it.”

The prince was not sure, exactly, how he was going to make Prince Leon do anything.

“But I’ve done it before,” he said, memory of that night returning piece by piece, “I got him to look into that mirror and see the truth, didn’t I?”

He had.

He had been able to force Leon’s hand before.

“Now I must do it again,” he whispered decisively.

His feet had led him to Leon’s bedchamber easily. So easily, in fact, that it startled him.

He didn’t remember ever having come in the first place.

“But I know that this is it,” he breathed, “how?”

That question had to wait. Because Marx and Camilla could not.

Takumi opened the door, forgetting his princely manners for a moment in the face of worry. Though it appeared not to matter much, seeing as the chamber was deserted.

But there, across the room—,

Takumi felt his heart stutter in his chest and he stumbled forwards, clumsily, so overjoyed to see—,

“Fuujin-!” he whispered out, hands curling around the bow as he drew it up into his grasp.

It hummed in his hands and Takumi was relieved that the strap Zero had made was still intact. He hooked the weapon over his back and stood tall, comforted by its presence.

“It’s good to have you back,” he breathed, clasping a hand around the strap across his chest.

He turned to go, knowing there wasn’t much else for him here.

As Takumi moved to leave, however, his gaze fell across Prince Leon’s divine weapon.

The Brynhildr tome.

It hummed beneath the prince’s gaze and Takumi halted, suddenly captured by the book’s beauty.
He approached it slowly, reaching out his hand and—,

There was a journal lying open. Takumi’s gaze slid over to it.

Leon’s twirling script perched gently at the top of the page.

“What’s this-?” he whispered, thoughts of Brynhildr set aside in favour of a more interesting topic.

“Wants proximity to be close.”

Takumi frowned.

The next line read: “Is forward without specific command.”

It had been scratched out messily. Rewritten next to it in scraggly script was: “Is very forward without specific command.”

Something tugged at the back of Takumi’s mind, as though a memory were trying to surface. Yet it was being barred.

“What is this-?”

And for a moment, Leon’s flushed face flashed in Takumi’s mind, clear as crystal. The prince pinked at the thought, embarrassed for having had it in the first place.

He’d never imagined his mind could concoct such an image.

Leon, eyes half-lidded yet brimming with need, gaze hazy with pleasure, fingers toying idly with loose strands of Takumi’s hair—,

“Whoa-, no, no-,” Takumi breathed, taking a step away from the journal and the Brynhildr.

“What in the-?”

It had almost felt… real. But Takumi had no memory of it. His frown deepened.

Then he shook his head, “N-no time for this-! I need to find Prince Leon-!”

He grabbed the Brynhildr, more as an afterthought than anything else, and then stumbled out into the hallway.

Macbeth towered over the knight with a faint look of disapproval. It sat in the corners of his features, so much so that Leon wondered if he had just imagined it.

“Prince Leon,” Macbeth said again, “King Garon is curious about your progress with the prisoner.”

Why did his father care about Takumi? Was Garon not satisfied with his capture?

“It’s going well,” Leon forced out.

It had been a disaster.
Tension rose in the air and Macbeth came closer. He had a way of making Leon feel very small.

“Is this true?” the sorcerer asked.

Leon squinted, bothered by Macbeth’s meddling.

“Yes,” he said stoutly, “it is.”

Macbeth lifted a hand and tipped Leon’s head upwards so that the prince gazed into his eyes.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, Leon?”

Leon was quiet for a moment, speechless.

“Th-that’s ‘Prince Leon,’” he corrected, words hardly more than a whisper.

Macbeth hummed in acknowledgement, unfazed. He put a hand to Leon’s hip and the prince stiffened.

“Wh-what are you-,” he began.

Magic flared in Macbeth’s hands and Leon let out a stuttering breath, sinking back against the table as though he could no longer support his own weight.

“You’ve grown soft,” Macbeth chided, watching Leon impassively.

There was a small spark of fear in the prince’s eyes.

“Weak,” the sorcerer breathed, tipping his head to one side as though studying Leon closely.

The prince scarcely dared to breathe, distracted by the way Macbeth had reduced him to such a messy state so easily.

“And they call you the Greatest Mage in Nohr,” Macbeth whispered, a laughing smile crowding coldly at his lips.

Leon bristled.

“I-,”

“No,” said Macbeth, and Leon fell silent, taken aback by the sorcerer’s conviction, “No, I don’t think that’s proper to say even now.”

“How dare you-,”

“If one were to conquer you,” Macbeth mused, gaze flitting elsewhere as though he were lost in thought, “what would that make them? The true Greatest Mage in Nohr, yes?”

He turned his attention back upon Leon who was gritting his teeth, anger pinking his cheeks.

“I should think so,” said Macbeth, watching him intently.

“That will never happen,” Leon forced out.

As if it were the truth.

Macbeth cracked an amused smile. It lit up his face bit by bit, with such unnatural slowness that
Leon felt his blood chill.

Something was wrong.

“Finally you feel it, don’t you?” asked Macbeth, eye alight with victory.

Leon could recognise that expression well enough; he’d worn it plenty of times himself, after all.

That look of pride after an enemy’s defeat. To see it now-, and on someone else’s face-,

Leon shook in Macbeth’s grasp and the sorcerer grinned at him.

“Such an interesting expression,” Macbeth observed with delight, “if only I could see it more often.”

“L-Let go of me-,” Leon choked out.

His voice sounded so weak and it pained him to hear. He wanted to snatch the words back up and shove them right back into his mouth, out of sight.

Macbeth sighed, seeming tired of playing with the prince.

“I did enjoy it when you behaved yourself,” he said, “torturing that little Hoshidan dog-, forcing your hand-, seeing that fear on his face and now, on your own-,”

The sorcerer shook his head, seeming pleased with himself.

Leon felt Macbeth’s magic flicker for a moment. With his attention elsewhere-,

In only a moment I’ll be able to break free-!

Macbeth turned back to him, eye scrutinising.

“You didn’t think I was going to drop my concentration, did you, Prince Leon?”

But how did he-?

“What happened to you?” Macbeth asked, “still, you would call yourself a Prince of Nohr in this state?”

Leon trembled, rage and fear mingling together into something unrecognisable within him.

Macbeth sighed again.

“Not to worry,” he promised, seeming sincere, “it will be over soon. You’ll get rid of that little Hoshidan and our war will continue. Imagine, Prince Leon, how outraged their little kingdom will be-!”

Distantly, Leon felt his mother’s words rise in the back of his mind and he squeezed his eyes shut.

N-no-, not now-, please-,

“Just having lost their queen and now, one of their princes-! What ever shall they do? I can
almost see that High Prince of theirs coming for us on his own. Like a dim little sheep for slaughter.”

The sacrificial lamb.

That’s what Takumi had seen himself as. Leon remembered it now, quite suddenly.

What had he been doing-? It felt as though he’d somehow forgotten some of himself-

“Your magic is not the only one to distort memories,” said Macbeth, as though reading the prince’s mind.

“You’ve been blinded by your arrogance. And I’ve overtaken you. Your mother was the only one to see the truth, you know. Ever since you casted that silly spell and ruined those eyes-, your mother’s beautiful green eyes-,”

Leon clenched his fists, squeezing his eyes shut and praying he could block it out. If he could just imagine Marx-,

Macbeth pressed closer to him, “you were all I had left of her. And yet you hated her. And destroyed the only thing that reminded me-,”

“Shut up,” Leon whispered.

The sorcerer let out a low growl, “You had her eyes… and through a silly spell that you couldn’t handle… you ruined them-!”

“Shut up-!” Leon hissed.

Macbeth tightened his grip on the prince, falling eerily silent.

“Are you afraid?” he asked, trying a different tactic.

Leon gritted his teeth.

“Not of you,” he seethed.

“You should be,” the sorcerer answered, tipping his head to press his mouth heavily over Leon’s.

The prince stiffened at the contact and magic bloomed across his skin, nearly suffocating him as it poured into his mouth, exploring him gingerly.

So this… is what it feels like…

His thoughts were blurring and Leon fought to stay conscious. What was Macbeth doing to him-?

This wasn’t some spell that Leon had ever encountered-, and he couldn’t even think about it rationally, not with it invading him as it was.

Leon sank lower until Macbeth was the only thing holding him upright.

I’ve been… so foolish…
For a moment, when the princess came flitting past Eir, she was surprised that Lady Aqua could be so small.

She frowned, watching the princess with interest.

“You’re not Odin but-,” she sighed and pushed off from her place against the wall, trailing Aqua.

“Leon, Leon-!” muttered the songstress, and Eir wondered if the Nohrian Prince had told her about their meeting.

A long braid hung down her back and Eir marvelled at the flowers in it.

She wondered suddenly if she were going to be reprimanded for her informality earlier; she hoped Prince Leon hadn’t told Aqua how improper she’d been.

‘It really isn’t my fault,’ Eir planned to say. She didn’t think much else beyond that, distracted when the princess ducked towards the library.

“Well, best to introduce myself,” she muttered, stumbling after the princess.

“Leon-!” yelled Takumi, throwing open the doors to the library.

His gaze fell immediately upon the knight and-,

“Y-you-, YOU!” he shouted, extending a trembling hand towards Macbeth.

The sorcerer released Leon for a moment and the knight shoved away from him, sputtering and sinking to one knee.

“Ah, the Hoshidan Prince-,” Macbeth greeted coolly, “you’ve kept me waiting.”

“Wh-what was-, what were you-,”

Takumi shook his head, still trying to work through what he’d just witnessed.

“Come here, let me show you,” Macbeth said, reaching out towards him.

“N-no-,” Leon choked out from his spot on the ground, “D-don’t-! Leave him out of this-,”

Macbeth paused, gaze sliding over to the knight.

“Still you disobey me, Leon?”

The Nohrian Prince pushed himself to a shaky stand and he raised his gaze, eyes burning with a humiliation that was quickly replaced with unrelenting rage.

“That’s ‘Prince Leon,’ to you, Ser,” Leon seethed, magic curling around his arms and forming into makeshift gauntlets over his knuckles.

“Oh? You wish to fight me?” Macbeth asked, seeming amused.
Leon growled at him.

“How dare you challenge me-!” the Nohrian Prince hissed, and raw magical energy dripped from his fingertips.

It hit the floor with a hiss and Takumi watched in fascination; he’d never seen such a display.

“Prince Takumi,” said Leon, not looking at him.

One of his hands was outstretched, as though he were expecting something.

Takumi glanced down and remembered the Brynhildr tome.

“Oh-,” he said, breathlessly, “right.”

He tossed the book towards the prince and it shot into Leon’s hand as if sensing its true wielder at last.

“Ah,” breathed Leon, and a weak grin danced across his face, “it’s nice to see you, Mein Schatz.”

Macbeth frowned, seeming displeased with Leon’s receiving of his divine weapon.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted you,” the knight breathed, grip on the tome tightening.

For a moment, Leon’s gaze slid to where Takumi stood in the doorway.

His silver hair was pulled back, a few strands of it loose and hanging down into his face. Flower petals—where had they come from?—settled around his feet and Leon wondered if perhaps he were an apparition; maybe Eir had been onto something earlier…

“Thank you,” Leon said regardless, voice scarcely more than a whisper.

Macbeth’s low laugh brought Leon’s attention back upon him.

The knight dropped into a defensive stance, watching the sorcerer cautiously.

“Come on then-!” Leon hissed, the Brynhildr pulsing dangerously in his grip, “show me what you can do, Ser-!”

***

Aqua closed the tome and got to a stand, tucking the book beneath her arm before offering her scarred hand to Kamui.

“Come on then,” she said, golden gaze bright with a renewed hope, “Leon should be able to perform a reversal spell.”

Kamui nodded, expression distant.

“Kamui,” said Aqua, squeezing his hand.

The dragon prince turned his attention upon her.
“Leon *is* the Greatest Mage in Nohr, isn’t he?”

Kamui blinked, and as the words registered, a small smile spread across his face.

“Yes!” he said with a nod.

Aqua smiled.

“Good,” she said, leading him from their chamber, “let’s see what he can do, shall we?”

“Right-!” Kamui whispered, squeezing her hand.

She closed her eyes and let out a small sigh.

“Thanks, Aqua,” said the prince after a moment, “thank you for everything.”

The songstress pinked and then shook her head, “It’s just what I do, really.”

“It means everything to me,” was Kamui’s answer.

Aqua patted his arm.

“Then let’s not keep him waiting.”

Macbeth leapt at Leon and slung a spell towards his chest in the same breath, a grin sweeping across his face.

Leon ducked and the sorcerer’s magic cut through the shoulder of his blouse, leaving a shallow cut across his milky skin.

“Damn-,” the knight swore with a grimace.

It had been too long since he’d had a proper fight with magic; it was always only ever swordplay with Marx.

He’d gotten rusty, and it showed.

Macbeth snapped and an array of spells sliced through the air, hurtling towards Leon. The knight brought up his free hand, summoning a bright lion-faced shield. It shattered when Macbeth’s magic hit it, but Leon himself was unharmed.

He relaxed for a moment and let out a heavy exhale.

*I’m not properly equipped... to deal with this right now...*

“I’ll get back into your head eventually, Leon,” Macbeth whispered.

Only the faint beads of sweat at his brow betrayed the way his magic was taking a toll on him. Leon, on the other hand, was breathing hard; he felt like retching.

That spell from earlier—the one Leon had never seen—whatever it had been, it had knocked him off his game.

“You can’t keep me out,” the sorcerer breathed.
Leon gritted his teeth and more magic dripped from his fingertips. He was so tired and yet the magic wouldn’t stop flowing, it was as though it was leaking from his very veins like some mystical life force.

*I’ll lose control of myself at this rate…*

And with the Brynhildr in hand… Leon had no idea what would happen.

*I need to finish this… quickly…*

A foreign magic raked up Macbeth’s arms and his sleeves went to ribbons beneath the energy.

“Wh-what is-,” Leon muttered, distracted by the plethora of colours gathering in the sorcerer’s palms.

“What kind of magic-?”

“To think that the Greatest Mage in Nohr has never seen #@$%^& magic… you truly are a disappointment, Leon.”

The prince bristled, hoping his anger would cover his confusion; what word has Macbeth just uttered?

*And why couldn’t I understand it?*

He frowned. Something wasn’t right. How could Macbeth have access to such a reservoir of power? And to sling spells that Leon had never seen-,

“This isn’t possible-,” the prince choked out.

Macbeth launched the spell at him and Leon raised his shield up once again, bringing it up a bit slower than before.

But the sorcerer’s spell fractured to pieces and Leon’s shield was rendered useless. He dodged at the last second as the shards of spell came arcing over his shield.

Leon rammed his shoulder roughly into one of the library’s tables to avoid being struck by the projectiles. The pain knocked him off balance and he let out a pained sound, furiously trying to regain a proper grip on himself. The Brynhildr hit the ground with a heavy thump and Leon swore colourfully.

“And now you, Hoshidan dog-,” Macbeth breathed, turning his attention slowly upon Takumi.

Leon sat up, shaking his head. Gods, he was so disoriented.

“T-Takumi-?” he choked out, realising that the prince was still present.

“Leon-!” Takumi hissed out, feet moving faster than his mind as he stumbled to cross the room to the Nohrian Prince.

The knight raised a hand as though that would be enough to stop the events from playing out in front of him.
“N-no-! Don’t turn your back-!” he shouted.

But it came out as only a broken whisper.

Macbeth’s fingers trailed through the ends of Takumi’s hair and Leon watched violet miasma shoot up through his thick braid.

“If I can’t have Leon-,” Macbeth whispered, “I’ll simply take you instead.”

Takumi slowed as Leon got to a shaky stand. The Brynhildr was pulsing with energy in the knight’s shaky grasp.

Prince Takumi…

Leon’s fingers graced the gem in the centre of his tome and he drew out her power. It curled comfortably in his palm as he wrapped his arm around Takumi.

“My apologies-,” he breathed into the Hoshidan Prince’s neck.

Takumi stiffened in confusion.

The magic in Leon’s hand shifted into a crude blade and the knight yanked it violently through Takumi’s hair, severing his braid and with it, Macbeth’s malicious magic.

Takumi’s braid hit the ground with the softest sound and he froze in Leon’s grasp.

Macbeth was readying another spell and Leon stepped away from Takumi, drawing the Brynhildr’s blade in front of himself.

As he regained his composure, the blade took on a more concrete shape until it was very clearly a sword.

This is…

Leon had seen his mother perform a similar spell with the Brynhildr once before, though she’d called forth a lance.

But… this isn’t Icespear… it’s more like…

“Iceblade,” he whispered, and the weapon pulsed in his hand as though it were alive.

“Yes,’ it seemed to say, recognising the name ‘yes, I am your Iceblade.’

The Brynhildr has given Leon a strange new power.

One that I can use to fight Macbeth…?

Just as Leon was preparing to launch himself towards the sorcerer, the door to the library came swinging open.

“Lady Aqua-!” hissed Eir, grey gaze landing on where Takumi had sunken to the floor, shell-shocked.

A lance hung loosely in her hand. Leon hoped she could make use of it.
“Lady Eir-!” Leon called, and as she was going to set her gaze upon him, she narrowed her eyes and swung her lance up, bracing herself.

Macbeth’s magic shot up the length of the weapon, shredding the sleeves of Eir’s uniform.

“Naga,” she swore, “and this was a comfortable outfit too…”

“Eir!” Leon chided, “now is really not the time!”

The mercenary sighed and spun her lance, still looking upset over her ruined uniform.

As Macbeth readied one last spell, both Eir and Leon launched themselves at him, drawing back their weapons.

Macbeth struck Eir with a spell across the face and she tumbled backwards, spitting blood across the door. Her lance flew from her hand and clanged against one of the bookshelves.

“Bastard-!” Leon seethed, bringing the Iceblade down and sinking it into the sorcerer’s shoulder.

Macbeth let out a yowl of pain as the sword sent raw ice magic down his arm and across his chest.

“Th-there will be… hell to pay-,” Macbeth sputtered, “if you kill me, Leon.”

“As much as I’d love to kill you,” Leon said with an air of mocking disappointment, “you’re beneath me. You’ve lost, Macbeth.”

The sorcerer gritted his teeth as ice crawled up the side of his face.

“Oh, and,” Leon grinned coldly at him, “that’s ‘Prince Leon’ to you, Ser. I am the Greatest Mage in all of Nohr. And you’re a fool to have ever thought otherwise.”

***

Leon went to Eir first, drawing her upright and looking down into her face.

“Eir,” he whispered, shaking her, “Eir.”

She stirred and shoved him away from her.

“Let go of me or I’m gonna hide a frog in your bed, Leon,” she mumbled, cracking open one eye.

Her ears twitched and Leon tried not to stare at them; did Kamui’s do that?

“Wh-what about Aqua-?” Eir whispered, sitting bolt upright and then getting to an unsteady stand.

“You’re bleeding,” said Leon, ignoring her and her nonsensical mutterings.

It was true. A long wound stretched across the side of Eir’s head and her snowy hair was matted with blood. Most of it was trailing down the side of her face.
“And also-,” said Leon, as Eir dropped to her knees beside Takumi.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered, “I was too late to protect you properly. I-, my name is Eir. It would be my pleasure, late as it is, if you would allow me to serve as your retainer.”

Takumi shook himself and then lifted a hand to the back of his neck, feeling his bare skin. His braid lay a few feet away, flower petals crushed beneath Macbeth’s magic.

“That’s not Aqua,” said Leon, squatting beside Eir.

She blinked owlishly at him, confusion skittering across her face.

“This is Prince Takumi of Hoshido,” Leon said tiredly, “he’s… visiting.”

Eir turned back to him.

“W-well-, well I can’t just take back a pledge so easily,” she said, uncomfortable.

“You’re no Hinata or Oboro,” Takumi whispered, raising his amber gaze slowly, “but…”

He took her right hand into his own and studied the back of it.

“But you have the Brand,” he breathed, remembering Owain’s arm and Azure’s eye.

Eir yanked her hand back and shielded it with her other one. There was a different brand on that hand.

She sighed hopelessly.

Leon was staring at the marks, fascinated.

“And so you’re like the others, huh?” Takumi finished.

“Have you seen-,”

“Odin?” said Takumi.

A faint smile graced his face. And then he nodded slowly.

“Yeah. He’s a real card. You must be-,”

He shook his head and trailed off, narrowing his eyes beneath Leon’s curious look.

Eir let out a small sigh in relief, glad her secret hadn’t been spilt.

“Leon-?”

Aqua and Kamui stood in the doorway, staring at the three of them.

“Broth-, er-, Kamui? Aqua?” Leon got to a stand and went to them.

Kamui took a step in front of Aqua, tail curling around the songstress’s leg.

“No closer,” Kamui whispered.
Aqua put a hand on the dragon prince’s arm, “It’s okay, Kamui. He’s alright now.”

Leon looked between the two of them wordlessly.

“Oh, that’s Aqua,” said Eir.

Takumi nodded, “Y-yeah, that’s her.”

“Takumi-!” Aqua whispered, golden gaze falling upon his braid.

“Y-yeah,” he said, looking up at her, “magical… misfire. Sort of.”

Leon gave him a surprised look, shocked that Takumi would play it off so innocently. Especially seeing as he’d appeared so shell-shocked earlier.

“It-, it’s all because of Macbeth,” Kamui said breathlessly, unable to keep the truth back any longer.

“Yeah,” retorted Takumi as Eir helped him to a stand, “we kinda figured that out already.”

“The spell…” Aqua leant over and whispered something into Leon’s ear.

He nodded solemnly.

“You should leave this place,” she said, directing her attention upon Takumi.

“Wh-what?” he whispered.

She nodded, “It’s safer that way.”

Takumi blinked, “But where would I-?”

“Cyrkensia,” breathed Eir, “you’ll be safe there. We can go together.”

“Take L-, take my brother with you,” said Kamui, clearing his throat, “come up with a reversal spell and then come back and fix all this.”

Leon blinked, staring at Kamui.

“Okay?” the dragon prince said.

Leon nodded slowly.

“Good,” said Kamui, stepping up to muss the knight’s hair, “there’s the Greatest Mage in all of Nohr.”

Leon pinked and Kamui smiled at him.

“Protect my other brother, alright?” said the dragon prince.

Leon glanced over at Takumi for a moment and then nodded again.

Kamui took Aqua’s hand and they both looked at where Macbeth lay unconscious.

“We’ll take care of this one,” Aqua said.
“Oh, one more thing,” said Takumi, “Marx and Camilla. They-, you’ll need to sing for them.”

He didn’t dare elaborate.

Aqua nodded in silent understanding.

“Come, Kamui and I already prepared a carriage for you,” Aqua said, leading the trio into the hallway.

“I’m coming with you,” said Eir, tugging on Takumi’s sleeve.

He blinked, surprised, and then nodded, “I-, I would appreciate that.”

“Lady Aqua,” said Eir, turning her attention upon the songstress, “I hope my-, I hope Freyja will serve you well. And I hope to serve Takumi just as well.”

The princess nodded once more, “A single retainer is more than I could have ever asked for, Eir. I should thank you for serving my brother.”

The mercenary pinked and nodded.

“Now then-,” said Aqua, turning back to the Leon and gesturing towards the main gate.

Their carriage was waiting beneath the setting sun; the day had been too wild and Leon was ready to sink into a much-needed sleep.

His shoulder was aching from where he’d struck it on the table in the library; it would bruise proper tomorrow, not to mention the cut Macbeth had made with his first spell.

The knight sighed.

As they stood there, Odin and Lazwald came trailing back into the fortress, mid-conversation.

They both went dead silent when they saw Eir.

“M-Marc-?” whispered Azure, her true name slipping out from between his lips before he could stop it.

Odin stood still, shell-shocked. Eir’s eyes widened and then her lance hit the cobblestone flooring with a heavy clang.

She sprinted at Odin and launched herself into the air. The sorcerer caught her with a grunt, spinning her in a circle.

Leon had never seen him smile so widely.

“I can’t believe you left me behind-!” she shouted at Odin, “Father would have wrung your neck! And you should have seen Mother’s face! She said she’d put frogs in your shoes the next time you snuck out!”

“Wh-what is-, Odin, you know this girl?” said Leon.
Odin turned his attention upon the prince and then nodded.

“Y-yes, My Lord. This is-,”

“We’re siblings,” said Eir, determined to keep up their newfound identities.

“Well, since you’re here,” said Leon, clearing his throat, “I’d very much like your company. I’m traveling to Cyrkensia with Prince Takumi and his new retainer.”

Odin stared down at Eir.

“You’re a retainer too?”

“You think I’d let you and Azure have all the fun? Don’t be silly.”

Eir shoved him and Odin laughed softly, unable to keep the glee from his face.

“Well,” said Lazwald, breaking the silence as usual, “I suppose you didn’t come alone now, did you?”

Eir shrugged, “Freyja’s around here somewhere with Elise.”

Lazwald nodded, “Luna will be thrilled.”

“Oh yeah,” said Takumi, “about that… you know the party tonight?”

“I guess you two aren’t coming,” Lazwald said, somewhat saddened.

“I asked Freyja to meet me on the rooftop patio,” said Takumi, “maybe you can give her my apologies for my lack in attendance.”

Lazwald nodded, grateful.

“Thank you,” he said, offering Takumi his hand.

The prince shook it and gave him a small smile.

“Make sure Luna sees her too, okay?”

“Naturally.”

Takumi straightened and turned back to Leon, Eir, and Odin.

“Are you three ready?”

“I doubt you’re the one who should be leading the charge,” said Eir with a wink.

Takumi moved to elbow her playfully. She stepped out of the way easily and collected her lance.

“Go now,” said Aqua, “Kamui and I will handle things here.”

Takumi and Leon nodded to her.

“Come up with a reversal spell while you’re out enjoying yourselves,” Kamui reminded with a small wave.
And then they went their separate ways.

***

“Prince Takumi-?”

Freyja stepped out cautiously onto the rooftop patio, mask propped up on her forehead.

The Parallel Falchion sat at her hip; she’d been expecting a fight.

There were two figures chatting near the wall and Freyja approached them carefully.

“Excuse me-,” she said, clearing her throat, “have either of you seen-,”

They turned to her and the rest of Freyja’s words died on her tongue.

“L-Lucina-?”

“Selena-?”

The redhead leapt at her and Lucina wrapped her arms around her, breathing in her smoky scent with a pleasant sigh.

“Selena, oh Selena-,”

“Luci, I never thought-, I-, what are you doing here?”

Azure folded his arms across his chest and simply smiled.

“Marc came too,” he supplied, “but she and Owain had to go on a mission with their lieges.”

“She’s serving Prince Takumi, apparently,” Azure said with a shrug.

Lucina sighed.

“Leave it to Marc to upturn every plan that isn’t her own.”

“Just like her father,” muttered Selena with a sigh.

Lucina laughed and embraced them both.

“I’ve missed you both so much,” she whispered.

“Just wait ‘til Owain and Marc get back,” Azure said with a small laugh, “Nohr won’t be big enough for the five of us.”

“I bet it won’t,” said Selena with a snort.

Lucina closed her eyes, remembering how distrusting she’d been of Takumi when he’d uttered Azure’s name. He’d really only been trying to help.
“Thank you,” she breathed, squeezing her friends closer.

Zero ducked under the frame of patio door, single eye gazing at the stars overhead. He’d hoped to see Prince Takumi this evening.

“Guess I came on too strong,” he breathed with a sigh, “had to go and scare him off.”

He closed his eye and let the raindrops slide down his cheeks. Such things usually made him feel so alive. But at this moment, all Zero felt was cold.

He shook his head and stepped back into the cover of the fortress’s corridor.

“Heya,” said a voice, shoving Zero from his pensiveness.

He blinked, surprised to find Kamui alone in the hallway.

“Lord Kamui,” the outlaw greeted, “what a surprise.”

“Were you crying?” the dragon prince asked, blunt as ever.

Zero snorted and tapped his eyepatch, “Only ever out of this eye, My Lord.”

Kamui’s tail dusted across the cobblestone flooring, the only evidence of his nervousness.

“Got something you wanna say?” asked Zero, leaning back against the wall.

“I don’t want to be alone,” said Kamui, “come read to me.”

The outlaw blinked and then the left corner of his mouth jerked upwards in the beginnings of a smile.

“You’re always so needy, Lord Kamui, don’t you have a cute servant to do that for you?”

“Only if you’re refusing.”

Zero pushed off from his place at the wall, “I make it a rule never to deny princes, Prince.”

“Good to know,” said Kamui, offering Zero his hand.

The outlaw took it, pressed a kiss to the prince’s knuckle, and then gestured.

“Shall we go?”

Kamui nodded, seeming pleased, “we shall.”

The rain had turned into a steady downpour when the carriage finally pulled away from the Northern Fortress.

Eir had laid her bandaged head on Odin’s shoulder, Branded hand clasped in Odin’s. He snored softly next to her, and Leon imagined he’d been hard at work training earlier.

Eir’s words returned to him and Leon wondered just how good Odin was with a sword. For him to display such powerful magic, he must’ve trained extensively before meeting the prince.
I had no idea…

It was impressive.

Leon’s gaze slid next to Takumi, who was slumbering against the window. He hadn’t spoken much to Leon as they’d hurriedly prepared to leave.

Leon lifted a hand to touch the prince’s hair, distracted by its sudden shortness.

Which I caused…

He’d done it to save Prince Takumi. Why?

Why, after all this time, would I save him?

Leon had spent nearly a month trying to force the Hoshidan into submission and yet—,

And yet I didn’t save him out of pity, or even with some future malicious intent…

Leon retracted his hand and instead sat his chin in his hand, staring out the window.

Gentle raindrops splattered across the glass frame and the knight sighed.

The Iceblade…

Leon could only wonder what other sorts of magic awaited him during his travels into Cyrkensia.

And what sort of spells Macbeth had conjured up earlier…

That word Leon hadn’t been able to understand…

What does any of this mean?

And why did Macbeth say that my magic wasn’t the only kind to distort memories—?

But Leon had a sneaking suspicion that he already knew; there were a few gaps in his memories.

If he could get Prince Takumi to open up for him, he was sure that the Hoshidan had the answers he was searching for.

But he already distrusts me as things are…

How am I to even begin trying to mend all that I’ve done?

Whatever that may have been… Leon had no idea.

Well. That’s a job for future me. I have a little while to figure things out and to create that reversal spell.

There was still plenty for Leon to learn. He could focus on getting answers later. For now, he really only wanted to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
Leon's pet name for the Brynhildr- "Mein Schatz"- is german for "my treasure."

Now, about that magic that macbeth used,,, i wonder what #@!!%^& magic could be,,, and why does it sound like static when i say it? (how are you doing that with your mouth macbeth)

pffft ahahahah ill fucking see yall in cyrkensia ;-)
The Prince and the Princess

Chapter Summary

Takumi and his closest allies have escaped to Cyrkensia, where they hope to recuperate and plan their next course of action to restore the Invisible Kingdom and prevent an all-out war. Leon struggles to recover from his duel with Macbeth and Takumi attempts to come to terms with having an ally in Nohr's Second Prince. Marc and Owain introduce a mutual friend.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while, sorry bout that. But I'm back now and I'm more determined than ever to give these kids a happy ending!

So without much more rambling, here's this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first few nights at the inn were tension-filled. Takumi elected to spend the majority of his time sleeping, and Leon had assumed that it was to avoid speaking to him.

Not that I can blame him.

Eir and Odin had volunteered to explore the busy streets of Cyrkensia while Leon recovered from his duel. As Takumi slept, the knight padded throughout their shared unit, moving from room to room in a daze.

Leon wasn't sure, exactly, what he was looking to accomplish through the motions, but he felt apprehensive in simply doing nothing.

*I need to get stronger. I should be training with Odin to hone my magic, not simply sitting around! This is a waste of my time*…

It was through his duel with Macbeth that Leon had gotten a brief glimpse of his full potential, only for it to drip out of control in the face of an adversary.

*I may have the Iceblade, but that does me no good if I don't have the means by which to control it*…

When he returned to their bedroom, Leon found Takumi awake, sitting with his back towards the door. The knight stood in the doorway for a moment, unsure of whether or not to voice his presence.

It felt strange to tip-toe around one another this way; it was driving Leon crazy.

He watched as Takumi lifted a hand and absently reached for a mass of hair that was no longer there.

The guilt over the display tightened uncomfortably in Leon’s chest.
Takumi reached over and traced the curving wood of his Fuujin Bow carefully. Leon was sure that he’d keep it in the damn bed with him if he could. But apparently the Hoshidan Prince had drawn the line there; perhaps he knew keeping his weapon in his bed was too outlandish, even for him.

“How long are you going to watch me?” Takumi asked, unmoving.

Realising that he was being addressed, Leon stumbled for a reply; how long had the prince known he’d been standing there?

“I’m not going to run, if that’s what you’re worried about,” the prince continued quietly.

They were closer to the border now. It would be so easy.

“That’s not-,”

“Save it,” Takumi said tiredly, getting to a stand and stalking across the room to push past Leon and into the kitchen.

The knight let out a slow sigh and turned to follow him.

It had been like this since they’d arrived; whatever camaraderie the pair had shared whilst in the library was gone now, buried beneath an awkward tension.

*It’s my fault.*

“What are you doing?” Leon asked, rounding the corner and stopping short when he saw Takumi slide the door to the patio open.

“I need some air,” was all the prince provided before tugging the door closed behind him.

It was a not-so-subtle message: “Don’t follow me.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose in irritation, Leon sank into a nearby chair.

Kamui’s words returned to him.

“*Come up with a reversal spell and then come back and fix all this.*”

Leon snorted at his brother’s unending naivety.

“I’ve ruined all of this, Kamui,” he muttered, “and you still want *me* to be the one to fix it?”

Marx was much better suited to the task.

***
“So when are you going to tell Leon the truth about yourself?” asked Eir casually as she and Odin settled at a café table.

They’d been cataloguing the city in hopes of aiding Takumi and Leon when the pair inevitably decided to take a day trip.

*Whenever that may be,* Eir thought but didn’t say.

Odin sputtered and then let out the smallest of self-conscious laughs.

“I-, I’m not sure,” he admitted, “I was going to tell him eventually. But… the time was never right. One thing led to another and so I just-,”

“Bullshit,” said Eir, interrupting her brother without an ounce of grace.

“I beg your-,”

“He trusts you, doesn’t he? Far more than he should, given that you’re practically living a lie right under his nose. But that’s beside the point. He trusts you, Owain. And he deserves the truth, don’t you think?”

“But if I were to tell him now-,”

Eir leant across the table and flicked him in the forehead. Odin winced.

“Surely you can sense it too, Owain. This unsettling energy in the air-,”

She paused, “I’ve seen the violet miasma that plagues the Northern Fortress. It’s familiar, isn’t it?”

“Like Father,” Odin whispered, “but-, but different somehow.”

Eir worried her pointed teeth against her lip.

“Whatever it is, it’s stirring up quite a bit of sinister magic. And if an all-out war erupts, there will be no way to stop it from spreading like the disease we know it to be.”

She glanced out the window, grey gaze sweeping across the people in the street.

A small, bare-footed village girl in a hood leapt over a particularly wide puddle in the street and threw her hands up in the air victoriously, proud of her accomplishment.

“The people of this world,” Eir said, “they’re unaware of it. And they won’t be ready if disaster strikes. We weren’t ready. And many people died because of it. *Mother* died because of it.”

Odin nodded wordlessly.

“We can’t let it happen again. Things are different now, Owain. Hydra warned us. We have the power to prevent this calamity.”

The sorcerer ran a hand through his hair with a low whistle.

Eir took a sip of her juice.

“Wow. This is very *fruity* for strawberry milk,” she muttered, sticking her tongue out.
“Thank you for effortlessly changing the subject,” Odin deadpanned.

“I don’t like talking about…” Eir motioned vaguely and took a noisy sip of her juice.

Odin smiled sheepishly.

“Alright,” he said, “Alright, you’re right, Marc. We’ll save everyone this time.”

Eir reached across the table and squeezed his hand, “Right.”

“I… guess I should tell Lord Leon the truth about us,” said Odin, brows coming together.

“No need to rush things,” Eir reassured, “but the sooner we start spilling secrets, the more answers we’re sure to uncover.”

***

Takumi settled on the edge of the patio fencing. A gentle breeze tickled the bare back of his neck and he shivered.

His thoughts returned, unbidden, to Leon’s duel with Macbeth.

“N-no-,” Leon had said, “D-don’t-! Leave him out of this-,”

He’d tried to keep Macbeth’s attention on himself.

“He… protected me…”

It hadn’t only been once, either. Leon had embraced him and apologised before severing his braid with a swift yank of his magical blade.

Macbeth’s malicious spell had been travelling through his hair; it would’ve seized his mind and turned him into a puppet.

That thought had been terrifying. It was stranger still that Prince Leon, of all people, had been the one to save Takumi from that fate.

One he might’ve known all too well...

It was something that Takumi had begun to suspect ever since he’d first laid eyes on Macbeth. And his duel with Leon had only confirmed the suspicion.

That sorcerer really has been terrorising me ever since I arrived in Nohr.

But even now, in knowing that Leon was not wholly in control of himself and his actions, Takumi was still unable to-,

“Lord Leon!!”
Odin’s voice rang out through their spacious unit at the inn and Takumi nearly fell from the fence, startled.

“Odin, Eir,” Leon greeted.

He was wearing an apron. Eir stared at him as he hastily shoved a feather duster into his pocket; the action did nothing to disguise the fact that he was still very much in possession of it.

“What’s all the commotion?” said Takumi, sliding open the door.

Eir jumped and let out a squeak in surprise before hurriedly smoothing her hair as though her outburst hadn’t happened.

Leon snorted at her.

“Oh, Takumi,” Odin said with a nod in greeting, “I’m glad to see that you’re well.”

“Yes, I slept well, thanks,” the prince answered, somewhat impatient, “is everything okay? You announced yourself rather loudly.”

Leon frowned, “I’m inclined to agree with Prince Takumi; has something happened?”

Takumi didn’t say anything to that; he wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about this newer, neutral side of Prince Leon.

*Best not to dwell on it; it won’t erase his actions or his status as an-, enemy prince.*

“There’s something we need to discuss,” Odin admitted.

Eir tiptoed around her brother and took Takumi by the arm, tugging him back out onto the patio.

“What are you doing?” asked Takumi as Eir leant against the fencing.

She let out a long sigh, “My brother has decided that now is the time for the truth; he’s going to tell Leon about us, and about our world.”

The prince blinked and then nodded, “That’s good. Prince Leon deserves the truth.”

Takumi wished he were just as lucky.

*The truth about my missing memories and Prince Leon’s behaviour would be very much appreciated. He’s not the only one who deserves some truth.*

But then again, some part of Takumi was frightened by the idea of it.

*Maybe it’s best to remain ignorant.*

The flash of Leon’s flushed face as Takumi perched between his thighs was still fresh in the prince’s mind.

*No, I-, don’t want to think about that now.*
“Still,” said Eir, turning her grey gaze upon him, “I’m surprised. You knew exactly what was going on when you saw my Brands in the library. I keep asking myself… why is that?”

Takumi looked out across the spacious field.

Some of the inn’s other patrons were having a picnic.

The innkeeper was perched on a stone at the entrance to Cyrkensia’s forest; they were playing an eerie tune on a small handheld instrument.

The melody was a gentle one and Takumi wondered if it was a foreign lullaby; he had the urge to crawl back into bed.

*I’d like to dream of Home, even if just once.*

Even if it made him unbearably sad.

But instead, the prince simply closed his eyes and took in the tune as he contemplated his reply.

“It was Azure who told me his name and introduced me to Owain,” he said, deciding it was best to simply start from the beginning.

That was true for most things.

“That was only a few weeks after I arrived. It was also around the time that the others detected Leon’s strange behaviour.”

The prince stopped, unsure as to why he’d mentioned that fact; surely Eir didn’t care for that sort of information.

She nodded regardless and Takumi continued.

“Selena filled in the gaps later on. The only reason I knew about you and Lucina was because they’d all mentioned you.”

When Takumi turned his attention back on Eir to gauge her reaction, he saw that her cheeks were dusted with blush.

The prince laughed softly.

“Although, to be honest,” he said, looking back out to the field, “I’ve only heard about the… tragedy. The war.”

Eir let out a bitter sound that might’ve been a laugh.

“Yes, well, that’s not so strange, is it? We ruined a few timelines trying to save the world. It’s sort of… unforgettable.”

Takumi looked at her, “Do you think you can save this one?”

“I’ll be damned if I think otherwise,” Eir said, expression hardening.

The prince nodded.
“I dunno,” she said, “I’m being a bit unfair. There were plenty of good things that happened too. It wasn’t always just ‘The War.’”

Eir’s expression softened and for a moment, she looked much older.

“Like, I got to see my parents fall in love. And I watched Mother develop all her strange quirks, and realised that she and Owain are a lot more similar than I thought. It’s so obvious that she’s the one who gave him all that charm.”

“What about you?”

Eir turned to look at Takumi, “Me?”

The innkeeper’s tune was growing distant and Takumi realised, with a pang of disappointment, that he missed the mystic melody. Eir began to hum, simply picking the song up where the innkeeper had left off.

But as Takumi was preparing to ask her about it, Eir spoke again.

“I think I always wanted to be more like Mother when I was younger,” she said with a small laugh, “but Owain had to go and snatch all her spunk. I just got the hand-me-downs, the stubbornness.”

Takumi smiled; it was funny to see Eir so readily admit to her biggest flaw.

“I’m more like Father, though,” she said, glancing down at her left hand.

The violet eye pattern of her Brand stared back up at her unblinking.

“I have his eye for battle tactics, sure,” Eir said, “but I’m also a graceless royal with retrograde amnesia. Not to mention all the other quirks he so graciously gifted me…”

Eir lifted a hand subconsciously to trace the cartilage of her pointed ear and she looked suddenly troubled.

Takumi was eager to change the subject.

“Though I’m definitely the best when it comes to magic,” Eir said quickly, brightening too quickly for it to be natural.

She seemed to finally settle on an emotion that wasn’t forced and put a hand to her chin, thinking.

“It does make me wonder about Owain’s skills with the sword, though. Maybe Uncle’s input really paid off in the end…”

Takumi settled on the edge of the fence with a contented sigh.

“What’s this?” asked Eir with a laugh, “don’t tell me I’m boring you, Lord Takumi. Shall I tell you a fairytale instead? I’ve learnt a lot of them-, even some Hoshidan tales-!”
The sudden use of his title reminded Takumi of Oboro and Hinata and he shook his head, determined to shake off the rising sadness.

“No, it’s not like that at all,” the prince reassured, “I like listening to you, that’s all. If you wanna tell me a story, that would be great too. But I’m gonna have to insist you drop the title, Princess.”

She laughed again and shoved him lightly.

“That’s fair. Takumi.”

“So, do I call you Marc now?” he asked, wondering if that sort of thing were suitable now.

It’s been kinda confusing having to correct myself-

Eir gave him a smile, “That is my name.”

“Marc, then,” said Takumi, returning the grin.

“Oh, speaking of marks,” said the flier, “do you wanna head into town later? Owain made a great map of the city.”

“I didn’t take your brother for the cartographer type,” said Takumi with a raised brow.

Marc shrugged, “His power works in mysterious ways.”

“Oh,” said Takumi, glancing over his shoulder when he heard movement within the unit, “it sounds like they’re finished.”

“I hope this whole truth thing helps you work out your business with Leon too,” Marc said honestly.

Takumi blinked, surprised.

“You guys have this… tense atmosphere about you,” she explained, straightening and pulling open the door.

“Tense… atmosphere?” Takumi echoed curiously as he followed her into the unit.

***

Leon was sitting alone in the kitchen. The feather duster sat on the counter in front of him.

Eir frowned and gave Takumi a helpless shrug before brushing past the knight in search of her brother.

“Hey,” said Takumi as he leant against the edge of the sink, unsure of what to do.

Leon nodded wordlessly in greeting; he didn’t look up. Takumi didn’t mind.

“Are you… okay?” the prince asked, watching Leon carefully.
Takumi realised in that moment, that he had no idea how to hold a normal conversation with Prince Leon.

The knight turned to look up at him from his place at one of the counter’s barstools.

“Why?” Leon asked simply.

The knight nearly elaborated with: “Why are you being so kind to me?”

It had been like that in his chamber too.

Even if he doesn’t remember… Even after I used him, he was still concerned for me then… and even now-,

Leon shook his head to dispel the rising thoughts; there was no point in analysing them here and now.

Takumi squinted at him.

‘Why?’ Why what? Is this guy really going to set me up for a riddle at a time like this?

“I don’t understand you at all, Prince Takumi,” Leon said, seeming to decide a bit of an elaboration was in order.

That makes two of us, Takumi thought but didn’t say.

“That’s unsurprising,” the prince said instead, “after all, you and I are fundamentally different.”

Despite their chilling similarities, Takumi could not deny the basic differences that separated them so totally.

“I suppose… that’s true,” Leon allowed.

The agreement seemed to strain him and it took all of Takumi’s strength to resist the urge to snort at such a childish behaviour.

“I’m-, forgive me for that,” the knight said suddenly, and Takumi squinted at him again.

“I don’t mean to antagonise you,” Leon continued, “but all this talk of foreign royals and travels from another world is-, it’s-, it’s a bit overwhelming. To say the least.”

Takumi could agree with him there.

“How long have you known? About Od-, about Owain?” the knight asked.

Genuine curiosity sat plainly in Leon’s chestnut eyes and Takumi was caught off-guard by it; it seemed so rare to see the ever-conniving Leon look so…

So what?

“A while,” Takumi supplied.

So docile.
Leon had spent the majority of his time furiously trying to dominate Takumi. That was no secret.

Each of the knight’s movements were meticulously planned out, each and every reaction prepared perfectly with a sound strategy.

_He’s usually so dangerous… but it’s almost as though…_

It was as though someone had yanked out his fangs and now, without his main measure of attack, Leon was simply a human again.

Even so, Takumi was uneasy.

_This feels like a setup, somehow._

“Who else knows?” Leon asked finally.

If he had noticed Takumi’s brief moment of inner contemplation, he made no comment on it.

“…the two of us,” Takumi said, “as well as the travellers themselves, I suppose.”

“So then the-, the _God_ of this-, this ‘Invisible Kingdom’ decided that our world needed only five children to stand as our saviours?”

Leon’s voice was tinged with bitterness and Takumi frowned at him.

“You’re kind of an idiot,” he said, the words out from between his lips before he could stop them.

Leon’s head snapped up at the statement and a brief flash of surprise danced across his face before he quickly schooled his features.

“Excuse me?” said the knight.

Takumi pushed off from his place against the sink and collected the feather duster, twisting it in his hands as he thought about his next words.

Back in Hoshido, he’d usually trace the lines of his wide sleeves or the curve of his bow. Without either of those now, the feather duster would have to do.

“For someone with such a sharp mind,” Takumi said finally, “you sure do love some genuine self-deprecation, Prince Leon.”

The knight frowned and confusion clouded his face.

Takumi shook his head, surprised that he could so clearly see a version of himself within Leon.

The similarity caught him off-guard once again.

_I’ll never get used to that-, how we can be so alike and yet so different at the same time._

“I’m confident that Hydra did not expect our friends to shoulder such a heavy burden alone.
No, don’t you think it makes more sense for them to assist us in saving our own world? Is it not obvious that they came here to guide us as we blindly struggle to mend the broken ties between our kingdoms?”

Leon said nothing.

Takumi tapped the feather duster against his open palm as more of the missing pieces fell into place in his mind.

“I don’t mean just Nohr and Hoshido, either,” he said, “I mean the Invisible Kingdom as well. Our ties with them have fallen into such dire disrepair that we can’t even remember our fellow faction.”

Leon was now visibly interested in what Takumi was saying; the prince tried not to be offended that it had taken this long for his interest to be piqued.

Selena’s words came back to Takumi quite suddenly.

“We’re just here to mend what’s broken.”

“Prince Leon,” the prince said, meeting Leon’s gaze steadily, “don’t you think it’s about time to mend what’s broken?”

***

Leon had not answered Takumi’s question head-on. Then again, it was quite the hefty invitation, and two princes of warring kingdoms couldn’t very well accept such a pact without some serious consideration.

“Are you ready?” Leon asked, standing awkwardly in the doorway of their shared chamber. He was fiddling with one of the ruffled sleeves of his blouse uncertainly.

Takumi smoothed the front of his tunic, taking one last slow turn in front of the mirror. He wasn’t the sort of man to wear leggings—they accented his body in ways he didn’t usually appreciate—but having a tunic draped across his form was a nice change in pace.

It’s breezy, perfect for the unpredictable weather here.

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” Takumi said, securing the Fuujin Bow over his back.

As he gripped the leather strap, the prince thought of Zero.

I hope he was alright at the get-together.

In the midst of Macbeth’s arrival and Aqua’s suggestion to escape to Cyrkensia, Takumi had failed to send word to Zero about his lack of attendance.

I have to remember to apologise to him when I see him again.

When Takumi shook himself and returned to the present, Leon was adjusting the satchel that hung
over his shoulder. Its contents were a mystery to Takumi, save for the Brynhildr Tome, which he knew Leon would not leave behind.

“I-, appreciate you having tidied up,” said Takumi as Leon locked up their unit.

It was now that he felt minutely guilty for evading Leon’s company in favour of sleep he didn’t need.

*It’s unfair of me to pretend he’s the only one being childish here…*

Marc and Owain had gone ahead into town and assured the princes that they would be sure to meet at The Sleeping Goat, the innkeeper’s private residence.

*Though, if it’s private, I have no idea how we’re going to go about meeting Marc and Owain there…*

That was a problem for the future, however.

“I’m not keen on letting a mess build up while we stay here,” Leon supplied, seeming to shrug off Takumi’s thanks.

The prince nodded, matching Leon’s pace as they headed down the cobblestone trail towards Cyrkensia.

“Are the people of your kingdom kind?” Leon asked suddenly, and Takumi blinked, surprised by the knight’s uncharacteristically gentle approach.

But, after a moment, he relaxed—deciding Leon’s curiosity was no threat—and nodded.

“Yes,” Takumi said, “my mother loved her people. I think the people knew that, and so they loved her in return. She protected them and the people wanted to protect her.”

He went quiet for a turn, expecting Leon to reply. When the knight said nothing, Takumi continued.

“Hoshido achieved all that it did only through the relationship the people shared with us and with each other.”

“But Kamui’s arrival changed that,” said Leon, seeming keen on turning the conversation elsewhere.

To where, exactly, Takumi could only guess.

“Yes, but no,“ the prince said, “it’s true that the people were surprised by the sudden return of their missing prince. Hell, even *we* were surprised, and we’re his blood.”

Takumi ran a fingernail up and down the Fuujin Bow’s leather strap across his chest.

“Mother’s death brought with it many changes. Our kingdom seemed peaceful beneath her barrier but once it was gone, the people turned on one another. And on us.”

Takumi thought of how his people had been so quick to ostracise Aqua and insist she be a Nohrian
“And then, with-, with my brother-, that only worsened things.”

Leon frowned.

“I don’t know what you think Hoshido is like,” Takumi said, “but it isn’t as gentle a place as one may believe.”

_Or as I once believed._

Takumi uncurled Owain’s map quickly, eager to move onto something else, leaving Leon to his thoughts.

“Oh,” the prince said, “it looks like if we follow this path through town, we’ll get there.”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Leon said, sounding genuine.

Takumi snuck a look at him from the corner of his eye.

The knight looked frustrated, but Takumi figured the frustration was aimed more at himself than anyone else.

“I keep getting these flashes,” Leon said, slowing his pace, “these memories that can’t possibly be my own.”

Takumi pinked, remembering the memories Leon had seen when he’d first arrived in Nohr.

“There’s this… little girl,” the knight said, and Takumi turned to stare at him.

_A little girl?- He only wanted my memories of Ryouma, though, right?_

“She’s shy and nervous most of the time; hardly speaks a word. But sometimes, in some memories she’s laughing. She’ll get this determined look on her face as she takes up her bow. She’ll raise it slowly, with a quiet strength, and whisper: ‘Deep breath. Become one with the bow. Pray to the winds to guide you-,”

“Now,” Takumi whispered, and the Fuujin Bow lit up brightly across his back, registering their shared chant with ease.

It was Leon’s turn to stare.

“Yes,” said Takumi, remembering for himself, “that would be my younger sister.”

It wasn’t that Takumi didn’t like Leon having memories of Sakura, it was more the impossibility of it that had shaken him.

_How can he know so much about her despite me never showing him any of those memories?_

It made no sense!

“She cares deeply for you,” Leon said.
Takumi blinked; he hadn’t been sure what he was expecting the knight to say, but that was not it.

“It’s only natural,” the prince said, uncomfortable, “she’s my sister after all.”

“Is that really all it takes?” Leon mused.

Then, seeming to realise he’d spoken his thoughts aloud, pinked and hurried to turn attention elsewhere.

_He says that like he doesn’t know. But I know for a fact that his siblings love him._

Or, Takumi suspected, Marx did, at least.

_If those memories I’ve got of them are any indication…_

“Why did we come out here, anyway?” Leon asked finally.

He’d sidled up closer to Takumi as the streets became busier. The prince was grateful for that, but would never say.

“Because that’s what you do in a city like this,” said Takumi, as though it had been obvious, “you explore, you indulge, you do a bit of merrymaking.”

“You are the last person I expected to hear that from,” said Leon with brutal honesty.

Takumi let out a sigh.

“I know,” he said, “but this city is full of nice memories for me; I came here often with my siblings.”

It was true. And it was precisely because of his siblings that Takumi was even able to come to such a place to begin with.

_If not for them, I would’ve never seen a place as bustling as Cyrkensia._

“But also,” said Takumi, slowing when they reached a particular storefront, “I’m looking for something.”

“A pair of shoes?” Leon asked, following the prince’s gaze through the glass window.

“Yeah,” Takumi replied softly, eyes flickering to each display.

Seeming dissatisfied, he turned to leave but Leon caught him by the arm.

“What, is that it then? We’re just going to go?”

Takumi frowned, “What do you mean? Yeah, they don’t have what I want.”

“Don’t you want to look inside?” Leon asked, perplexed.

Surely the selection inside was wider and-

“No,” said Takumi, looking away, “I’d rather not.”
Leon tightened his grip, “I’ll go in with you, if that’s what you’re worried about. If it’s too busy inside, we can go somewhere else. But if you’re anxious about going alone, don’t be.”

The knight nearly added: “I’ll be right by your side.” But that sounded too intimate and given all the things Leon had done, *Heben* spell or not, he couldn’t push the phrase past his lips.

“Okay,” said Takumi.

It was easier to say that than to say anything else, let alone what he really wanted to say.

*How can he be this way? After all the cruelty he’s shown me, it’s as though Prince Leon is now a completely different person…*

The prince was unsure of what to think about that.

Was it just a complicated game? Leon would ease them into a friendship, gain Takumi’s trust, before tearing into him like the poisonous prince he truly was?

*Is this a trick or is it genuine? I can never decide…!*

***

“Do you really think they’re going to be okay?” Owain asked, shifting uncertainly in the armchair.

Marc snorted, “They’ll be fine. Have a bit of faith in those princes. And stop squirming, I’m uncomfortable just *watching* you.”

Owain pouted and manoeuvred into a new position across the arms of the leather.

They were presently perched in the sitting room of The Sleeping Goat.

“Lady Marc, Lord Owain, it’s rare to be visited by members of House Ylisse.”

It was the gentle innkeeper, who had returned from their walk through the forest.

“Heya, Frey,” Marc greeted easily, “good to see you.”

“Likewise,” Frey returned, setting down a tray between them.

“Oh, yeah! It’s milk-honey tea!” Marc whispered, grey eyes bright, “you always prepare the perfect blends.”

She eagerly snatched up a teacup and took a big sip.

“That’s hot,” Frey warned, too late.

Marc stuck out her tongue and then frowned at them, “You could’ve told me sooner.”
“You need to work on that patience of yours,” Frey supplied with a teasing grin.

Owain cracked a smile and Marc rolled her eyes in mock disapproval.

“Teas aside,” said Frey, “what are the two of you doing here? I do recall having said I’d come to you.”

Marc pulled her legs up to her chest and balanced her teacup between her knees.

“Yes, well,” she said, expression serious, “it seems your lessons will have to wait, O Glorious Mentor. I saw a little something that doesn’t make much sense.”

Frey’s expression went sour as Marc explained her run-in with Macbeth in the Northern Fortress’s library.

“That should be very well impossible, Lady Marc. Only the two children of Valla should be able to read Vallite texts and speak their spells.”

“What if Macbeth has a jynxpiece?” Owain asked as he watched Frey return their handheld instrument to its proper place.

“Oh, that’s a good point,” said Marc, turning to look at the innkeeper, “say Macbeth has one—an heirloom, maybe?—then he could just look through it and read the spells, right? No Vallite blood necessary!”

Frey frowned, “Yes, but those are rare. In all my travels, I’ve only found the one.”

Subconsciously, the innkeeper lifted a hand to touch the ringed pendant that hung low from around their neck. The stone was a startling blue hue and glowed faintly at Frey’s touch.

“Godfrey!” came a shout from just beyond the sitting room.

Frey leapt up, startled, and Marc nearly spilt her tea across her brother’s shirtfront.

“Golden coin of my heart! Where are you my precious specimen? I’ve found the most darling tome for you! And you won’t believe how much I paid for it; it was a real steal!”

“Anna?” said Owain.

“Anna,” Frey agreed.

As if on cue, the merchant emerged, dropping a sack of gold at the entryway.

“How has my angel held up in my brief but necessary absence?” Anna asked, glancing over her shoulder at Frey as she pawed through her newly-acquired wares.

“We sold all the rooms,” the innkeeper deadpanned.

“All of them?” said Anna, dubious.
“All of them.”

There was a beat of silence where Anna and Frey wordlessly engaged in an intense staring contest.

Owain snorted and Marc giggled, “They’re messing with ya,” Miss Anna. Cyrkensia’s busy, but it’s not that busy.”

The merchant shook her head and sighed, “I knew it was too good to be true!”

“Tell me about this book you found,” said Frey, extending their pale hands and making grabbing motions eagerly.

Anna grinned and lifted the volume victoriously, “Ta-da! One legendary tome straight from my sister all the way in Askr!”

“Askrl” echoed Marc and Owain.

Anna cleared her throat, “Forget you heard that. You two really need to slow down when it comes to messing with timelines other than your own.”

“We didn’t ask to be brought here,” Marc reminded her, peeking over Frey’s shoulder at the text.

“Sis said that mages of a certain calibre can read this, regardless of whether or not they have a jynxpiece,” Anna supplied, seeming proud of her new acquisition.

“Can you read it, Marc?” Frey asked, stepping aside and gesturing.

Marc smoothed the front of her blouse and puffed out her chest.

“I’ll give it a go!” she said, ducking down and squinting at the words.

***

It wasn’t as though the shopkeeper was leering. She wasn’t. Not really.

Leon was sure it was just his imagina-,

“Takumi,” he said, linking his arm with the prince’s, “do any of these catch your fancy?”

*It’s all in my head. This prince says a few revolutionary statements and then suddenly I can’t think straight.*

Takumi went beet-red, startled by Leon’s uncharacteristically affectionate display.

“Wh-what? No, they’re not really the right-,” he glanced around, surveying the inventory, “not the right colour. I’m looking for something a little more-, like that-!”

He snatched up a pair and gestured to them. They were the colour of a pale rose.

*I have no idea why he wants fanciful sandals like those. But if they make him happy then I guess it*
doesn’t matter how strange his tastes may be.

The shopkeep smiled graciously at Takumi as he met her at the shop’s register.

“While these sandals are certainly attractive,” she said, accepting the gold from Leon while she watched Takumi, “we have a few… finer cuts in the back. If you’d… like to observe?”

Her phrasing was… wrong. And that look in her eyes was…

No. No. No no no no. No! That’s not-, she couldn’t be-, there’s no way-,

Takumi seemed interested in what she had to say. Leon couldn’t have that.

We have to get out of here. Gods, I knew something was wrong-!

He closed his eyes and squeezed Takumi’s arm, shooting a weak spell into his skin. The prince tottered unsteadily and Leon took the opportunity to put his arm around Takumi’s middle.

“Are you feeling alright?” the knight asked, guilt blooming in his chest.

Takumi bit his lip and laughed it off nervously.

“You know, I think I just need to rest for a bit. A sudden bout of dizziness, that’s all.”

“Oh, well if you’re in dire need-,” the shopkeep began.

Leon lifted his free hand to halt her, “that’s generous of you but our lodge is just down the street. Thanks for the shoes.”

She smiled—it was a bit too tight to be natural—and watched as they exited.

Leon felt the daggers of her gaze between his shoulder blades as they hurried out of view and into a nearby alleyway.

“Takumi-,” he began, already readying an explanation.

The prince shoved away from him, fear and anger mingling in his eyes.

“What did you do to me?” he asked, tone carefully even; he’d learnt to control his fear since the last time this had happened.

Having said that, Takumi wasn’t looking forward to a repeat of the previous schemes Leon had used on him.

Especially since Marx isn’t around to give me a gentle antidote.

At that thought, the prince nearly slapped himself, embarrassed for having had it in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” said Leon, and he meant it.

Takumi recovered but didn’t move.

“She wasn’t-, you were being deceived,” Leon said.
And then he stopped. That was the truth.

“I-, I don’t understand-,”

“It’s one of Macbeth’s ploys. He’s here, in the city.”

Takumi bristled, “How?”

“He-, I don’t-, I’m not sure. But we have to find Owain and Marc. If Macbeth has them, then-,”

Well… if Leon’s spell was just to get us out of a tight spot, then…

Leon had trailed off and the Brynhildr Tome hummed to life in the satchel at his side, seeming to sense his growing rage.

“Okay, okay,” said Takumi, setting a calming hand on Leon’s arm, “we’ll go find them. Alright, Leon? We’ll find them.”

The knight nodded wordlessly and Takumi took his hand.

He wasn’t sure what had happened to Leon in that brief time, but he was clearly wrestling with some unseen issue; the duel with Macbeth might’ve had worse repercussions than he’d initially thought.

Unsure of how to help, Takumi simply decided that regrouping would be best.

We’ll figure this out together.

***

After what felt like a long silence, Marc finally sighed and let her forehead fall against the pages.

“I can’t read it,” she mumbled into the ink.

Owain frowned and Frey looked to Anna for help.

“There were only a handful of mages in-, uh-,” she looked at Marc and Owain again, unsure of whether talking about another world was a good idea.

“Only a few could read the text without a jynxpiece.”

“What does it say?” Frey asked.

Anna tapped her chin for a moment, “They only said that it was a book of spells. Whatever it contains was of no interest to them. That’s why Sis let me grab it for such a bargain.”

Marc sighed into the book again as Anna headed into another room to stash her remaining newly-acquired artefacts.

“I’m a magical failure,” the flier whined, only half-joking.

Owain patted her on the head, “If it makes you feel any better, Dad probably couldn’t read it either.”
“Wait, hang on, hold up, everybody stop,” said Marc, sitting bolt upright and spinning to stare up at her brother.

He lifted a brow in silent question.

“Leon could probably read it, right? I mean, ‘Greatest Mage in Nohr’ and all that?”

Owain took a moment to think about it and then nodded, “I-, I suppose it’s possible. He and Takumi should be by at any moment.”

“Gods be damned,” Takumi swore, turning the map upside down in his hands, “we got turned around somewhere.”

Leon hissed and pointed, “That’s fine. Let’s just find a main road and head to The Sleeping Goat from there.”

The knight didn’t seem nearly as rattled as he had earlier, which was a relief. But Takumi was still unconvinced; something was still… wrong.

The Brynhildr Tome continued humming from within Leon’s satchel and every so often, the knight would pat the bag reassuringly, as though to calm the tome and himself.

*Does he know that I can hear it too?*

Sometimes the hum changed pitch, as though the Brynhildr were producing a very slow song. It chilled Takumi to his core, but he decided not to mention it, fearing it would upset Leon further.

*That’s right, I need him to be calm and collected. He’s got a great mind but it’ll be useless if he can’t pull himself together.*

Takumi remembered the way Leon had gone to pieces in his duel with Macbeth; it was something he wanted to avoid in the future.

“Oh, there should be a main road coming up right here,” Takumi said, only glancing up from the map when they made it out of the winding alleyway.

They’d ended up near the theatre. Ryouma and the others had always encouraged Aqua to try her hand up on the stage but she’d adamantly refused, embarrassed.

Takumi smiled a bit at the memory.

Another one came to mind as he realised that he’d subconsciously walked in the direction of their old family meeting spot.

“If we get separated,” Ryouma had said, “we meet back here by sundown. Remember:-;”


Sure enough, the giant stone slab was just as it always was. It had a giant arc cut into it, which was why Hinoka had affectionately deemed it ‘the smiling rock’ in the first place.

As Takumi studied it, he realised with icy horror that he knew the people who were gathered by it.
“Ryouma-?” he breathed.

***

Had it not been for Leon, Takumi would’ve collapsed from the sheer shock of it all.

“Prince Takumi-?” Leon whispered, strength unwavering as he pulled the prince to a proper stand.

“It-it’s my-, that’s my brother,” Takumi said dumbly.

He was here. Ryouma, whom Takumi so loved, was standing right in front of him.

The High Prince surveyed the area and Takumi felt hope bloom in his chest. Ryouma could take him back to Hoshido!

*Finally, finally! I can go home! Ryouma! And Hinoka! And-,*

“But why are they at the Smiling Rock if-,”

“Oh sweet Dawn Dragon above,” Takumi swore as realisation struck him square in the chest, “they’ve lost Sakura.”

***

“No worries, we can walk together, okay? At least until you can find your family.”

“Lady Elise!”

The princess patted her newfound companion’s hand and turned, expression brightening when she caught sight of Harold and Elfy, who were hurrying to her side.

With them present, the princess felt comfortable enough to toss back her hood, loose blonde curls spilling down her back.

“Hey, you two! This is Sakura! She’s from Hoshido and she’s gonna stick with us for a bit!”

Harold and Elfy looked at each other for a moment before nodding.

“Perhaps you might consider taking a break soon, My Lady,” Elfy suggested, “although I could also carry the both of you if you’d prefer that instead.”

“Oh my,” said Sakura, blinking, “that is certainly-,”

“Nah, we’re okay!” Elise said with a smile, “but you’re right, Elfy, I should probably have a sit. My feet’ll hurt real bad if I keep this up.”
“If My Lady requires a massage, all she must do is say,” Harold provided with one of his winning smiles.

Sakura hid a giggle behind her wide sleeve and Elise laughed, the sound bouncing pleasantly off the buildings around them.

“No, no,” she said, “but thanks anyway, Harold! I was wondering though, if you and Elfy have a moment, can you find us a private place to rest for a bit? Sakura’s looking for her company but a bit of tea might be nice for the both of us.”

“Sure thing,” Elfy said, nodding to Elise before walking off, Harold hurrying to match her brisk pace.

“I didn’t meant to startle you too badly,” Elise said quickly, “I just-, your dress looks kinda like mine so I got really excited!”

Sakura blinked and then nodded, “Y-yes, your kimono is very lovely. My sister had one very much like it. It-, it suits you.”

She reached out and traced the cuff of the sleeve carefully.

Elise blinked.

For a moment, Sakura almost reminded her of-,

“S-sorry!” the priestess whispered, catching Elise staring, “I didn’t mean to touch it so casually-, it’s just that-,”

“Hey, Sakura?” asked Elise, expression uncharacteristically serious.

Sakura worried at her own sleeve, shifting the fabric between her fingers; the strip she was toying with was worn from where she’d practiced the motion in the past.

“Y-yes?”

“Are you a princess?”

***

There was a knock at the door and Marc leapt to her feet, “Behold! Our long-awaited friends arrive at last!”

Frey turned to look for Anna but she was nowhere in sight. From beyond the sitting room, her lofty voice carried: “Can you take care of that, Angel? I’ve gotta find someplace to put all this new inventory!”

With a sigh, the innkeeper got to a slow stand and made their way over to the door, pulling it wide open with a great effort.

“Prince Takumi and Prince-,” they stopped short, realising that the people before them could not
“Hail and well-met!” said the man with a wide bow, “my charge is hoping to settle down for a tea time in a fine establishment such as this!”

“Do you think that’s possible?” asked the woman with him, seeming unaffected by her companion’s gusto.

Marc and Owain looked at one another and hurried to Frey’s side.

“Harold? Elfy? What are you two doing here?” said Marc, blinking in surprise.

“Ah, Odin Dark! Eir of the Skies! It’s a pleasure to see you both!” Harold returned, crow’s feet making themselves visible as he smiled widely at them.

Frey looked between the four of them for a moment.

“Y-you’re acquaintances then?”

Marc shot them a sympathetic smile, “Sorry, Frey. These are Princess Elise’s retainers: Harold and Elfy of Nohr.”

The innkeeper nodded, “I see. Well, if your princess desires a place for tea, I think this is as fine a place as any.”

“Great,” said Elfy with a satisfied nod.

“We shall fetch her post-haste!” Harold announced, turning on heel and heading back the direction in which he came.

Elfy nodded again in thanks, assuring Frey and the others that she’d return shortly with her little liege.

“Wh-what are you-, where are we going, Takumi?” Leon asked, hurrying to catch up with the prince.

“My sister,” he said, “my sister’s gone. We have to find her. The sun will set soon.”

“What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.”

Takumi shoved the knight up against one of the buildings, knuckles going white as he clenched the fabric of Leon’s blouse in his fists.

He had lost his patience.

“My family is here, in Cyrkensia. I saw them. But my younger sister wasn’t with them. Which means she’s alone. In this great big bustling city. And I have to find her. And I have to hurry. Because I’m running out of time.”


“Prince Leon, that really isn’t helping me,” Takumi hissed, releasing him with a shove.

Leon grabbed him by the wrist.
“You don’t have to do this alone! Gods, Takumi, how ignorant can you be? You’re surrounded by all these people who care about you and still you turn them away! Why? Why?!”

He stopped only to suck in a ragged breath before marching on: “Your elder brother so obviously loves you, as did your mother, and even your younger sister, whom you’re so desperately searching for! She worries that she’s been a burden to you by asking for your help with her training! All this and still you refuse their love?”

Leon was no longer concerned with keeping his voice down.

Takumi had never seen him so heated about anything, save perhaps his duel with Macbeth.

Why is he so suddenly-?

“Do you have any idea how lucky you’ve been? You’re so blessed to have such a loving family! People who desire to see you well—they want you to succeed and to be seen for what you are! They’re not like me, not like my family, nothing like Nohrians at all!!”

The prince took a step back, eyes widening as tears took form in Leon’s chestnut eyes.

“I’ve lived a life of schemes and betrayal, Takumi! I’ve watched countless of my siblings kill one another at the behest of their parents, all for my father’s attention! Murder all for the chance to get a quick turn with a broken man! I don’t know the definition of family, Takumi! The family I have are the scattered remains of what they once were, what they could’ve been!”

Leon grabbed him and pushed him against the opposite building.

He was exasperated and angry and tired. The ghost of his mother, the duel with Macbeth, all of it was finally beginning to take a toll.

“My brother, crippled beneath the weight of the crown! My sister, scarred by the hatred of our siblings! Elise, her mother’s biggest mistake! And me! Nohr has shattered us, Takumi!"

“I-, I’m-, that’s-,”

Takumi had nothing.

There wasn’t anything to say. And if there were, he certainly had no idea how to voice it.

“For the love of the First Dragons, would you let someone help you for once?!”

And then he was done.

Leon turned on heel. And he walked away.

Takumi was motionless, staring at the spot that Leon had previously occupied only moments prior.

“Nohr has shattered us.”

“W-wait-,” he whispered, “Prince Leon, wait!”

He hurried to the knight’s side, breaths coming hard.

“Wh-what are you-, where are we going, Prince Leon?”
He had to say that.

Takumi couldn’t ask the true questions that bubbled up in his heart, threatening to suffocate him.

‘Why did you tell me that?’ ‘What happened to you and the others?’ ‘What did you mean when you called your father ‘a broken man?’’

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Leon with renewed strength, “we’re gonna find your sister. But first, we’re gonna get some help.”

And he unrolled Owain’s map.

***

Over the course of only a few hours, The Sleeping Goat had become a bustling home once more.

It was generally only ever occupied by Anna and her evening guests, with Frey in and out as they were.

“My ‘reception desk,’ if you will,” she’d said with a wink.

However, this evening, it seemed restored to its former glory, acting as the safe haven for Nohrians and Hoshidans alike.

Elise, accompanied by Sakura as well as Harold and Elfy, was pleased to find herself hosting the smallest of tea parties in Anna’s tea room.

Periodically, Frey and Marc would sneak in to snatch a few pastries.

“Oh, oh, try this one, Sakura!” Elise said, handing the princess the smallest of cakes.

Sakura nodded and cupped her hands, popping the sweet into her mouth with a pleased sound.

Elise had discarded her cloak and Sakura had put the Nohrian’s hair up in the traditional style of her homeland.

“You can borrow my hairpin,” the princess said, slipping the metal piece into Elise’s hair easily, “it was a gift from my brother.”

“From Takumi?” Elise asked before she could stop herself.

“Actually,” said Sakura, pinking, “it was from Kamui. We were only really together for a bit, but… I’ll always treasure it.”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t keep it then?”

Sakura shook her head with a pleased look, “No, great things should be shared. Besides, I’m sure my brother would be glad to know that we’ve met.”
“And that we’re friends!” Elise said.

Sakura looked at her, wide-eyed.

“I mean, we are friends, aren’t we?”

After a moment, the Hoshidan Princess nodded, “I-, y-yes, I’d really like that. If we could be friends, I mean. That’d be nice.”

“Why are you helping me?” Takumi asked as he trailed Leon through the emptying streets.

“Do I need a reason?” was Leon’s quick reply.

The prince frowned, “You’ve changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we first met,” Takumi provided, “you were-, just-, different.”

He wasn’t sure how else to put it. This was still obviously the same Leon—equally as commanding and demanding and stubborn—and yet somehow not the same simultaneously.

“It would be easy to blame it on the Heben spell that Macbeth has been using to manipulate me into doing unspeakable things to you,” Leon said, “but the Heben is, at its core, just an amplifier.”

Takumi watched the knight out of the corner of his eye curiously.

“I suppose what I’m saying is that all of those feelings—that hatred and disgust—those were all very real. The only thing that Macbeth is guilty of is using the Heben to force my hand against you.”

“Can you truly hate a stranger?” Takumi asked.

Leon looked at him, “Can you?”

Takumi remembered how he’d insisted that Kamui was a Nohrian spy.

He’s right.

In realising that, Takumi wondered if he was just as good a candidate for the Heben spell.

Is that why that sorcerer made a grab for me earlier?—

“I think I’ve hated the idea of you and your people for a long time,” said Leon, drawing Takumi back into the present, “because that’s what I’ve been conditioned to think. I’m sure your situation is similar. After all, your queen had to constantly maintain a barrier for the sake of your people’s peace in the face of our conquest against you.”

That was also true.

“Even so-,” said Takumi.

“It’s actually quite selfish,” Leon said, “the reason that I’m helping you, that is.”
The prince was quiet, hoping for some elaboration.

“Those memories that I have of your sister—your memories, truly—speak to a nostalgia I’ve never had the pleasure of experiencing.”

Leon was wearing a bittersweet smile as they paced.

“I don’t want your sister to be poisoned. I feel that something dark has lifted its head in Nohr as of late. And I don’t want anyone else caught in its wide maw.”

Takumi nodded, understanding the sentiment totally.

“I’ve already tainted you,” Leon admitted, “and there’s no erasing that fact, just like there’s no erasing the actions I’ve taken against you. I know you still have questions. Both you and I have gaps in our memories.”

Takumi blinked, surprised; he had not expected Leon to be confused.

But then again, as he recalled Leon’s shock at the use of a disarming spell, perhaps Takumi should’ve expected this after all.

“When we get the thing with your sister sorted, and when we regroup with Marc and Owain, then you and I need to figure this out.”

Takumi frowned, “That’s all well and good, but how exactly do you plan to do that?”

“I know you don’t trust my magic,” Leon said, “and I don’t blame you for that; I’ve used it to cause you immeasurable pain. But there is an old spell we can use. If you’re willing. It’s by no means a requirement. Though it would certainly speed up the process.”

“The process?” Takumi echoed.

“Of uncovering the truth,” Leon supplied steadily.

Marc’s words came back to Takumi suddenly.

“I hope this whole truth thing helps you work out your business with Leon too.”

She was one wicked wizard after all, Takumi thought.

***

When they finally arrived at The Sleeping Goat, Takumi was swatting at Leon with Owain’s map, annoyed that the knight had used the edge of his tunic as a handkerchief.

“It’s not my fault you’re sweating all over the place! Why didn’t you think to pack your own? What the hell else was so important to put in that bag of yours that you couldn’t pack a single hankie?”

Leon lifted his sleeve and dragged it across his forehead with a pout, refusing to honour Takumi with a proper answer.
“Gross,” said Takumi as he raised the brass knocker on the door.

After a beat of unsettling silence, the door swung open and the innkeeper from earlier, albeit a bit tipsier, greeted them with an enigmatic smile.

They nearly sloshed their remaining wine into the floor, but managed to steady their hand in time.

Leon looked at Takumi. Takumi looked back at him.

“We’re here for Marc and Owain,” Takumi said.

“Ah, yes,” said the innkeeper, “the Lord and Lady of House Ylisse. You must be the princes, Leo and Takumi.”

“Actually it’s ‘Leon-,'” Leon began, but then decided to drop it.

Frey welcomed them inside, shutting the door against the rising darkness.

“I’m Godfrey,” Frey provided smoothly, and Takumi wondered if the tipsy attitude was just a front, “the innkeeper. Sort of. Technically my wife does all the business, but-,”

They shrugged and gestured, “Your friends met up with some other friends and now they’re busy... what’s the word... ‘merrymaking?’”

Takumi shot Leon a look as if to say: “What’d I tell you? This is a city of merrymaking!”

Leon rolled his eyes with mock annoyance.

“We’re actually in a bit of a hurry,” Leon said, “we’re looking for someone and we needed Marc and Owain’s help.”

Frey studied them quietly for a moment and set down their wine glass.

“I don’t mean to impose,” the innkeeper said softly, in no rush whatsoever, “but if you have a moment, I’d like you to take a look at a tome for me. I’ve been told by Lord Owain and Lady Marc that you’re quite the gifted mage.”

The knight blinked, momentarily surprised, but nodded.

Takumi studied Frey as they chatted with Leon; the innkeeper had seemed aloof when they’d first met, but the prince was beginning to wonder if that was also a front.

*What are you hiding?*

They’d said their wife had been the true manager of The Sleeping Goat, including the unit where Takumi and his companions were staying.

*But if that’s the case... then what does Godfrey do?*

He recalled the mysterious tune that the innkeeper had played on their handheld instrument and the way in which Marc had picked up humming it shortly thereafter.
Not to mention the way in which they refer to Marc and Owain.

It was as though Frey knew quite a bit more than they cared to let on. Takumi was unsure of how to feel about that.

But it wasn’t as though Godfrey were outwardly malicious. Someone of such small stature could hardly be seen as dangerous. If anything, Frey seemed like one of Cyrkensia’s performers, albeit too shy to do anything with their talent.

Takumi wondered if their aloofness was the main reason they preferred to stay in The Sleeping Goat.

As someone with exotic features not so unlike Frey’s, Takumi could understand the sentiment.

Frey’s hair was golden and pulled back in a loose, thick braid down their back. They watched Leon with a pair of sad, sunken grey eyes that had not seen much sleep.

Their pale hands were small, fingernails painted a deep merlot, and they fiddled with their pendant as they spoke to Leon.

Just as Takumi was preparing to re-enter the conversation, he heard soft voices from down the hall.

Well… I’ll just take a… quick peek…

And with that, he slipped further into The Sleeping Goat, scanning for the source.

Sakura had fallen asleep mid-way through their card game and Elise tucked her arm around the princess, hushing her boisterous playing partners.

“Keep it down, you guys,” she said, “Sakura’s exhausted!”

The others gave her nods and Owain nudged his sister, “you’re up, Marc. I’m calling your bluff right now.”

The flier was wearing Harold’s belt around her head as a makeshift hairband, holding her fringe from her face. She sat with one leg propped up to her chest, the other dangling bare beneath the table.

She daintily set down her cards and shrugged, “Are you sure?”

“You can’t possibly have the perfect hand,” Owain said.

His blouse was unbuttoned down to his navel and he was wearing one of his socks on his hand. Marc had cast a spell on it so it was now sentient.

It told him that he was a fool and that he was going to lose.

Owain ignored it.

“I would not test her!” Harold warned, “that confidence is true!”

With his free hand, the fighter was spinning his bright belt buckle around on the glossy tabletop.

Owain disregarded his words and overturned Marc’s cards.
She grinned wickedly at him.

“Looks like I’m really unbeatable!”

She laughed and tackled her brother. They both tumbled into the floor and Owain’s sock puppet cackled at him. Marc shoved a macaroon in his face.

“Oh, it’s lemon-flavoured,” he said, taking a dollop of cream and smearing it across his sister’s cheek.

“You shouldn’t’ve challenged her,” Elfy agreed, slipping out of her blouse with a sigh.

She seemed more comfortable in only a camisole.

Owain let out a long sigh and went limp under Marc, “Okay, okay, I give up!”

“Let’s go another round!” Elise said, pushing up the sleeves of her kimono, “I’m sure we can do it this time!”

“Excuse me-,” came a voice, pulling them all from their game.

Alarmed at the sudden visitor, Elfy and Harold got to a stand, both suspicious.

Harold, seeming to realise that his belt was quite necessary—and also presently wrapped around Marc’s head—hurriedly sat back down, dropping his cards in favour of catching his trousers.

Takumi looked to Elfy, who had her fists up in front of her and was frowning.

She was wearing the laciest camisole that the prince had ever seen, and her silver hair was in two uneven pigtails on either side of her head; the work of Elise, no doubt.

The prince looked to Owain next, who was still lying in the floor with half a macaroon sticking out of his mouth.

The sentient sock on the mage’s hand announced that Takumi was a fool and that he was going to lose.

Lose what? he thought but didn’t say.

Takumi slowly turned his attention upon Marc, who was beginning to sweat.

“I-, I-, I can explain-,” she said, craning her neck but avoiding eye contact, “It was a dare-, no-, I uh-, I thought it would be-, a nice-, change in- pace-?”

“Why are you wearing a belt on your head?” asked Takumi, who didn’t even bother asking about the cream smeared across her cheek.

Marc swallowed hard.

“Listen, don’t sweat the details, Takumi. Why don’t you sit in for a game with us?”

The prince glanced at Elise, wondering what she thought of all this.

It was only then that he saw his sister slumbering softly on Elise’s arm.
“Ah,” said a new voice, pulling Frey and Leon apart in the middle of their conversation, “you must be the mage prince I’ve heard so much about.”

“I’m Prince Leon, yes,” said Leon.

“Charmed,” replied Anna, squinting at him, “say, didn’t we just have a chat earlier?”

Leon frowned at her, “I-, I don’t think we’ve met, Miss-,”

“Anna,” she said, “the name’s Anna. You said your name’s Leo?”

“Leon,” he corrected, realising that she was probably responsible for Frey’s use of the wrong name earlier.

“Hm,” mused Anna, “anyway,” she turned to Frey, “this guy can read the tome.”

“I haven’t even tried it yet-!” Leon warned, seeming concerned that she may be overestimating his power.

Great, now I’m doubting myself. Macbeth’s good for that sort of thing, isn’t he?

Anna and Frey shared a meaningful glance. Leon turned to get Takumi’s opinion on the whole thing, feeling as though he were missing an important detail.

The Hoshidan Prince was nowhere to be seen.

Panic began to rise in Leon’s chest; was this one of Macbeth’s ploys?

Did I allow myself to be wrapped up in another scheme? I thought we would be safe here, but there was the storeclerk, and now this-?!

Leon took a step back and the Brynhildr Tome hummed from her place in his satchel.

“I know, I know,” he breathed, magic sluicing down his wrist and into his open palm.

“Hey now,” said Anna, expression darkening, “we don’t do big magic in here.”

Leon took another step back, “Where’s Takumi.”

Frey moved away from the pair, small hands already reaching for their handheld instrument.

“Tell me right this second or I’m sending your musician straight to hell,” said Leon, lifting his hand slowly and extending his pinkie in Frey’s direction.

Anna lifted her hands in surrender, “Listen, Mage Prince, I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours, but all your friends are in the tea parlour. If you hurt even one hair on my Angel’s head, I’ll have yours on a spike before you can sling a single spell.”

Leon slowly lowered his hand. The magic bounced uncertainly across each of his fingertips as he
moved past Anna and towards the tea room.

*If a single one of them is hurt… I’ll burn this place to the fucking ground. Macbeth’ll pay for it-, I should’ve killed him when I had the chance-*,

Takumi was beginning to shake uncontrollably. He clenched his fists and moved into the room, past Elfy without concern, and knelt beside his sleeping sister.

“Sakura-,” he breathed, “for you to be here, in the company of allies, even in such a busy city…”

He raised his gaze to Elise’s face.

“How did this happen?”

“We found her,” the Nohrian Princess provided, “she was wandering alone and she was wearing one of these-, ‘kee-mone-ohs,’ and so I started talking with her about it.”

Takumi realised that Elise was wearing Aqua’s and he gave her a small smile.

Somehow, the Nohrian Princess had picked the perfect thing to talk about.

“It probably calmed her down quite a bit,” Takumi said softly, brushing a few stray hairs from Sakura’s face.

He squeezed Elise’s hand, “Thank you.”

Elise pinked and then laughed good-naturedly, “No worries, Takumi. Besides, I’m always glad to make new friends! It’s just an added bonus that I’m now friends with a prince and a princess!”

Takumi glanced at Owain and Marc over his shoulder, who were both avidly avoiding eye contact.

*So they haven’t told Elise yet.*

The prince sighed and turned his attention back to Sakura.

“Do you want to wake her up? You guys haven’t seen each other in like-, uh-, a while,” said Elise.

Takumi got to a slow stand and bent to press a kiss atop Sakura’s head.

“No,” he said, and his expression was pained, “she needs to rest. We’ll help her home when she wakes up.”

Elise smiled at him in wordless understanding and quietly retrieved her cards, returning to her game.

“Thank the Dusk Dragon,” Leon swore from the doorway, seeming genuinely relieved to see his companions.

Takumi blinked and paced to his side, “Your sister found mine. So there’s no need for us to go rushing off.”
“And Marc and Owain are safe and... sound... I see,” said Leon, squinting at their strange attire.

Owain offered him a macaroon. Leon shook his hand, declining politely.

Marc stuck her tongue out and tried to no avail to swipe the remaining cream from her cheek. Leon rolled his eyes at her and casually took Takumi by the arm.

“Are you okay?” the prince asked once they were back out in the hallway, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No, that was last chapter,” said Frey as they approached, and then to themself, added: “or was it two chapters ago?”

Leon frowned, “I beg your pardon?”

“Would you like to take a look at the tome now?” the innkeeper asked, ignoring their previous statement.

Leon laced his fingers between Takumi’s and the prince realised that Leon’s palms were sweaty. 

Is he nervous? No... this is... something else...

The knight seemed apprehensive. Takumi squeezed his hand.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking a look too,” he said, stepping closer to Frey.

The innkeeper shrugged, “I don’t mind at all. Though it’s written in ancient script, so I’m not sure if you’ll be able to read any of it.”

Takumi returned the gesture, “No worries.”

Leon let out a small sigh of relief as they followed Frey deeper into The Sleeping Goat.

“It’s here,” said Frey, voice low.

Takumi frowned, wondering why the innkeeper was speaking in such a small voice.

“This is quite the collection,” Leon said, gaze flickering across the many bookshelves that lined the walls of what he could only assume was Frey’s personal library.

“Yes,” Frey agreed, “it’s taken years to build it up. Though it’s written in ancient script, so I’m not sure if you’ll be able to read any of it.”

Leon nodded and stepped up to the desk, pulling out the chair and slinging off his satchel. He seemed to think better of hooking it over the back and instead handed it to Takumi.

The prince accepted it wordlessly and tried not to think of the implication.

He’s just handed me his Divine Weapon.

As Leon took a seat, Takumi peeked over his shoulder while Frey settled in one of the armchairs.

Leon wasted no time squaring up to the tome. Takumi watched carefully from his place at the
knight’s side, making it apparent that he had no intention of leaving Leon alone.

The knight seemed grateful for his presence, and that made Takumi feel… valued.

It was quite the juxtaposition; Leon had been the one to make Takumi feel so unloved and betrayed when they’d first met.

*Things between us are still… rocky.*

That was obvious.

*But he’s… trying. He knows an apology is insignificant compared to all the cruelty he’s shown me. And yet…*

Leon did seem genuine in wanting to undo what he’d done, despite being fully aware that he could not erase it.

***

Prince Leon’s motions were practised as he eased the tome open. Just as Frey had said, the text was foreign and Takumi could not read it.

The prince glanced over to Frey and was surprised to see the innkeeper asleep, chin cupped in their hand. Frey’s leg twitched beneath the cover of their black tunic and it seemed like they were having a nightmare.

*Should I wake them?*

Just as Takumi looked back to Leon, he saw the knight reach into the pocket of his trousers and withdraw a small piece of glass. As Leon held it up to his eye and scanned the page, Takumi realised it was not unlike a jeweller’s magnifying glass.

“He, where’d you get-,” he began, but then worried that he’d distract the knight from his work, and instead went quiet.

Leon’s movements were mechanical as he flipped through the pages, scanning them at an incredibly quick pace.

“Leon, what are you doing? Shouldn’t you go slower?” Takumi finally said.

It wasn’t as though the book was just going to up and disappear.

*What’s the rush?*

Leon didn’t answer and Takumi frowned.

In the silence, the prince could only hear the dull hum of the Brynhildr Tome.

And she was getting louder.
Frey was startled awake by a chilling tune, sitting bolt upright and blinking sleep from their eyes.

Prince Takumi was holding a powerful tome and it seemed to be the source of the eerie melody.

“What in God’s name is going on?” Frey hissed, getting to a hurried stand.

Takumi looked at them, panicked.

“I-, I don’t know-, something’s wrong-,”

Frey looked at Leon. He was flipping through the tome quickly and scanning the pages through-,

“A jynxpiece?” the innkeeper whispered, grey eyes widening in surprise.

“I don’t know what that is, and I don’t care,” said Takumi.

He held the Brynhildr closer to Leon’s free hand in an attempt to snap the knight out of his daze. But when Leon reached for the tome, she spat a bolt of lightning towards his open hand.

“It rejected him?” said Frey, intrigued despite the danger.

“A shame,” said Leon, though it wasn’t his voice.

Takumi bristled and yanked the Brynhildr out of his reach, holding the tome to his chest protectively.

“So Leon was right,” the prince seethed softly, taking a few steps back, “you followed us here.”

The corners of Leon’s mouth pitched up into a contorted grin.

“It was no easy task,” Macbeth assured, “the people of Cyrkensia are surprisingly strong-willed for commoners.”

Takumi took pleasure in the sorcerer’s irritation despite the situation.

Frey came to his side, watching Leon nervously.

“I… have some questions,” the innkeeper said bluntly.

*Do they not recognise the danger*-

Macbeth turned his attention upon Frey, who was clutching their handheld instrument in white-knuckled hands.

“And who might you be?” the sorcerer asked, sizing Frey up slowly.

“You… are not Prince Leon,” Frey deduced, watching carefully.

Macbeth paused and forced Leon’s hands into a slow clap, “Well, you’re certainly an intelligent one, aren’t you, Innkeeper?”
“Is this person your enemy?” Frey asked, turning to Takumi and ignoring Macbeth entirely.

“He hurt Leon,” the prince said, “and Marc. And me. Probably a lot of people, actually.”

Frey nodded slowly, fingernails clicking against the wood panelling of their instrument.

“Alright,” they said, “I see. So would I be correct in assuming that this person is the source of your suffering, Lord Takumi?” the innkeeper asked.

The prince looked at Leon. In the moments of silence that followed, the Brynhildr Tome trilled out her ancient elegy. The tune became more distorted as the song progressed and she mourned the loss of her wielder.

Maybe she rejected Leon’s body out of necessity; she couldn’t give Macbeth her power.

Takumi clenched his fist.

“Yeah,” he said.

***

“So then I suppose it’s only right that I ask you to please remove yourself from Prince Leon,” Frey said, cordial to a fault as he addressed Macbeth. The sorcerer sneered, “If a polite request was all it took, I would be long gone; you can imagine how frustrating it is to listen to Leon’s incessant pleading in here.”

Takumi bit his lip in order to stop himself from spitting an insult. The Fuujin Bow’s string lit up across his back.

“Don’t you mind,” Frey said gently, putting a reassuring hand on the prince’s arm.

Takumi wanted to trust them; but what could they do against Macbeth? The sorcerer’s hunger couldn’t be satiated and the fact that he’d followed them all the way here served as proof enough.

“I did want to ask you one question before you go,” said Frey, stepping in front of Takumi. The gesture was not an obviously protective one, given the innkeeper’s small size, but Takumi appreciated it nonetheless.

“Bold of you to assume that you can force me out. If the host himself cannot keep me away, do you honestly expect yourself to do any better?” Macbeth tipped Leon’s head to one side curiously. Frey watched him unblinkingly, seeming to wait for permission to speak again.

Leon’s mouth twitched into a twisted smile.

“But don’t keep me in suspense; ask your single question, Innkeeper. I’m rather interested to see what a commoner thinks a proper inquiry,” Macbeth said, lifting Leon’s hand up so he could set his chin in his palm.
The way in which he seemed so relaxed offset a deep distaste in Takumi’s stomach.

How many times has he used Leon this way-? How can he be so comfortable in a body other than his own-?!

“Your arrogance is almost refreshing,” Frey said softly, bringing Takumi back from his dark thoughts.

Macbeth’s smile wavered for a moment.

“But it’s still too early for foreshadowing,” said Frey, steadying their gaze, “so, did you learn anything useful through that jynxpiece, Ser?”

Leon’s face frowned but Frey did not give Macbeth the chance to reply, instead thumbing out a tune from their instrument.

Takumi recognised it as the one he’d heard earlier. Marc had hummed it back on their unit’s patio.

As it had before, the prince felt drowsiness creep over him.

“What-, what magic is this-?” Macbeth demanded.

Frey did not stop playing.

Takumi stumbled back into the leather armchair, watching the display unfold through a haze.

“You’re no commoner-! What are you-?” Macbeth hissed.

Takumi could nearly swear he heard panic in the sorcerer’s voice.

“Don’t you mind,” Frey murmured breezily, “I’m just a storyteller.”

Leon’s expression clouded and he suddenly convulsed, going limp in the desk chair. After a few aching seconds, magic began to drip from his fingertips.

It seared the carpet beneath his feet and only then did Frey’s music cease.

“M-Marx-?” Leon gasped, clenching one of his fists as he slowly regained control over his own body.

He blinked and looked about blindly.

Takumi went to his side, still a bit unsteady, and put a hand on his arm carefully.

“Leon,” he breathed, “Leon, it’s me. It’s Takumi. I’m… glad you’re back.”

Asking him if he was alright seemed like a waste of breath at this point.

The knight raised his head and looked into Takumi’s face for a moment before he flung himself into the prince’s arms.

Surprised, Takumi sank to the floor as Leon sobbed silently into the crook of his neck.
The prince vaguely recalled having done the same thing to Marx after his first real encounter with Macbeth’s meddling in the bath.

Somehow, it felt as though he’d learnt something new about Marx and Leon both.

*And the extent of their relationship…*

Frey returned their instrument to its proper place and then quietly excused themself.

Takumi watched them leave, vowing to demand answers in the near future.

“I’m sorry,” Leon choked out, “I couldn’t stop him. I-, I wasn’t strong enough.”

Takumi’s own mantra echoed in his mind.

“I’m stronger than this.”

He had nothing to say to comfort Leon. So instead, he did the next best thing: he hummed a song.

“What is that?” Leon asked when he’d calmed down, “what are you humming? I’ve heard it before…”

Takumi pinked, “It’s my sister’s song.”

“Aqua-?”

The prince nodded, “She’d use it to help me go back to sleep after I’d had a nightmare.”

He didn’t care to elaborate.

Leon only nodded wordlessly, seeming satisfied with that explanation. He rested his head against Takumi’s shoulder, arms wrapped around himself.

“How did you know?” he whispered, “how did you know that-, that there was something wrong with me?”

“Something was wrong,” Takumi agreed, hating how Leon blamed himself for Macbeth’s meddling, “but it was actually your… it was the Brynhildr Tome.”

Leon blinked, raising his head a fraction so he could look into Takumi’s face “What?”

“Earlier, when you told me about Macbeth’s manipulation of that shop clerk,” Takumi said, “I heard her humming.”

The knight was quiet for a moment, digesting this new information.

“I suppose it would make sense that you can hear her, then. After all, your bow reacted to me too.”

That was right. It was back when Leon was disguised as Lazwald.

*Or… Azure, if we’re using their real names now…*

“Can I ask you something?” asked Takumi.
A small half-smile ghosted across Leon’s face.

“What?” said Takumi.

Leon shook his head, “Nothing. It’s just- you just did. Ask me a question, that is.”

It was something he and Marx had always done to one another.

Takumi smiled a bit at that.

*It seems he’s getting back to normal, at least*, the prince thought but didn’t say.

“No, but in all seriousness,” said Leon, “what did you want to ask me?”

Takumi pointed, “when Godfrey asked you to look at that special tome, you pulled out this little eyeglass-, called a-, a-,”

“A jynxpiece,” Leon finished.

He was frowning.

“Yeah,” Takumi said, recalling Frey’s word from earlier, “what is it?”

The knight retrieved the magnifying glass from his pocket and held it so that Takumi could inspect it at a closer distance.

“They’re ancient artefacts from the Invisible Kingdom,” he said, “it’s unclear what their original purpose was, but they’re now used to decipher texts in the ancient tongues.”

He paused, blinking rapidly, “Only a handful exist anymore. I doubt there are any left in Nohr after the late Queen Arête destroyed all evidence of the Invisible Kingdom.”

“You know a lot about them, huh?” said Takumi, impressed

Leon frowned deeply, “No. I don’t. I’m not sure how I know… any of that.”

Takumi patted him gently, “It’s alright. We’ll figure this out together. Are you… feeling better?”

“Given that I just got my body back, yeah,” said Leon, “I’m okay.”

“Do you… remember what happened?”

Leon put a hand to his head.

Takumi wondered if having him talk about what had just happened was a good idea.

But, when Leon spoke, the prince didn’t dare interrupt him.

*We gotta start somewhere.*

“I opened the book-, and then-, then I couldn’t control myself. I was-, I was still in there, somewhere, but I-, I couldn’t do anything. I was just… floating there. Somewhere. In the emptiness. I didn’t even know that I had one of the jynxpieces until just now.”

Leon frowned, “I heard Brynhildr-, she-, did she reject me?”
He turned to look at Takumi, a stricken look plastered across his pale face.

“She was rejecting Macbeth,” Takumi said flatly.

Leon bit his lip but nodded.

“And then, all these spells were flowing into my head but-, but I couldn’t remember any of them. It was like I was just-, just conducting the information. Like-, like Macbeth was just channelling himself through me-, using my body like his own.”

The knight shivered at the thought.

Takumi recalled the ease with which Macbeth had piloted Leon.

The implication that Macbeth had utilised Leon like this many times before now was enough to churn Takumi’s stomach.

“And I-, I was powerless against him,” the knight murmured.

This is probably the point where I say something like “Oh, how the tables have turned,” except it seems like Macbeth’s been the one in control the entire time.

He manipulated me the same way through Leon.

“I’m sorry,” said Takumi, understanding with a chilling clarity.

“I-, I did that to you,” Leon whispered, “I made you feel just as powerless, as helpless, against me as I was against him.”

He looked down at his hands. They were callused from years of spell-slinging and swordplay.

Takumi took one in his own and squeezed it.

“Listen, Leon, we’re gonna get through this. We’re gonna fix this.”

“We’re gonna mend what’s broken-?” said Leon, echoing Takumi’s—and Selena’s—words from earlier.

The prince nodded solemnly.

“Takumi,” Leon said, turning to look into his face with a fierce determination, “let’s do it. Let’s restore the Invisible Kingdom. Let’s save our world from calamity. And let’s mend what’s broken.”

Takumi nodded, a bit uncertain with the knight’s sudden change in attitude.

“I’m so tired,” Leon whispered, “I’m tired of living like this. I don’t want things to stay this way forever. If we can really change things, I-, I wanna do that.”

The prince patted Leon on the back.

“Okay,” he said.
“T-Takumi-? Is it really you?”

After Leon had calmed down a bit, Takumi had returned to the tea room and found his sister awake.

Sakura looked into her brother’s face, amber eyes wide with recognition.

Through a combination of the day’s stress and his relief at seeing his sister well, a few tears streamed down Takumi’s face as he nodded, “Yes, yes, it’s really me.”

“Brother-,” she whispered, embracing him tightly.

He could feel her shaking against him, fists clenching tightly in the folds of his tunic.

“I’m glad to see you’re well,” Takumi said, smoothing her hair, “and I’m gladder to see that you’ve made friends with Elise.”

“Y-yes-!” Sakura said, pulling away to look into his face, “have you met her?”

“We’re friends,” he said with a small smile.

Elise had that unbeatable charisma; she’d been impossible to deny when questioned about becoming friends.

“Are you coming back to Hoshido?” Sakura asked, watching Takumi from beneath her long lashes.

The prince turned and glimpsed the others outside on the patio of The Sleeping Goat.

Leon’s cheeks were pinking and Elise was hiding a grin behind the wide sleeve of her kimono. Marc pointed at Leon and cackled, Owain attempting to keep his expression neutral, but to no avail.

Elfy was smiling gently at them, Harold asleep on her arm.

Anna read something from the page of the tome she was holding and Marc leapt up, volunteering for some ridiculous task.

She was attempting to do a handstand. Owain was holding one of her legs and shaking his head.

Frey stumbled into the narrow hallway and nodded to Takumi before making their way onto the patio.

The prince couldn’t help but notice the stains on the innkeeper’s—storyteller’s?—sleeve.

What have they been up to?

He tried to think back to earlier, when Frey had played their mysterious tune and somehow chased Macbeth from Leon’s body.

That’s right… I still need to ask them about that.

“Takumi?”
The prince blinked, “Sorry, Sakura. I was just… thinking about something.”

She laughed uncertainly, but nodded in understanding all the same.

“But,” he said, “to answer your question, I don’t think I can go back.”

Takumi recalled Leon’s expression as he’d finally agreed to mend what was broken in their world. He was finally ready to take a step towards change.

“But, anyway,” he finished, “believe me, Sister, there’s nothing I want more than to be with you and the others. But there’s something dark brewing in our world and I-, I need to help fix it.”

Sakura watched him quietly for a few tantalising moments and Takumi worried that she’d accuse him of turning to Nohr as Kamui had done.

But she only nodded again, taking his hand in her own.

“Oh, okay,” she said.

Takumi nodded back to her, unsure of how to interpret her response.

“Hey, Takumi?”

He glanced down at her.

“When the time comes,” she said, “and we all eventually have to take sides, I wanna be on yours.”

The prince blinked.

“Sakura, I’ll always be on your side.”

“I know,” she said, “and no matter what happens, I trust you. And I want you to know that. And even though I- I’m not great with a bow-, and-, and my archery needs some work, I want to become someone that you can depend on.”

She glanced at the group gathered on the patio.

“You’ve found a lot of allies,” she remarked softly, “and I’m glad for you, Big Brother. But please, don’t forget that there are others who will join you. Kazahana and Tsubaki. And Oboro and Hinata as well. Suzukaze too.”

Takumi thought of Oboro’s dislike for Nohrians.

Well... we’ll work on it.

“Sakura,” he said instead, “you have no idea how much that means to me.”

She blinked, surprised by his earnest honesty, but then her face broke into a kind smile.

“I’m glad,” she said.
Takumi looked back out to the others, “Should I help you to the border?”

“Will that be alright?”

Her true question was left unspoken.

“Will seeing the others upset you, now that you’ve made your choice?”

Takumi closed his eyes and pictured Luna’s—Selena’s—face as she’d told him her true purpose in coming to Nohr.

He remembered Aqua, perching in the traditional Hoshidan style as she erased Leon’s disarming spell over him.

And he remembered Marx, who had apologised for ever having thought things between Hoshido and Nohr could be different.

That’s right, the prince thought, this is my choice. If I’m on any side, it’s probably Ylisse’s, which doesn’t even make any sense, so that’s just great-

“I’ll see if some of the others will join us,” he said.

Sakura nodded.

***

As the group outside dispersed, Leon approached Sakura.

She was surprised that he seemed so eager to interact with her.

“You’re Takumi’s younger sister then, right? Princess Sakura?”

She worried at the sleeve of her kimono and nodded, “Y-yes, that’s right.”

Leon nodded back.

“You have a very strong brother,” he said after a moment.

Sakura turned to look at him, amber eyes wide as she watched him.

“I didn’t use to think that,” the knight admitted after a moment with a small laugh, “but now-, now I think he’s one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. Sometimes-, it’s almost like he’s shining. He’s so bright that I should really look away but-, but I can’t. He’s just-, radiating this light. All the time.”

Sakura smiled as she watched her brother chat with Elise. Elfy was flexing for Marc, who cautiously felt the bulge of her muscle in awe.

Harold threw his head back and laughed as Owain flexed, seeming disappointed when compared to Elfy.
Marc was reassuring him that it was nothing for a mage to be ashamed of.

“I thought that was the case with all Hoshidans,” Leon admitted, “that you were all softer and brighter because of your peaceful kingdom and your peaceful Queen.”

He frowned, seeming dissatisfied with himself, “But Takumi assured me that that wasn’t the case. I-, I assumed a lot about Hoshidans. And about your brother.”

Sakura smiled a bit, pleased that Leon had seen her brother for what he was: a beacon of kindness. *That part of him is so often overlooked… and yet, it is his best trait,* she thought but didn’t say.

Even Ryouma, who loved his brother so desperately, had trouble seeing the truth after all this time.

For the prince of another kingdom—and one so dedicated to the subjugation of Hoshido—to see the truth—,

“Prince Leon,” said Sakura, drawing the knight back, “do you… have feelings for my brother?”

***

Leon, eager to discuss his worrisome revelation with someone close, caught Elise standing on the patio. He was readying his sentence when another voice beat him to it.

“Hey, Elise, mind if I borrow you for a minute?”

The princess blinked and nodded, pushing Harold to a stand: “You’re up, fearsome fighter! Think you have what it takes to beat Odin Dark?”

“The tome calls for both of you to-,” Anna was saying as Elise and Takumi trailed away.

“Now,” said the princess, “what did you need?”

Leon, feeling guilty, followed them back into The Sleeping Goat, curiosity eating away at him.

Takumi knelt beside the knight’s satchel and retrieved the pair of peachy sandals they’d purchased earlier.

It felt like days ago now.

“When we were in the garden,” Takumi said, “you made a remark about not having a suitable pair of shoes to wear with your kimono.”

Elise hitched it up to get a look at her bruised feet and she laughed self-consciously.

“Yeah, but that didn’t stop me,” she said half-heartedly.

Takumi patted his knee, “I’ll help you put them on. They’re not so different from the ones in my home-, in Hoshido.”

Elise pinked, “Y-you guys bought these for me?”

Takumi nodded, “Yeah. Leon helped me pick them out.”
From his place just beyond their view, Leon stared in disbelief.

The knight recalled how he’d questioned Takumi’s fashion choices.

Now, of course, he felt like an absolute fool.

_I can’t seem to stop misjudging him about these sorts of things… he’s always surprising me, dammit…_

Leon couldn’t remember a soul who’d ever cared for others as selflessly as Takumi had.

_Save for Marx, of course._

But that was a given.

_Still…_

Still, it was strange to see Takumi include him.

_All I did was handle the gold and then shock him with a spell to get us out of there. That hardly seems like reason enough to bother mentioning me…_

“Leon did?” Elise said, brightening.

Takumi nodded, “Yes. I almost passed them up but he… managed to convince me.”

“He is convincing,” she agreed with a small laugh.

The prince smiled and adjusted Elise’s kimono as she did a slow spin in front of him.

“You look wonderful,” Takumi promised as he straightened, hooking Leon’s satchel over his shoulder.

“You look wonderful,” Takumi promised as he straightened, hooking Leon’s satchel over his shoulder.

“Hey, Takumi?”

“Hm?”

Elise went to scuff her shoe but seemed to think better of it at the last second.

“Are you going back to your-, to Hoshido?”

Leon held his breath.

He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Takumi decided to return to his homeland this evening with his sister.

_So much has changed… could things really just go back to how they were?_

Leon knew the answer.

“No,” said Takumi.

“Are you going to stay with us in Nohr, then?” the princess asked him quietly.
She seemed apprehensive about it for some reason.

Takumi instinctively mussed her hair and she giggled.

“Marx does that,” she murmured.

The prince pinked, “S-sorry. I didn’t mean-,”

“It’s okay,” Elise reassured with a gracious smile, “I’m really glad you’re sticking with us.”

“We’re friends, remember? Friends stick together.”

Elise blinked and then nodded, embracing him suddenly. Takumi nearly lost his balance in surprise.

“Does this mean that you’re going to help us?” she asked.

Takumi looked down at her, confused.

“Help you? Like how?”

Elise averted her gaze.

“Just, you know-,”

He didn’t.

“I want Nohr to be a happy place again,” she said, “and if we all team up, I’m sure we can make that happen.”

Her words were so simple but Takumi agreed with them wholeheartedly.

*I want Hoshido to be warm like it once was too.*

“I guess so, yeah,” he said, giving her an encouraging smile, “I guess I’ll do whatever I can. With your help, and Harold and Elfý’s, and Leon’s and Owa-, Odin’s and Eir’s, I’m sure we can make a difference.”

The princess nodded, “I’m glad.”

As their conversation finished up, Leon carefully slipped back out onto the patio.

“You shouldn’t make a habit of eavesdropping,” said Marc, sidling up to the knight with ease.

“You shouldn’t pretend to know what I was doing in there,” Leon countered.

Marc shot him an unimpressed look; she had him all figured out.

“Did you learn anything useful?”

The words made Leon feel suddenly uncomfortable, but he couldn’t exactly say why.

“Nothing I didn’t already know,” the knight lied.

Marc didn’t look at him and instead, simply hummed.
Leon wondered if he simply imagined the disapproving tone.

“Actually,” he said, “that’s not entirely true.”

Only then did the flier glance at him from the corner of her eye.

“My sister asked Takumi if he was going to return to Hoshido tonight with Princess Sakura.”

Marc nodded for him to continue.

“I was worried that he was,” Leon admitted.

For some reason, he didn’t want Takumi to leave. It wasn’t because of some looming ulterior motive, which was the strange part.

“I’ve lived a life of schemes and betrayals, Takumi!” that was what he’d said. And it was the truth.

But now, to be bound to someone—practically a stranger—for an entirely new reason—,

“It’s strange,” Leon said.

He recalled Sakura’s innocent inquiry.

“Do you… have feelings for my brother?”

“I don’t like that face you’re making one bit, Leon,” said Marc, frowning.

Leon’s cheeks heated and he couldn’t look at her.

“I was just… thinking about something,” he said lamely.

Marc let out a long sigh.

“I can’t believe this,” she muttered, “you’re like a child sometimes, I swear.”

*That might have something to do with my lack of a proper childhood.*

“Listen,” said Marc, suddenly serious.

She was watching her brother arm-wrestle Harold. Anna was laser-focused on them, trying to decide who the victor would be.

Elfy was sitting between Frey’s thighs, sipping from an absurdly small teacup as the storyteller carefully braided her hair.

“When all of this is said and done,” said Marc, “you only have the one life, Lord Leon. If you want to make it count, you need to be honest with yourself.”

The knight had nothing to say to that.

“You owe Takumi that, at least.”

Leon nodded.

“I know,” he said.
Marc gave him one good pat on the arm and joined the others. Frey had finished braiding Elfy’s hair and Marc offered her hand, intending to wrestle with the knight.

“Be honest with myself, huh?”

Leon leant back against the fence and closed his eyes.

*If only it were that easy.*

***

“Thanks again for the sandals, Takumi! I’m glad we’re friends, Sakura! See ya’ later, Leon!”

Elise waved to them before taking Harold and Elfy’s hands and heading in the direction of her unit.

Her laughter echoed in the abandoned streets and Takumi felt a pang of sudden sadness as he watched her shadow melt into the darkness.

“I hope we’ll see each other again soon,” Sakura said, more to herself than to the others.

“Have a bit of faith,” Frey reassured her, “It was fate that brought you together.”

The princess brightened a bit and nodded nervously, “Y-yes, you’re probably right.”

Marc cleared her throat, “Now then, if all’s finished, let’s get to the border. We have a princess to see home!”

“Are you sure this alright?” Sakura asked again, “If it’s too much trouble, Miss Anna and Godfrey can accompany me, that’s certainly going to be just as-,”

“Sakura,” said Takumi, setting a supportive hand on her shoulder, “it’s fine. Really.”

The princess nodded and relaxed as Takumi took her hand in his own.

The Fuujin Bow’s string lit up at Sakura’s close proximity and she laughed softly, “Hello to you too.”

“Looks like I wasn’t the only one who missed you,” said Takumi.

Sakura smiled at him. At Takumi’s side, the Brynhildr Tome hummed in short greeting, though Sakura seemed oblivious to it.

Frey had privately asked Takumi to keep the tome with him to avoid a second rejection of her true wielder.

“It might be trouble if that were to happen,” the storyteller had said with a frown.

“And though I chased that sorcerer off, I’m confident that he will return in the future. So you both must be ready.”

“Owain and I are taking to the skies,” said Marc, pausing mid-step to whistle loudly.
Her jet-black pegasus came speeding to a halt in front of them.

“Everybody meet Ser Fafnir!” the flier said with a wide gesture.

The pegasus snorted in what must’ve been a greeting.

“Why would you name a pegasus Faf-?  Don’t you think a name like that suits a wyvern better?” muttered Leon.

Marc shoved him, “he didn’t like the name Grendel so this is what I settled on!”

“But that’s also-, oh, just forget it.”

“Give us a shout if you need anything,” Marc said with a wink as she patted Fafnir’s neck.

She, along with her brother, disappeared into the blackness overhead.

Takumi could only trust that they were close-by.

“I’m glad you came with me,” Sakura said quietly so that only her brother could hear.

He squeezed her hand, “Of course.  I wouldn’t feel good about letting anyone else bring you out here.”

She nodded, “I-, I hope this is alright.”

“Don’t worry, really,” said Takumi, reassuring her for a third time, “it was my choice.  I’m glad to be with you.”

“Even if it means you have to face Ryouma?”

Takumi’s expression hardened in the darkness and he was thankful that Leon had kept his light spells far enough away that his sadness was not immediately visible.

“I’ll be alright,” the prince promised.

In truth, however, he was not so sure.

“We’re nearly there,” said Anna, who was lacking her usual optimism.

Her lantern clanged against her hip.

The tension in the air was palpable.

Leon trailed behind the group, uncertain of how close he could be without drawing too much attention to himself.

“Tell me, why are you lingering back here?  Your companions are ahead of you,” said Frey, matching the knight’s step.

Leon winced, “I-it’s really not my place.  This isn’t my affair.”

“You can always choose to make it yours,” the storyteller suggested quietly.

“What do you mean?”
Instead of giving him a straight answer, Frey simply asked another question: “Will you defend your friends, Lord Leon? Until the end?”

“I-, I-, of course I will-, but what has that got to do with-,”

Frey reached over and pushed a stray hair from the knight’s face.

“Nothing,” they said, “I just wanted to know what sort of a man you are, Mage Prince.”

Leon felt uneasiness settle in the pit of his stomach.

“I wanted to know if you have what it takes to save this world from calamity.”

“So then, what do you think, Godfrey?”

“I’ll get back to you on that one.”

Leon let out a heavy sigh.

“You okay back there, Leon?” Takumi called over his shoulder.

“Never better,” the knight murmured.

Frey chuckled softly and gave him a reassuring pat on the arm, “You’ll be fine.”

***

At the border, a small group of the castle’s usual entourage were gathered.

Ryouma seemed to be waiting alone; Hinoka wasn’t with him. Orochi stood at his side with a forlorn look on her usually bright face. Her pinkies were glowing as she maintained the orbs of light that perched around them.

Though he couldn’t see Saizou or Kagerou, Takumi was sure that they were present as well.

Kazahana was trying to console Tsubaki, who was crouched at her side. He looked exhausted, face gaunt in the dim light of Orochi’s spell.

Tsubaki’s pegasus was at his side, her sides heaving.

Takumi realised that the sky knight must’ve worked the poor thing near-death searching for his charge.

“Oh-,” breathed Sakura, as she saw the small group gathered at the border, “oh my-, Tsubaki-, Kazahana-,”

“It’s okay,” Takumi whispered, putting his arm around her, “they’ll be relieved to see you well.”

She looked up at him and there were unshed tears in her eyes.

“Oh, Sakura-,”
“I—I’m sorry-,” she murmured, “I swore I wouldn’t cry. But-, but I’m gonna miss you, Big Brother.”

She embraced him and Takumi smoothed her hair.

“We’ll see each other again soon,” he promised.

“R-right-!”

As they approached and Leon’s light illuminated them properly, Ryouma lifted a halting hand.

“Return Princess Sakura,” he called out, tenor voice reverberating through the field.

Tsubaki looked up and Kazahana helped him to a stand. The two of them seemed to see Sakura at the same time and rushed forwards.

Ryouma called them back with a single order.

Despite what she said earlier… it doesn’t seem like Tsubaki and Kazahana can go against Ryouma’s word… will they really side with us when the time comes?

“Send one,” Ryouma ordered, “and I will do the same.”

Sakura was trembling against Takumi and he squeezed her hand, “It’s okay. It’s just Ryouma.”

“I-I know,” she said softly, “It’s just-, when he’s like this-,”

She shook her head, seeming unsure of how to voice her fright properly.

But there was no need; Takumi understood it perfectly. Ryouma had been forced to become a hardened High Prince after their mother’s death.

Even so, it was hard to watch him behave so heartlessly.

“I’ll go,” Takumi said, looking at the others.

Anna frowned from beneath her wide-brimmed hat, “I don’t like this.”

Leon nodded, “I’d feel better if it were me instead.”

Takumi shook his head, “No. It has to be me. I have no idea what sorts of things my brother may be thinking. If he attacked any of you…”

The prince trailed off and clenched his fist.

“Godfrey,” said Anna, nudging the storyteller, “do you have anything to say?”

They closed their eyes and put their hand to their pendant, thinking.

“This is the best option,” Frey said, revealing nothing.

Takumi glanced skyward for a moment. He couldn’t see Marc and Owain in the darkness.
Were they still there?

*If things go sour, I’ll need their help...*

But he shook the uncertainty from his mind.

*No, I have to trust them. They wouldn’t abandon me.*


Takumi simply nodded and put a steadying hand to Sakura’s back. “You ready?”

***

The walk to meet Ryouma in the middle of the field took what felt like hours.

“No closer,” said the High Prince, his hand falling to the hilt of the Raijinto Blade. The sword was uncharacteristically silent at his side. “Brother-,” began Sakura, dismayed by the way he received his siblings.

Takumi took another step. “As the High Prince, I’m ordering you to halt,” Ryouma said.

The air of command felt foreign and against his better judgment, Takumi thought of Marx, who had commanded him so naturally prior.

*I had… wanted that.*

Now, to have Ryouma do it, Takumi felt betrayal pluck at his tender heartstrings.

The Brynhildr Tome buzzed warningly in the satchel at Takumi’s hip. He patted it as Leon had done earlier in hopes of calming her. “Ryouma-!” Sakura said, giving him the slightest of shoves.

He blinked and the fondness that had become so familiar to Takumi returned to the Trueblade’s eyes. Ryouma cleared his throat and shielded Sakura behind himself. “You,” he said, addressing Takumi with a surprising coldness, “should I learn that any harm has befallen my sister, I will hunt you down.”
“Ryouma-,” Sakura said again, and her voice seemed to get through to him, “I cannot allow this-!”

“Sakura, what-,”

“You mustn’t speak to our brother in such a cruel manner!”

At her words, Ryouma turned back to scrutinise Takumi before him.

The prince’s hair was cut choppy and short against his neck. He was wearing a foreign garb that spoke to tastes that Ryouma had never associated with his brother.

The satchel at Takumi’s hip bore the Nohrian Crest. The strap that held the Fuujin Bow across his back was fashioned unquestionably out of Nohrian leather.

Ryouma gazed at him for a long time. There was a brief flicker of recognition in his eyes and the High Prince’s grip on the Raijinto Blade at his side tightened.

“Hello, Brother,” said Takumi.

Chapter End Notes

damn it feels good to be back! anybody know what instrument frey's playing? ;-)

* (also for those curious: leon's confusion about the name of marc's pegasus stems from the fact that both names she selected belong to dragons of ancient legend. the first being "Grendel," the draconic foe in the Old English Epic of Beowulf, and the second "Fafnir" being the dragon slain by Siegfried in the Germanic Epic "Die Nibelungenlied".)

thanks for all your support as always, everyone, you really make my day with your comments and kudos! <3
Storyteller, Sword, and Song

Chapter Summary

Despite Takumi's long-awaited reunion with his beloved brother, the engagement does not match the one he's fantasized about for so long. Undeterred, the prince continues to seek the truths shrouded in mystery that surround him; he aims to reclaim his missing memory and learn about Godfrey's true power. Meanwhile, Leon struggles to accept the fact that his magical upbringing has been built on years of betrayal. Macbeth's meddling reaches a climax and no one can sit by and allow it any longer; the time to fight is nearly upon us!

Chapter Notes

ta-da! here we are! i hope frey has been well-received; they're very near and dear to my heart!
also if yall get that chapter title reference, im so glad!
in any case, here's chapter eight! lets get crazy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryouma was quiet for a long moment and Takumi swallowed hard, throat suddenly dry.

"Tell me," the High Prince breathed, "is this an illusion? Some half-baked Nohrian taunt in poor taste?"

Sakura looked between the two of them before slowly backing away, allowing her brothers a private moment; there was much they had to discuss.

Tsubaki and Kazahana rushed to her side. Tsubaki was trying to keep himself from openly weeping but a few stray tears managed to slip down his pale cheeks. Kazahana embraced her charge and handed Sakura her stave with a small nod.

"Surely you know the answer for yourself," Takumi whispered, watching Ryouma carefully.

For reasons he couldn’t understand, the prince had the urge to flee from beneath his brother’s scrutiny.

*Do I fear what he'll find if he looks hard enough?*

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Frey softly so that only Anna could hear.

She glanced over at them, "What should we do? Can you see the best answer?"

The storyteller bit their lip, "I-, I’m not sure. I-, don’t know what to do."
Leon was standing taut, as though the mere presence of the High Prince was wearing on him. His magic bounced uncertainly across each of his fingertips and then back again, skirting across the lines of his palm.

“What are the two of you talking about?” he asked, not looking their way; he couldn’t tear his gaze away from Takumi and the High Prince.

“Something’s wrong,” said Anna, “but…”

“But?”

It was Frey who took over, “I can’t see the true path. That-, that’s never happened to me before.”

“The ‘true path’?” Leon echoed, mystified.

“Yes,” said the storyteller softly, “I suppose in your world, I’m a diviner of sorts. Though I can’t do much magic, I can see the threads of fate.”

Leon eyed them curiously from the corner of his eye, trying to decipher Frey’s cryptic explanation.

“Can you see the future?”

“It isn’t as direct as that,” the storyteller said by way of apology, “but it’s… adjacent.”

Leon let out a low sigh, “I still don’t quite understand but… if you’re saying something’s wrong, then we’d better get ready.”

And with that, the knight’s magic sluiced down his arms, staining the wide sleeves of his tunic.

“Marc’s gonna be mad,” he muttered as the power dripped into the grass at his feet.

“That’ll be the least of our worries,” Anna replied, hooking one leg over the other and summoning her own magic; the lantern at her hip hummed with power and she drifted a few centimetres into the air.

“Can you support-?” Frey said before turning to cough violently into the crook of their arm.

Anna frowned but dropped back down onto her feet and retrieved her stave. The crystal tip began to glow faintly.

“Are you alright, Angel?” she whispered, pushing up her wide-brimmed hat so she could look into Frey’s face.

The storyteller wiped their hand on the wide sleeve of their tunic and nodded, “It’ll pass. Let’s focus on getting out of here alive. Lord Ryouma has more forces than we can see.”

“Ninja-?”

“Can’t tell,” Frey said with a shake of their head; they looked paler than usual and squinted at the field, as though studying something unseen.

“Don’t push yourself,” said Leon, surprising the others, “we’ll manage. I don’t know what sort of power you have, Godfrey, but we’ll have to do without it for a bit.”
The storyteller blinked wordlessly.

“After all, you’re allied with royalty of House Ylisse and Nohr; we aren’t exactly your typical mages.”

When Frey had nothing to say to that, Leon turned to shoot them a tight grin, “Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten.”

“You’ve changed,” said Ryouma.

Takumi shifted from one foot to the other, “Y-yes, well, that’s to be expected. I’ve been through quite a lot.”

He laughed softly, unsure and self-conscious and-, then Ryouma was hugging him.

His embrace was warm and welcoming and Takumi allowed himself the smallest of pleasures, melting into his brother’s arms.

“I missed you,” the High Prince said softly, breath hot against the base of Takumi’s bare neck.

He shivered. Ryouma’s hands roamed, tracing across the prince’s body easily, with a familiarity that Takumi had been longing for; a familiarity that Marx had been unable to imitate.

“I never should have let you go,” the High Prince said, “how much have you endured on my behalf, Brother?”

“Nothing that I wouldn’t do again,” said Takumi honestly.

His thoughts returned involuntarily to his evening with Marx.

Th-that too but… it’ll be our little secret. For now. I don’t need to tell Ryouma everything right this second…

“I’m sorry,” Ryouma whispered, “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

Too him so long for what?

“I should’ve come for you,” the High Prince said, “but I was so busy after Mother-, no. There is no excuse. I’m sorry.”

He parted from Takumi—too soon—and looked down into the prince’s face.

“Come,” he said, taking Takumi’s hands in his own, “let’s go home.”

The Brynhildr trilled another warning from her place in the satchel at Takumi’s hip and the prince felt apprehension skitter up his arms.

“I can’t,” he said, taking a step back.

“Takumi? What are you doing-?”

Confusion rolled across Ryouma’s face. It was a natural response; he would’ve never expected his
brother to refuse him.

*And only a little while ago, I would’ve never expected myself to refuse him either.*

“Takumi,” the Trueblade said, voice stern, “it’s time to go home.”

“No,” the prince said, “I can’t go with you.”

Ryouma frowned at him, “What are you talking about? Nothing else matters-! To have you back in Hoshido by my side, that’s all I want-!”

Takumi took another step back, “I-, I understand that. But-, that’s not what I want.”

Pricks of panic shot up the prince’s legs and he locked his knees in an attempt to remain upright; could Ryouma feel him trembling?

*If I return to Hoshido now, I won’t be able to fight the calamity that’s sure to rise soon-, I can’t restore the Invisible Kingdom-, I can’t mend what’s broken-, I can’t-,*

“Brother,” said Ryouma, gaze pleading, “can you hear yourself? What you’re saying-, it’s nonsense-! You are the Second Prince of Hoshido!”

Ryouma’s grip on Takumi’s hands tightened.

“You’re hurting me,” the prince said quietly.

Anxiety was building a pyre in Takumi’s chest and he forced himself to steady his breaths.

*No, I mustn’t panic now.*

“Takumi-,”

“Let go of me, Ryouma.”

“I can’t do that,” the High Prince said, dropping his gaze, “I can’t let you out of my sight again. I feared that you’d be corrupted by them and I was right-!”

Takumi wrenched one of his hands free, “No-! You’re wrong! I haven’t been-,”

It occurred to him suddenly how ironic the setup was.

*Did I not say the same things to Kamui when he made his choice?*

“I said *let go of me,*” Takumi repeated again, steeling himself.

Somehow, in his absence, Ryouma had become nearly unrecognisable.

*He’s become obsessed with sealing me away!*

Had things always been this way between them? Had Takumi always simply bowed his head and submitted to Ryouma’s every order so thoughtlessly?

*Did I really not notice the imbalance until now-?*

The Raijinto Blade hummed and an electrical current bounced about the sheath, bringing Takumi
back from his troubling thoughts quickly.

Ryouma had no intention of releasing him and Takumi hurriedly yanked Leon’s satchel from his body and launched it over his shoulder.

“Leon!” he shouted, and the knight rushed forwards as the Brynhildr Tome tumbled towards the earth.

For a moment, the three princes watched as the volume fell—would it reject Leon again?

But she shot into his open hands and the gem on the cover lit up, trilling a brilliant greeting.

Leon clutched the tome to his chest in one hand, extending the other as he slowly paced towards Takumi and High Prince Ryouma. The Iceblade materialised in his awaiting hand, gleaming beneath the pale moonlight.

The blade was perfect, nothing like the crude weapon he’d conjured earlier in the Northern Fortress’s library.

I see. So the level of focus is reflected in the sword…

“Nothing is ever simple with you, is it?” Leon muttered, drawing the Iceblade up as he approached.

It was difficult to watch Ryouma and Takumi bicker, especially when Leon knew the depth of their love for one another.

Though it seems that this High Prince’s heart has not grown fonder with time…

“Marc!” shouted Leon, just remembering that he did in fact have other allies, “Hindernis! Now!”

The flier came into view in a shower of violet sparks, concocting a wide barrier as the Hoshidan forces readied themselves.

“Oh my,” said Leon, coming to Takumi’s side, “someone really ought to tell your big brother to mind his manners.”

Ryouma bristled and went to draw his blade, releasing his grip on Takumi in the process.

Leon hooked an arm around the prince’s middle and they stumbled back beyond Marc’s barrier.

“You okay?” the knight asked.

Takumi nodded dazedly, “Y-yeah.”

“As if I’d let you take my brother so easily!” Ryouma hissed, slicing Marc’s barrier in two with a single swing of his sword.

“It’s a legendary weapon,” Owain supplied when he caught sight of Marc’s shocked expression.
“Ah,” the flier hummed, “A stronger barrier would be appreciated then, huh? Guess I should’ve expected this…”

And with that, she abruptly leapt from her place atop Fafnir’s back and landed gracefully between Leon and Ryouma.

Her grey eyes were glowing like a cat’s in the darkness and Takumi stared in awe as two lines of violet streaked down her cheeks before they shifted into two more sets of eyes, opening to blink at Ryouma.

“What sort of-?” he began, recoiling at the otherworldly sight.

Marc growled at him.

*I guess those are some of the “other quirks” she was telling me about earlier…*

“Marc-!” hissed Takumi, shocked by her sudden arrival.

“Man, Takumi, you’re lucky I’m around,” she said, though there was no laughter in her voice, “you make for a pretty bad tactician on your own. It’s a good thing you’ve got a retainer like me to keep a few eyes on you.”

“Marc-,”

“Don’t sweat it,” she assured, though her gaze was still focused on Ryouma, “I’ll be sure to protect you. I doubt the rest of our ragtag team can keep it together without you. So I’ll do my part and keep you alive.”

“Y-yeah, okay,” said Takumi as Leon slowly released him.

Ryouma took another step back, confused by the way in which the flier was talking; had Takumi really taken on a Nohrian retainer?

Marc lifted her glowing gaze and set it upon him coldly, “You hurt him, didn’t you? You hurt Takumi and now I’m going to destroy you.”

The Trueblade lifted his sword and electricity danced up from the hilt; what sort of monstrous creature had Takumi gotten himself involved with?

“With Nohr being so cruel to him,” breathed Marc, serpentine spells lacing up her arms, “I thought *surely* Hoshido would be kinder. But clearly, I was wrong.”

Ryouma gritted his teeth, “You know nothing of which you speak! Hoshido is Takumi’s home!”

“He said he doesn’t WANNA GO BACK!” Marc exploded, “and if you try to force his hand, I’ll slice yours off!! We’ll see how well you wield that glowing sword handleless, Samurai.”

Ryouma swung his blade at her and Marc dodged with an angry bark, “Look at you go! Overflowing with this self-righteousness, even when you *know* you’re wrong! Tell me, High Prince, how far have you fallen?”

“Marc-,” Takumi whispered, “Marc, stop.”
Six wings of delicate lavender unfurled from the flier’s back and the Brands on her hands began to glow.

“Takumi-,” Leon said, hoping to placate him, “she’s-, oh *Dusk Dragon-*,”

And then to the flier, he shouted: “Marc! *Beruhigen Sie!*”

At the command to calm herself, Marc spat at Ryouma’s feet and took a step back, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

“Hey, hey,” called Owain, who had brought Fafnir back down to the ground.

The Brands on his biceps were glowing too.

“You are the one who knows nothing, High Prince,” Marc seethed.

She was hunched over, magic flowing freely into the air around her like a smokescreen.

Ryouma squinted through the fog at her.

“Marc, that’s enough,” said Takumi, reaching over to muss her snowy hair.

She blinked and her wings evaporated, second and third sets of eyes closing back up with no evidence of ever having been there.

“Sorry,” she breathed, tucking her Brands out of view behind her back, “sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Takumi, slinging an arm around her in a quick half-embrace, “thanks for protecting me.”

“But why are you-, I don’t understand, he-, no-, *why* are you defending this man-?” she asked, confusion clouding her face.

Takumi wanted to smooth the lines on her forehead and tell her things would be alright.

Ryouma was still poised with the Raijinto Blade in hand, gaze darting to those gathered before him, sizing them up.

*Sizing* me *up. Like an enemy.*

“Because,” said Takumi, not meeting her gaze, “he’s my brother. And I love him.”

***

After that, Ryouma had sheathed his sword in one easy motion before turning on heel and promptly gathering his forces.

They returned to Hoshido without another word, save for Sakura who promised she’d do everything she could to help them, and Tsubaki and Kazahana, who both bowed in thanks.

“Takumi? Are you okay?”

It was Leon at his side. Anna and Owain were deep in conversation about the safety of bridges
while Marc wordlessly led Fafnir along.

Godfrey paced, dazed, at her side. They’d sat Takumi atop Fafnir’s back, unsure of if he was going to be alright.

Leon managed to pull him back to the present with a tender question.

“Y-yeah, yeah,” said Takumi, running his fingers through Fafnir’s jet mane.

“You don’t have to-,” Leon trailed off and sighed.

…Lie, the knight was going to finish, but he let the word sit on his tongue until it melted away.

Takumi finally looked down at him.

“Why did you try to stop my brother?” he asked.

The question was a startling one, so innocent and genuine that it took Leon off-guard.

The knight slowed his pace and after a beat, shrugged, “It seemed like the right thing to do? I prefer to steer clear of affairs of the family but he was-, he loves you, but he-,”

Leon looked down at his callused palms.

_Not bloodstained._

“I dunno,” he finally said, none-to-happy with leaving things at that.

“Thanks, though,” said Takumi.

He wasn’t sure what he would’ve done if the others hadn’t come to his aid. Which was strange in itself; Takumi had never relied on his allies like that before, especially when standing up to his brother, a High Prince.

“It was just a selfish action,” Leon replied, “once more.”

Takumi frowned at him, “What do you mean?”

“Earlier, I heard you talking with my sister. She asked if you were going to return to Hoshido with Princess Sakura.”

Leon refused to look at him, “I realised that if you did go back to your homeland, I wouldn’t have the strength to face Macbeth; things would go back to how they were.”

_And I would continue to be his puppet…_

Leon went quiet and Takumi shifted awkwardly across Fafnir’s back; he wasn’t sure how to respond.

“I don’t-, I don’t want things to return to the way they were,” Leon admitted, “and your brother threatened to make that happen, whether he knew it or not.”

Takumi nodded; there was nothing for him to say to that.
“All that stress over such a sweet princess has left me exhausted!” said Anna, stretching her arms up high over her head.

Owain stifled a yawn and nodded his agreement, “Today’s been full of enough excitement for this prince.”

“This princess agrees,” Marc said softly.

She hadn’t said much after they’d split from the Hoshidan border.

Takumi reminded himself that he had to talk to her about all that had happened.

About her sudden entrance… and those lovely lavender wings…

“Well,” said Owain, “we’re nearly back to your place, Anna. Guess we’ll leave you guys here?”

The merchant nodded, “Sounds good to me!”

She took Godfrey gently by the arm before adding: “Perhaps when things are less hectic, you can stop by and say hi again.”

“I don’t even want to know what that would entail,” Marc muttered, unamused by Anna’s mischievous grin.

“In any case,” said the merchant, hooking her arm through Frey’s, “the two of us had better get some beauty sleep. Feel free to drop by anytime.”

“Thanks for your support today,” said Takumi, nodding his thanks to the both of them.

Anna tipped her wide-brimmed hat to him and Frey lifted the edge of their tunic in the smallest of curtsies.

“Let’s chat again soon,” the prince added, trying to secure a chance to discuss things with Godfrey.

A storyteller, huh? No, there’s more to it than that. I can’t afford to have allies who keep secrets. And, perhaps more to the point, if that storyteller knows how to keep Macbeth out of Leon, I’d love to know more about that…

“Leon,” he said, realising what that meant, “about that spell you mentioned earlier…”

The knight was waving Anna and Frey off before he turned his attention back upon Takumi.

“What of it?”

“What of it?”

Leon blinked, surprised by the prince’s willingness.

After everything I’ve done to him… this is…

“Alright,” Leon said instead, “when?”
“Can we do it tonight? I’d feel better getting this done soon.”

Well, I can’t refuse that sort of enthusiasm.

“Certainly. If that’s truly alright with you.”

Takumi nodded, “Sure thing. I’ve gotta talk with Marc a bit, but yeah. Definitely.”

“I’ll get my things together then,” said Leon with a curt nod.

Back at their unit, Takumi found Marc standing alone on the patio.

Owain had patted her on the head and taken Fafnir to the stable before announcing that he was headed to bed.

Takumi envied him for a moment, but quickly reminded himself that he needed answers.

Yes, those are most important. If Leon’s spell really can help my memory, I shouldn’t put it off.

“Takumi,” said Marc, not looking at him.

The prince couldn’t help but notice that she’d hidden her Brands beneath the dark gloves of her flier uniform.

“Listen, Marc-,”

“I’m sorry,” she said again, “I was way outta line earlier. I-, I uh-, shouldn’t have attacked your brother.”

“That’s true,” Takumi allowed, “but you did it to protect me, which is what a true retainer would’ve done.”

He took a moment to pause and organise his thoughts; Takumi was unused to dealing with such a delicate situation.

Maybe it’s because I’ve grown to respect Marc? No, this is something different…

It makes me wonder what sort of thoughtless things I said to Oboro and Hinata before…

“My other retainers,” he said, hoping she hadn’t noticed his long silence, “Oboro and Hinata, they would’ve been unable to defy my brother. He is the High Prince and everyone in Hoshido, including myself and my siblings, answer to him absolutely.”

“But today-,”

Takumi looked out into the darkness of the field, “Today was different. I- I’ve never refused Ryouma like that before. I would never have done it either, but-, but if our world really is in danger, I have to do my part. Even if that puts me at odds with the ones I love.”

Marc blinked and turned to gaze at him.

“My, my,” she said and a small smile played its way to her lips, “I blink and suddenly you have
the wisdom of a king.”

Takumi pinked in the dim moonlight and laughed, “You think so? It was kinda scary-, standing up to Ryouma like that. And-, and in front of everyone-!”

“Yeah,” Marc agreed, “a hell of a display, to be sure. But it was also pretty brave. I’m glad that you’re my charge, Takumi. I can hold my head high next to you.”

“Yes,” said Takumi, “please do! I’m honoured to have you by my side, Marc, weird quirks and all.”

At that, she glanced away and her pointed ears twitched.

“Those wings were pretty cool,” Takumi told her.

She laughed until she hiccupped and when the prince looked at her, he realised that she was crying.

“You’re the only person who’s ever said that to me. You’re probably the only person who’d ever even think that.”

Takumi frowned, “What do you mean-?”

“Where I come from, my Brand,” she lifted her hand with the eye marking, “the marks on my face, my wings, even my ears are a reminder of an evil dragon who preys upon the kind.”

“Well that doesn’t make any sense,” said Takumi in a voice that did not permit argument.

Marc took off a glove to rub her eye and then studied him, “What do you mean-?”

“You’ve only ever protected me, Marc,” he said, “even when you thought I was my sis-, Aqua-, still. And you came all this way just to try and save a world full of total strangers. That doesn’t seem like something an evil dragon would do, does it?”

He turned to look at her and she laughed a bit at the absurdity of it.

“Thanks, Takumi,” she said softly.

He pulled her into a hug.

“Don’t ever regret what you did for me today,” he said into her hair, “you were there when I needed you. I froze up and you protected me, even against the one person I never wanted to fight.”

She nodded wordlessly, too choked up to say anything as her fists clenched the fabric of his tunic.

“Thank you, Marc,” he said, “thank you.”

***

Takumi had sent Marc to bed after that, informing her that bags under all six of her eyes would probably be bad for her health.
She’d laughed but headed into her room quietly.

Leon was perched at their desk when Takumi entered their shared chamber.

“Leon,” he greeted softly, “I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“Did you get everything worked out with Marc?” the knight asked, closing up the book he was reading.

He had a few notes drafted out on a loose-leaf piece of parchment.

Takumi nodded, deciding to ask about the notes later, “I think so. But let’s get to it.”

Leon stood and the prince realised he’d already changed into his nightgown.

“You should change too,” the knight suggested, as though he’d read Takumi’s mind.

Without his headband in place, Leon had pushed his hair back and it shaped his face, the ends curling.

The first time that it’d happened, Takumi had almost blurted out something akin to: “You have a forehead underneath all that?”

Thankfully, some part of him had prevented that calamity.

“This one’s thicker,” Leon said, handing the prince a crisply folded gown, “if you don’t mind the added weight, that is.”

Takumi blinked, a bit surprised by the consideration, but accepted it gratefully nonetheless.

“Thanks,” he said, stepping into the washroom.

In the silence, the prince slowly leant up against the door and let out a heavy breath.

He was glad his true feelings about Leon’s spell hadn’t been revealed; he wasn’t entirely confident that it was a good idea.

*I don’t have the first clue what this spell is going to do to me.*

As Takumi changed, Leon took a few calming breaths; Macbeth’s use of his body earlier had shaken him far more than he’d dared admit.

*No, I have to do better. Takumi is counting on my skills and my magic. I-, I can’t falter. Not now. Not when this involves someone else.*

When it had just been Leon—and it had always just been Leon—he hadn’t minded it so much; lessons without pain meant nothing, after all.

*Those failures had all led me to knowledge, so it was fine, but-.*

Whenever magic involved another, Leon couldn’t maintain Macbeth’s strictly sterile attitude; he couldn’t ignore the fact that those around him were human.

*And now, with Takumi. He’s a person, just like me, with emotions and goals and a family and-,*
a pretty important missing memory.

“Not to mention a few truths he deserves to know,” Leon muttered as he turned down the sheets on their bed.

For the first few days—which had turned into weeks—at their unit, Takumi had adamantly refused to sleep in the same bed as Leon.

This had led to the two of them trading off every-so-often. However, this evening required the both of them to be in close proximity.

“I know you don’t like that,” Leon said once he’d explained things to Takumi, “but try to bear with me. Just for tonight.”

The prince had nodded, lacking in his usual biting replies.

“It’s okay,” Takumi said as they climbed into the bed together.

Leon shifted awkwardly, offering his hand to the prince.

“I’ve only done this once before,” the knight admitted after a moment.

“Now is really not the time to tell me things like that,” Takumi said before he could stop himself.

But he intertwined his fingers with Leon’s anyway.

“The spell activates when we’re asleep,” the knight explained, “so this is… all we really have to do.”

“Pretty easy set-up,” Takumi commented, easing himself into a comfortable position at Leon’s side.

The knight resisted the urge to correct him and systematically go through all the unseen steps that this particular spell required.

“Are you alright?” Leon asked instead, “there’s still time to back out.”

Takumi turned to gaze at him for what felt like a long time in the darkness.

“I… trust you,” he said finally.

Leon blinked, minutely grateful for the shade to hide his surprise.

“I know that seems wild to say,” Takumi admitted hurriedly, seeming to realise that he’d said something quite unexpected.

“But-, but it’s the truth.”

“Now is the time for truth,” Marc had said. It seemed that she and Owain had impressive timing when it came to these sorts of things.

*Must be an Ylissean thing.*
“I-, I see,” said Leon lamely.

He really had no idea how to respond to such brutal honesty.

_Especially given my-,_

“I didn’t mean to make things weird,” Takumi said with a laugh that he turned into a cough.

Leon smiled.

“It’s okay,” he reassured, realising how strange it would be to refuse a reply, “I’m glad you told me. There’s a chance-, perhaps I should say a guarantee-, that you’ll feel differently when we wake again.”

Takumi didn’t say anything and Leon wondered if the prince had fallen asleep.

“I dunno,” he said finally.

Had he been struggling with an honest answer in the silence?

Leon bit his lip, deciding it was best not to dwell on it.

“Goodnight, Prince Takumi,” he said instead.

“Goodnight, Prince Leon.”

***

When Takumi blinked, he found himself in a misty forest. He was still wearing his nightgown, which was a little strange. But before he had more time to consider the uncanny development, Takumi heard Frey’s mysterious tune filling the space between the arching trees.

He followed the noise, curious.

“Maybe Leon’s spell didn’t work,” he said to himself.

If Takumi had had any other thoughts, they dissipated once he reached a clearing.

Frey was perched upon The Smiling Rock—which made no sense because the rock couldn’t be here—wearing a loose white tunic and a pair of dark leggings.

Their golden braid sat over one shoulder, sunken grey eyes closed in concentration. A donut-shaped stone hung from around their neck and glowed a ghostly blue hue.

“Godfrey?” said Takumi, not expecting a reply.

But the storyteller’s song came to a slow stop and Frey opened their eyes.

“They said by way of greeting, “I’ll be honest, I was expecting someone else.”

“Yeah,” said Takumi with an apologetic shrug, “that happens a lot when I’m around.”
“Nah,” said Frey with a good-natured smile as they leapt gracefully from their place atop the impossible Smiling Rock, “you’re just a bit of a rogue element in this story.”

“Excuse me-?”

“You’re unpredictable,” Frey corrected, “and that’s one of the greatest traits one may possess. Stories always do favour those who refuse to remain complaisant.”

“Refuse to remain-?”

The storyteller chuckled, “No more spoilers for you though, Lord Takumi. Who knows what might happen if we keep chatting? I must admit, I do feel inclined to tell you-,”

They trailed off with a pained smile.

Takumi frowned, “I have a lot of questions. About you, and that song you played. And also about these outlandish remarks you keep making.”

“I’m sure you do,” Frey agreed, “there’s much we must discuss. But as you’ll recall, you were not the one I was to meet this evening.”

“But-,”

“Hush,” said the storyteller, “there will be plenty of time to talk later. For now, though, I think you have a memory to reclaim.”

That was true. Takumi didn’t want to abandon Frey so soon but if he didn’t go to retrieve his memory now, there was a possibility that it’d be lost forever.

No, I can’t let that happen. I need answers. I can ask Frey my questions anytime. But Leon did set all this up for me, so...

“Go, now,” said Frey, gesturing, “and don’t forget what you learn there.”

Takumi bit his lip.

“I’ll come find you later,” he said, “we need to talk.”

Frey approached him and ruffled his hair. For a second, Takumi thought he saw unspent tears in the storyteller’s eyes.

But he blinked and they were gone; things were strange in this dreamy realm.

“Please don’t forget,” said Frey with uncharacteristic seriousness.

Takumi lingered, unnerved by that reply.

“There’s nothing to be done now,” said Frey, oddly resigned, “so get going, Lord Takumi.”

And he did.

But, just before he lost sight of the enigmatic storyteller, Takumi looked back.

Frey had retaken their spot atop the impossible Smiling Rock.
And Leon stood before them.

***

The trees became warped and distorted as Takumi wandered deeper into the forest. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do; was his memory simply going to wash over him?

“Maybe I’ll just know everything when I wake up?”

The answer was not so simple, nor so easy; it never was.

Takumi realised this when he came upon a wide wooden door. The trees arched over it, branches and undergrowth nearly obscuring it entirely.

“Okay,” the prince said, “I’m officially lost both physically and mentally.”

Takumi studied the door for a long moment. If Marc and Owain were here, they’d encourage him to explore it further.

“It’s best to investigate these sorts of mysterious happenings!” Owain would say with an encouraging pat.

“Just open the fucking door, Takumi,” Marc would say with a shove.

If she were here, she’d actually push him through the doorway.

“Oh, I hate this,” the prince muttered before pushing open the door.

***

“Well this is a surprise,” Leon deadpanned.

Frey watched him passively for a moment in the silence.

“Well? What do you want? You shouldn’t be here. But, I suppose you already know that, don’t you?” said Leon with a frown.

“My, my,” said Frey, “what’s with the sudden animosity, Lord Leon?”

The knight bristled. “I don’t appreciate your use of foreign magics against me. Were this not a dream, I would not be so complaisant.”

Frey smiled but it didn’t reach their eyes.

“Oh of course,” they replied, “your distrust in me is natural.”

“A diviner who claims to know no magic yet can rid my body of a pesky possession is quite the outlier, even among a party such as mine,” Leon shot back.
Frey trilled a meaningless tune on their handheld instrument.

“Did your mentor give you that jynxpiece?” they asked.

“I-, don’t recall,” Leon said honestly; he felt the weight of the glass in his hand suddenly.

Frey hummed, “Well, in any case, I must applaud your party’s efforts against fate; such defiance is a nice change in pace.”

“What are you?” Leon asked, right to the point.

“You reflect the sorcerer’s curiosity and think it your own,” said Frey with soft disapproval.

“Pardon-?”

Frey sighed and readjusted in their spot atop the impossible Smiling Rock.

“Do you know why your draconic brother sent you to Cyrkensia?”

“To reverse Macbeth’s spell. And to protect Takumi.”

Frey nodded, “Yes, that’s right. But I hear the uncertainty in your heart; you wonder why your elder brother is not the one to fix things.”

Leon clenched his fists; there was no need for this foolish storyteller to go through his head so easily.

*They needn’t see my memories of Marx… those precious sights are mine alone.*

“Stop that,” he said tartly.

Frey’s sad eyes lit up with amusement, “And if I don’t?”

“I will stop you by force.”

The storyteller frowned, “Don’t misunderstand; I am not your enemy. But I need you to recognise something, and that’s the powerlessness that your current companion felt in the past.”

“My current-, you mean Takumi-?”

“You made him feel that way,” Frey continued, “and unlike you, he did not have the means to fight back against your assault upon him.”

“But that-,”

“-Wasn’t you? Sure it was. You said it yourself: the *Heben* spell is only an amplifier. Somewhere, deep in your heart, you wanted to do that to him. And the *Heben* let you.”

Leon opened his mouth to reply but no words came; what could he say?

Godfrey was right on the mark; they had Leon all figured out.
“Lord Takumi has just as many questions as you do,” Frey supplied, “though his are much easier to answer.”

“And mine?”

Frey frowned, “I cannot distinguish which thoughts are your own. Do you want answers for yourself or is it that sorcerer within you?”

“I was under the impression that you drove Macbeth out,” said Leon, beginning to frown. Anxiety pooled in his stomach; what if he made another appearance?

Will I ever be able to resist him-?

“I am not omnipotent, Lord Leon. My power comes at a price, just as all power does. Surely you, who claims himself a brother to Lady Aqua, understand that.”

Leon recalled how her songs exhausted her, perhaps even preyed upon her life.

“I don’t aim to risk setting my secrets in enemy hands,” Frey explained without remorse, “so do try to understand, Lord Leon.”

“Is there anything you can tell me?” he asked, frustrated.

The storyteller’s eyes narrowed; Leon wondered briefly if he should’ve used a kinder tone.

“There are plenty of things I’d like to tell you,” Frey said with an honesty that Leon did not associate with them.

They frowned, “But as long as you harbour that sorcerer, I cannot be sure what part of you is genuine; I want to stop the calamity just as you do, but you’re a bit of a difficult case, I’m afraid.”

Leon nodded, he could understand that, at least.

I may understand it, but I’m not satisfied with that; I want answers!

“Earlier when Lord Takumi returned your Divine Weapon, you conjured up an interesting piece,” said Frey, “tell me about it.”

Leon lifted his hand and the Brynhildr Tome materialised.

“I’ve only ever seen it done once before,” said the knight, “when my mother summoned her own weapon. It was different though, and she called it the Icespear.”

“But your blade-,”

Leon tapped the gem on the cover of his tome and she trilled a soft sound in greeting.

The Iceblade exploded into existence in a shower of snowy flurries.

“Iceblade,” Leon breathed, “my own creation.”

He seemed uncharacteristically careful as he handled the weapon and Frey approached slowly.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” whispered the knight.
Frey studied the weapon in Leon’s hands, “Flawless; your skill is indisputable.”

“Oh yes,” the knight agreed, turning the blade in his hands, “my skill is indisputable indeed, Innkeeper.”

***

“This is certainly disorienting,” said Takumi, stepping into his borrowed chamber back at the Northern Fortress.

He saw himself in his bed and pinked, realising he was wearing only Marx’s blouse.

“So this was after we-,”

Lazwald came in with a tray and Takumi recalled that he’d been fooled at first. Now, of course, he already knew the truth.

The scene changed and Takumi watched Leon dump his unconscious body unceremoniously in one of his armchairs.

“Guess this explains how I knew where his chamber was,” the prince muttered to himself, striding deeper into the room to watch in sick fascination.

Leon had retrieved a coil of rope and Takumi already figured he knew what the knight intended to do with it. His wrists ached at the thought and Takumi looked down at them for any cruel evidence left behind; if there had been, however, it was now gone in the present.

But Takumi was pulled back to the scene when Leon spoke. He seemed disoriented, upset, and even frightened.

His words chilled Takumi’s blood.

“Mother-?”

Was Leon haunted by the ghost of his deceased-?

The scene jumped like a broken record and Takumi resisted the urge to vomit; he began to realise that the scene was comprised of both his memories and Leon’s, which accounted for the severe lack of a decent continuity.

Leon denied his mother again and again despite the obvious anguish it caused him.

Despite knowing that things would go sour quickly, Takumi could not ignore Leon’s blatant suffering; how could this mage prince hold his head so high, even after having endured such cruelty?

***
“Lord Leon-,”

The knight looked down into Frey’s face, “I’ll admit, your tactics deserve some merit, Innkeeper. You’re certainly a slippery one; I can’t seem to get a proper read on you.”

“You’re not Lord-,”

“My name is Macbeth,” said the sorcerer, voice slipping easily between Leon’s lips, “and now you’re right where I want you.”

And he sank the Iceblade into Frey’s thigh.

The pain was excruciating.

Frey’s mouth opened in a soundless scream.

Macbeth pitched Leon’s mouth into another twisted grin.

“Tell me, Innkeeper, how do you like the impossible heat of my pupil’s Iceblade in your blood?”

Frey gritted their teeth and sank to the ground, “I’ve-, had better.”

Macbeth’s lip curled in disapproval; this was clearly not the reaction he’d been eagerly awaiting.

“Disappointed?” Frey asked, looking up into his face with a bittersweet smile, “thought you might be.”

The magic in Leon’s sword skittered down the storyteller’s leg and they hissed at the pain.

“That’s more like it,” Macbeth muttered, though he was noticeably less enthused.

He took a step closer to where Frey was perched on the ground, unmoving. The storyteller screwed their eyes shut as Macbeth raised Leon’s weapon again.

But when no blow came, Frey cautiously opened one eye.

Leon was standing motionless above them.

“Lord Leon-?”

“Verlassen!” Leon spat, but Frey got the distinct feeling that the order was not directed at them.

His hand jerked and the Iceblade tumbled from his grip, clanging against the soft earth.

“Beruehre Sie nicht!” Leon whispered, “Don’t touch them!” He was beginning to tremble from the weight of Macbeth’s spirit within him.

Frey blinked, watching in fascination as Leon tore open his spectral body. The Brynhildr Tome reached a fever pitch melody and disappeared in a puff of smoke, taking the Iceblade with her.

Frey rubbed their eyes and was surprised to see Leon and Macbeth standing apart before them.
“Oh,” they mumbled, “I wasn’t expecting this twist so soon-,”

“How dare you lay a hand on them!” Leon shouted, clenching his hands into fists.

In only a moment, his armour had sheathed up his body, gauntlets clicking into their rightful places at his hands.

Macbeth grinned, “I’ll never tire of your passion, Leon.”

“Godfrey’s just an Innkeeper!” Leon hissed, “why would you-,”

“They’re an abomination!” Macbeth corrected condescendingly, “a storyteller should stay on their side of the story! Your little friend aims to rewrite a path already chosen! This sort of interaction is forbidden!”

It doesn’t have to be.

“I’ve had enough of this!” Leon hissed, launching himself at the sorcerer.

“It seems we’ll have to settle things,” Macbeth breathed, easing just out of reach, “but that’ll be later; I have no intention of fighting you as you are now.”

And then he winked out of existence.

For a moment, Leon stood silently in the spot that Macbeth had previously occupied.

And then he sank to his knees.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

***

Takumi watched as the Leon of the past finally rid himself of his mother’s ghost.

Placated at last, he turned his attention back on Takumi’s unconscious form.

As the prince studied the scene playing out before him, he noticed that it brought Leon no pleasure to do as he did.

“So then why-?”

Had the Heben spell truly distorted his reality so absolutely?

“You’ll learn to love me in time,” Leon was saying when Takumi started paying attention again.

He silently cheered for his past self’s witty response: “Keep dreaming.”

Leon degraded him further and at the mentions of Marx—and worse still, Ryouma—Takumi had to look away.

“But this is it, right? This is what I wanted: to see the truth of the matter.”
He settled at the edge of Leon’s bed, “No matter how much it may hurt… I have to do this.”

Takumi watched his past self recognize the silhouette of the Fuujin Bow. He’d trusted Leon—foolishly—when the knight remarked on how upset he seemed without it.

“Oh, this is it,” Takumi said to himself, realizing they’d nearly reached the point where his memories faded into static.

“Prince Takumi, I want you to obey me.”

The prince sighed, recalling the momentary pricks of pain as Leon’s manipulation spell sank into him.

It had festered in his mind until he could no longer fight it.

And then Leon began to command him.

***

Frey got to a slow stand and limped over to Leon, touching his shoulder gently.

At the contact, the knight’s armour dissipated and he was left in his nightgown.

“Are you okay?”

Leon looked into their face, “I’m fine, but what about you? I-, I stabbed you. Uh. Sorry about that.”

The storyteller looked down at their thigh.

“It looks alright,” Frey said, “it was more of a surprise than anything; I tend to feel very safe in places like this so… I wasn’t counting on that.”

Leon got to a stand and dusted off his nightgown.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

Frey waved the apology off dismissively, “It’s no real trouble. I’m grateful that the damage was done here instead of in the waking world.”

“I-,”

“Hush,” said the storyteller, taking Leon’s hand and limping him deeper into the forest, “you must open these doors and uncover your memories now.”

“But-,”

“Go, Lord Leon.”

And he did.
Through the first door, Leon found himself greeted by the damp interior of the Northern Fortress’s prison.

He’d been on his way to visit Prince Takumi; word of his arrival had reached Krakenburg quickly and Leon’s siblings were interested in meeting the foreign prince.

“This is after I ran into Macbeth,” he muttered to himself, trailing his past self into the cell.

This was one of many memories that Leon possessed only a partial of; would he finally see the entire scene for himself?

“My Lord Leon,” Zero had greeted.

The knight watched as his retainer parted from them, leaving his past self alone with Takumi.

“Tell me the High Prince’s weakness,” Leon’s past self commanded.

“What?” he muttered, unsure why he’d said that, “why would I-?”

And then, the chilly realisation sank in. As Leon watched himself approach Takumi, he saw the unmistakable glint of violet miasma.

“So that damned Macbeth-, he was in my head even then-? How long was I under the Heben’s influence-?”

The knight straightened and made for the door; he had no reason to stick around and watch the rest of this corrupt scene play out.

“Alright,” Leon breathed, hand fisting around the door handle, “on to the next one.”

The door didn’t budge.

“What-?”

Angered, Leon yanked it harder. Still, the ancient oak wood did not give way.

“Godfrey! If this is your doing, I’ll kill you myself! I take back what I said about your leg! I wish I stabbed the other one too!” he shouted, bringing a fist down upon the wood.

The oak door trembled beneath Leon’s hand but it did not give way; in the silence, the knight sank to the floor.

Dimly, he could hear Prince Takumi’s pleas go unanswered behind him.

“No-,” Takumi was saying—and it pained Leon to hear—“please-,”

The knight drew his knees to his chest and put his hands over his ears in an attempt to thwart the sound of the assault just out of view.

Yet somehow, when Leon watched his past self exit, there was no relief left in his heart.

“Please,” he murmured, “please tell me it’s over-,”
Leon got to a shaky stand and took a hesitant step towards the prison cell.

“I should-,”

But what could he do? Everything he was seeing, it was all in the past!

“Even so, I-,”

The door rattled and Leon spun, startled, only to see the oak wood fly open, urging him into another memory.

The Takumi of the present was wandering around the same dreamy labyrinth, discovering things he’d no doubt be scarred by.

“That’s right-, I-, I have to keep going...”

It hurt, to continue. It hurt to turn his back on the Takumi of the past, who sat rotting in the darkness—who would continue to do so for a week—alone and aching.

“But I can’t help you now,” Leon whispered, and stepped through the doorway.

***

“Godfrey!”

The storyteller nearly dropped their handheld instrument, startled.

They turned, grey eyes widening as Prince Takumi came pacing back into view.

“That was certainly quick,” said Frey, “did you really uncover all the truths you were searching for, Lord Takumi?”

“Yeah,” the prince said, “I would’ve been back sooner but this place is like a damn maze-!”

“I did not mean to hide from you,” Frey replied, amused.

Takumi came to the foot of the impossible Smiling Rock and gazed up at them for a while.

“Won’t you come down for a bit? Let’s talk a while. I suppose you met with Leon too, right?”

Frey blinked and then chuckled, “Yes, I did. Nothing gets past you, does it?”

“Nah,” said Takumi, thinking of how he’d looked over his shoulder and seen the two of them together earlier, “I’m just lucky.”

Leon’s words from earlier returned to him: “Do you have any idea how lucky you’ve been? You’re so blessed to have such a loving family!“

“How can you say that?” whispered Frey, thick brows coming together in confusion.

The prince blinked, “Huh?”
“Lord Leon did some awful things to you,” said Frey, who sounded uncharacteristically angry, “and yet still, you call yourself lucky?”

“There was some bad stuff,” Takumi agreed, “lots of bad stuff. But I met Marc and Owain, and the others too.”

He thought of Elfy and Harold and little Elise, all crowded around the table in Anna’s team room playing a few rounds of cards.

“And I met Miss Anna, and you!”

Frey’s eyes widened at that.

“Then there’s also Ser Fafnir; I didn’t know pegasi could be jet-coloured like that! So I think I’m pretty lucky. After all, I’ve learnt a whole lot. About Nohr, the Invisible Kingdom, and even Ylisse.”

As he thought on his earlier conversation with Marc, he hastily added: “Not to mention myself…”

Frey eased down from their place atop the impossible Smiling Rock; their movements were careful and cautious and Takumi studied them, confused.

“You never cease to amaze me,” Frey admitted with a rueful smile, crossing their hands behind their back and pacing cautiously closer.

Had Frey always had that limp?

Takumi shrugged and laughed, “I have that effect on some people.”

“Oh?”

“N-no,” the prince said, pinking, “I just wanted to try saying a line like that for a change.”

“Not really your style?” suggested Frey, hiding a smile.

“Not really my style,” Takumi agreed.

Frey chuckled.

Takumi studied their face in the silence.

“I have a lot of questions,” the prince said again.

The storyteller nodded, “I’m sure you do.”

“Can I ask them?”

“I was not expecting you to come back for me here,” Frey admitted instead of answering.

Takumi frowned, “Of course, that’s what I said, right? I’d come for you and for some answers.”

“That sounds like a threat.”
“It was a promise.”

Frey giggled, “Oh, I like you, Lord Takumi! You’re so straightforward! I’m sure a story like this appreciates that.”

“Yeah, like that,” said the prince, “those outlandish remarks.”

The storyteller winked at him, “Oh, yeah. It’s part of my charm.”

Takumi squinted at them.

“Alright, alright, fine,” said Frey, lifting their hands in surrender.

Their handheld instrument caught the pale glow of the dim moonlight.

“Tell me about that,” said Takumi, gesturing.

Godfrey blinked, genuinely surprised by his interest, “This old thing?”

“Yeah.”

The storyteller came to Takumi’s side and after only a moment’s hesitation, handed their instrument to him.

“This is my thumb piano,” Frey explained, “but that’s a silly name, so I just call it a Kalimba.”

“Ka-lim-ba,” Takumi sounded out.

“Yes,” said Frey, pleased, “I guess it’s sort of…my tome.”

“That melody you played earlier,” said Takumi, “to separate Macbeth and Leon-,”

“The Renewal Arrangement,” Frey supplied, “yes. It’s an old spell. Mages like Lord Leon would only have to recite the words to activate the magic.”

“But you don’t do that,” said Takumi, confused; he really didn’t understand any of this magic stuff.

The storyteller nodded, “That’s true. I can’t use magic. At least, not in the traditional sense. Most spells are performed with words, but it wasn’t always that way.”

“So you use music-?”

“That’s how older spells were done,” Frey agreed, “including the Renewal Arrangement.”

Takumi thought of Aqua and her mysterious song that purified Macbeth’s miasma.

Maybe her magic is the same-?

“It’s better to use tools to do magic,” Frey added, “which is why things like tomes and scrolls exist today. But originally, we used much more common items.”

The storyteller lifted their pendant and the bluish stone caught the moonlight.
“Jynxpieces.”

Takumi recalled the word from earlier; Leon was in possession of one too.

“Like Leon’s jeweller’s glass,” he said.

Godfrey nodded, “Exactly.”

Takumi pictured Aqua’s pendant.

*It is the same-*!

“Well that clears some stuff up,” he said.

Frey laughed again, “Well I’m glad to hear it.”

Takumi shoved them playfully.

Godfrey shouldered him back with a wince.

“I still have a lot of questions,” Takumi said, “but there’s one that’s really bothering me.”

“Christ, don’t let it weigh on you,” said Frey, seeming genuinely concerned.

Takumi frowned, “When we were in the library and you were talking to Macbeth, you said something kinda strange.”

“I said a lot of things.”

“Yeah, but you said ‘your arrogance is almost refreshing.’ Do you face tough opponents often, Godfrey?”

“Just ‘Frey,’” said Frey, “but to answer your question: sorta.”

Takumi bit his lip and nodded; that wasn’t exactly the answer he was looking for.

*I know it wasn’t.*

“Sorry,” said the storyteller, “I’ll elaborate; I don’t mean to dodge your questions.”

Takumi fixed a look upon them, disbelieving.

“I’m not of your world,” said Frey, “which you already know. And it probably doesn’t surprise you; Lord Owain and Lady Marc are strangers in this place as well, it isn’t new. But I am not from their world either.”

“But-,”

“I’ve been to so many worlds,” the storyteller said, studying their feet.

They were bare against the soft earth.

“The world that I’m from,” they continued, “it’s full of war and tragedy.”

Takumi frowned; that didn’t sound like a nice world.
It isn’t.

“But despite that, many of her people are Good.”

Takumi thought back to Marc, who was so saddened by her Brand and the weight that it forced upon her.

“That doesn’t sound like something an evil dragon would do, does it?”

Marc was Good despite her Brand, despite her blood, despite everything that told her she was Bad.

“Many of those people are imperfect,” said Frey, “but they strive to do good and spread kindness throughout their world. Even in knowing that it will never overshadow the evil that lurks there.”

“Yeah, but, a world with no Good is…”

“Well it’s not a very good world, now is it?” said Frey with a laugh.

“That’s right,” said Takumi, serious.

Frey smiled at him.

“I want to see you achieve your happy ending,” they said.

The prince blinked, “Huh? My happy-?”

“Your happy ending. You deserve one.”

Takumi thought of Ryouma, who had sheathed his sword without another word and turned his back on his brother.

Do I?

“Despite everything,” said Frey, “you will get one. You will get a happy ending, Lord Takumi.”

“Are those the threads of fate talking?”

Frey blinked and their grey gaze softened.

“Who knows?”

Takumi laughed. That was all he could really do; it was obvious that Frey didn’t want to go into details about the fates they could see.


Frey studied their bare wrist for a moment.

“It’s almost time to say goodbye,” they said.

Takumi lifted a brow, “That’s a bit sad, isn’t it?”
The storyteller chuckled joylessly, "You have no idea."

The prince frowned and just as he was preparing to ask—in vain—for an explanation, Frey flicked him in the forehead.

"You’d better hurry. Your friends are all waiting."

Takumi blinked.

My friends-?

"Well-, I guess I’ll-, see you later," said Takumi.

His hands were beginning to fade; it was time to return to the waking world.

A lopsided grin danced across the storyteller’s face.

"Oh, one more thing!" said Frey, and Takumi blinked; it was unlike them to provide information so freely.

"Should you have need of a swordsman, tell Lord Owain these words…"

"This isn’t goodbye," said Takumi with a confident nod as Frey finished, "I’ll see you soon, okay?"

And with that, he faded into nothingness.

"Okay," said Frey, and they sank to the ground.

***

Takumi blinked and he felt the unmistakable warmth of a body at his side. For an awful second, the prince almost thought he was back in Hoshido with Ryouma.

The events from the previous few days flooded his mind and Takumi laughed to himself joylessly.

"Right, right," he muttered, "he probably hates me now."

The prince glanced over and found Leon asleep on his arm.

Just as he was about to remark on how strange the situation was, the door to his chamber came open.

Owain bowed with gusto in the doorway.

"Good morning Leon, Takumi. I see you’re both as comfortable as yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. I’ll tell Marc to-,

"Good morning, Owain," said Takumi.
His response startled the mage, whose head whipped up and his eyes widened.

“You’re awake!”

“Y-yes,” said Takumi, not understanding, “I am.”

A wide grin spread across Owain’s face.

“Hold on,” he said, “I gotta tell my sister!”

And with that, he ducked out of the room in a hurry.

“You should wake up soon, Leon,” said Takumi, who felt a bit foolish talking to him as he slumbered on, “Owain seems pretty excited about something. I think he missed us while we were dreaming.”

As Takumi studied Leon’s face, he realised the knight’s cheeks were streaked with tears.

“Oh,” said the prince, “that’s probably not good.”

He shook Leon gently, unsure of whether it would ruin the spell.

*I can’t think about that now-! What if he’s having a nightmare?*

“Leon,” he said, “Leon, you’ve gotta wake up.”

Yet still, the knight did not respond.

“Alright!” said Owain, popping back into the doorway, “Marc’s got breakfast started! She’s been learning all about Cyrkensian cuisine just for this moment! We’re gonna have a buffet; it’ll be great!!”

Takumi wished he could share the mage’s enthusiasm.

“Leon isn’t waking up,” he said.

The joy dropped right from Owain’s face.

“Oh,” he said, tone uncharacteristically empty.

He approached the bed cautiously, grey eyes centring on Leon’s soft expression.

“He’s crying,” Owain noted aloud.

“Yeah,” said Takumi, “I-, I think he’s having a nightmare.”

Owain grimaced; he had no idea what to do.

“Alright,” he said instead, “in any case now that you’re finally awake-,”

“Finally-? How long have I been asleep?”

“Four days.”

Takumi blinked.
“Oh,” he said lamely; he hadn’t expected Leon’s spell to hold him under for so long.

And for just one memory, too…

Perhaps Leon had to sift through more.

“I smell awful,” said Takumi, expression souring.

“We didn’t want to move either of you,” Owain admitted, “but now, if it isn’t too much trouble, I’d really like to get those sheets washed.”

“Sure,” said Takumi, who eased Leon from the bed and carefully resettled him in the desk chair.

His notes from a few nights prior sat folded crisply atop his tomes. Takumi had the urge to unravel them and read through them; what sort of spells was Leon researching?

“Maybe bathe, if it suits you,” suggested Owain, though he didn’t seem to care either way.

Takumi looked down at Leon as he slept on.

“Oh, c’mon,” he muttered, pulling the knight into his arms and pushing into the washroom.

After debating with himself for significantly longer than necessary, Takumi finally settled in the wide tub, resting Leon’s body against his chest.

“It’s funny,” he muttered, “I feared this exact situation only months ago. But now I’m the driving force behind it.”

He wordlessly sponged at Leon’s body, agonising over what he’d do if the knight didn’t wake.

“Maybe I should go to Godfrey-?” he wondered aloud.

“Don’t go,” Leon whispered, and had Takumi not felt his jaw move with the words, he would’ve thought he’d imagined it.

“Leon, you’re awake-,”

“I’m wet,” the knight observed sleepily.

Takumi bit his lip, “Yeah. Well, we’ve been asleep for a few days. Owain took the sheets so I thought we could use a bath.”

“Oh,” said Leon.

He sounded so tired.

“Oh.”

Takumi frowned.

“Are you okay?”
“It happened again,” Leon said softly and Takumi’s hands stilled in the water.

“What-,”

“Macbeth,” the knight supplied, “he got me again.”

“I’m sorry-,”

“I’m so sick of this,” Leon choked out, voice hoarse from disuse, “I’m so sick of this betrayal. He’s had a grip on me since the start. I saw it. I saw everything.”

He rested against the prince’s chest with a long sigh. After a moment, the knight raised his chestnut gaze and stared up at Takumi.

“Something wrong?” the prince asked.

“How can you bear to be this close?” Leon wondered aloud, “After everything I did to you-?”

Takumi leant back and looked at the ceiling for a long moment. The tile was pattered with pale roses, whose vines threaded through one another in an intricate pattern.

The prince sighed.

“It was Macbeth’s spell that made you act on your impulses,” he said finally, “and it was the hate in your heart that he took advantage of.”

Leon closed his eyes; that was true.

“He could’ve used anyone,” Takumi added, “and had it not been for your quick thinking in the library, I would’ve become his puppet as well.”

Leon blinked. It was true that he’d saved Takumi, but-,

But what?

Why did I save him?

“Macbeth mentored you while your magic was in its infancy,” the prince continued, “and that gave him a way into your heart. He betrayed your trust in him and took over your mind for his own gain.”

I’ll kill him. I’ll kill Macbeth and make him pay for what he’s done to me. And for what he did to Takumi.

Leon thought of how Macbeth had struck Marc in the library, how he’d seized Leon’s body and used the knight’s own divine sword to stab Godfrey-,

No, I’ll make him pay for what he did to all of us.

“But it’s precisely because you let that hate in your heart fester that Macbeth was able to consume you so easily,” Takumi said quietly.
He had suddenly become very wise.

Leon blinked.

“What-?”

“Don’t misunderstand. After what happened in that cell, I did hate you. And I took that hate out on your elder brother. You should’ve heard the awful things I said! I held him—and you—accountable for things that were not your fault. And I’m sorry for that.”

Leon blinked again; he had no idea what to say to that.

“I will fall into ruin too,” the prince added, “if I continue to hold you completely responsible for all the things that have happened to me.”

His phrasing was softer than Leon had been expecting.

He could’ve easily said “for all the things you’ve done to me.” But he didn’t.

“Do you understand?” asked Takumi.

“Yeah,” replied Leon, letting out a steadying breath.

The prince shifted awkwardly behind him.

“We’ll get pruney,” he warned.

“Gross,” said Leon, getting to an abrupt stand.

Takumi tried not to stare as the knight clambered out of the tub and towelled himself off.

“Can I ask you something?” the prince said as Leon secured his towel around his waist.

“You just did,” was Leon’s teasing response.

Takumi pouted at him.

“No, but seriously,” said the knight, “is something wrong?”

“I was curious about what you were looking into before we went to sleep.”

“What?”

“You were studying some spells,” Takumi reminded.

Leon blinked.

“Oh!” he said, seeming to recall it rather suddenly, “that’s right! Shall I show you?”

He seemed so spontaneously excited that Takumi couldn’t possibly deny him.

“Sure,” he said, bracing himself against the lip of the bath so he could climb out.

He didn’t face Leon as he moved, much more comfortable drying off privately; he didn’t need a third Nohrian Royal studying him as he dried off.
“But we’ll have to hurry,” Takumi warned, “Marc’s making a buffet breakfast and I think she’s pretty excited about it. If, uh, Owain’s behaviour was any indication.”

Leon chuckled to himself and nodded, “Right, I’ll keep it in mind. Come on, now, I think you’ll like what I’ve found.”

Takumi lifted a brow; this was certainly unexpected.

The prince tried to push down the optimism that was rising within his chest; he’d never seen Leon so energised about anything before.

This reaction is definitely… new…

“Look, look,” said Leon, drawing Takumi from his thoughts, “so it turns out that Miss Anna was right!”

“Miss Anna was… right?” the prince echoed, minutely confused; he had pulled his tunic over his head as Leon made himself comfortable in the desk chair.

Takumi’s uncertainty must’ve shown on his face, for Leon explained quickly.

“Remember when we first met her? She was confident that I could read Godfrey’s tome.”

“The one you read with Macbeth’s jynxpiece,” Takumi confirmed; it brought him no joy to mention the sorcerer.

Leon’s excitement wavered for a moment and the prince regretted having said anything about it.

“I don’t need a jynxpiece,” Leon said, “it takes a bit longer to translate than a regular tome’s language but… I can do it. Come, see what I’ve learnt.”

Takumi bent to study the book and recognised it to be the same looping script from earlier.

“Frey gave you the book?”

“They thought it might come in handy,” Leon said with a shrug.

Takumi was still unconvinced; was this gesture purely from the kindness of the storyteller’s heart?

There aren’t coincidences with that one…

“Miss Anna’s sister said that none of the mages she knew had any use for it,” Leon continued, unbothered.

His lack of worry, however, did ease the anxiety in Takumi’s chest.

“And it’s no wonder they don’t need it,” the knight said with a small grin, “it’s purely for cosmetics!”

“Cosmetics-?”

Leon nodded, “Yes! We really lucked out, Takumi!”
The prince bit his lip; he was missing some key information.

Sensing that an elaboration was still required, Leon lifted his notes and unfolded them carefully.

“See? Do you know what this means?”

Takumi reached out to right a stray hair from Leon’s fringe. The knight blinked, startled by the gesture.

“Show me what it means,” he said gently.

Leon pinked, momentarily struck speechless. But he recovered quickly and pointed to his script.

“These are—for lack of a better word—beauty spells. It seems the Invisible Kingdom is not so unlike Cyrkensia; performances were held often enough to warrant convenience spells like the ones here.”

“So Frey gave you a book that teaches you how to put on eyeliner?” said Takumi with a small laugh.

“Even better than that,” reassured Leon, getting to a stand and lifting a hand.

He cupped Takumi’s face with a gentleness that the prince did not associate with him.

“We can fix your hair.”

***

When Takumi and Leon finally emerged and met their friends at the table, Owain nearly dropped the glass dish he was holding.

Marc struck it with a spell to keep it in the air and her brother shot her a look of apology.

“Takumi,” the flier breathed, “your hair-,”

The prince ran his fingers through it, “Does it look alright? Leon figured out a spell to return it to how it was.”

“A growth spell?” Owain asked, looking to his liege for confirmation.

The knight nodded, “Yes, that’s right. I was worried about something important getting lost in the translation but it seems like it worked out alright.”

“More than alright!” Marc cheered, “you look marvellous, Takumi!”

The prince pinked and ducked his head, embarrassed, “Th-thanks. I feel marvellous too.”

“Well things are really starting to look up!” said Owain gladly, gesturing to the table, “let’s eat!”

***
“I gotta hand it to ya,’ Marc, that was a hell of a breakfast,” Leon said as they locked up their unit for the day.

Takumi had insisted that they go and visit Godfrey despite Marc’s warnings against giving Anna any more time to concoct a money-making scheme using the princes.

“The sausage was best,” said Owain stoutly.

“He’s just jealous because he only got to make one dish,” said Marc with a giggle.

“It was a great thing to wake up to,” Takumi reassured the both of them.

Marc patted Ser Fafnir’s side and the pegasus snorted, seeming irritated that he’d been left out of the breakfast shenanigans.

“Oh, don’t worry,” the flier said as she ran her fingers through his mane, “you’ll get yours in due time. You should learn some patience, Fafnir!”

“Look who’s talking,” muttered Owain.

Takumi laughed.

“I could get used to this,” he said, though it was only Leon who heard him.

“Oh?” the knight said, intrigued, “what do you mean?”

“I was worried, earlier,” Takumi admitted, “after I refused to go back to Hoshido with-, with my brother. I feared that if I turned my back on them, they’d do the same to me. And then I’d be stuck in this awful limbo where I didn’t belong anywhere.”

“But-?”

The prince shrugged, “I guess I belong here, with everyone. When I talked to Frey in our dream, they made me realise a few things. I’m glad to be here.”

“If it weren’t for you,” said Leon softly—he didn’t meet Takumi’s gaze—“I wouldn’t have had the courage to stand up to Macbeth; I’d let fate continue on its awful course towards ruin.”

He went quiet and Takumi frowned.

“What I mean to say is that I’m glad that you’re here as well,” Leon elaborated quickly, seeming to sense he’d left things on a rough note.

“Oh,” said Takumi, who was too startled to say much else, “okay.”

Internally, he was beating himself over the head for such a lame response.

“Uh, guys-?” said Marc, drawing Takumi from his embarrassment.

“Something’s wrong,” said Owain.

Leon’s heart dropped as his gaze landed on the door to The Sleeping Goat.
It was completely disconnected, merely leaning against the frame it had previously occupied.

“Frey!” yelled Marc.

There was pandemonium as Takumi walked slowly towards the inn.

Frey, the humble innkeeper who played soft tunes and cracked gentle jokes.

Frey, who had selflessly guided Takumi along during his confusing journey.

Frey, who was lying in a pool of their own blood in the library.

Their small handheld instrument—their Kalimba, Takumi recalled—was shattered, metal tongs bent and wood panelling splintered. Their golden hair had been freed from its braid and spilt across the floor like a river of ichor; the tips of it were dyed red with the storyteller’s blood.

“Naga,” Owain swore and dragged his trembling sister from the room.

Marc was kicking and screaming at him, demanding to be released so she could go to her friend’s side. Her brands lit up and her lavender wings flared into existence as she sobbed in her brother’s arms.

Takumi felt as though he’d faint.

“I-, I should’ve realised-,”

It was Leon’s voice. Takumi turned to him slowly, confusion flitting across his face.

“Oh-what-?”

“Macbeth seized me again in our dreams,” Leon said softly and he sounded very far away, “and he used my Iceblade to stab Godfrey.”

“He-, he-, stabbed-,”

“It was just-, it was in the thigh-! I didn’t think-,”

“Yeah!” yelled Takumi, suddenly angry—distantly, he knew he was crying, but he couldn’t be bothered by that right now—“Yeah, you didn’t think! You never do! If only you’d been stronger-!”

“I know!” Leon seethed in reply, “I know! If I’d been stronger—if I were even half the man my brother is—I could’ve rejected Macbeth, right? I could’ve saved Godfrey, right? I could’ve prevented myself from violating you like some half-quid whore, right, Prince Takumi-?!”

There was a sound deeper within the inn and the two princes spun, searching for the source.

It was only when Anna’s whistling filled the vacant corridor that Takumi realised just how terrible things were about to become.

“Godfrey!” she called airily, “Golden coin of my heart! Precious specimen of mine! Where are
you hiding? You won’t believe who got a spanking good deal on peppermint patties today! Or maybe you will! It was me, your lovely wife!”

She trailed through the inn, giggling to herself with a glee that crushed Takumi’s heart.

“Studying, maybe? You’re too diligent, my Angel! Come, take a break! Have a snack! Talk to your favourite redhead gal!”

Leon covered his mouth and stepped back, forcing the creaking wall to support his weight; he must’ve realised what Anna’s return meant.

“Darling-?”

Her footsteps grew louder and Takumi sank to his knees beside Frey.

“Do you have visitors? I saw Ser Fafnir out back, so are Marc and-,”

The rest of her sentence sank into the silence as she appeared in the doorway. Her gaze flickered first to Leon, who wordlessly met her gaze with great effort.

And then as the smile dropped from her face and confusion took its place in her eyes, she looked to Takumi.

He couldn’t bear to look at her.

And then she screamed.

***

Anna’s blood-curdling cry split the air with more force than a silver sword.

She clenched her fists and tears sprang down her cheeks with a force Takumi thought impossible.

“No-,” she whispered, and a disbelieving smile spread across her face as she raised her hands to her head, fingers curling in her red hair, “no, this isn’t really happening. This is some cruel vision, planted in my head by that strange sorcerer-, it’s not real-, it’s just a fantasy-,”

“Sorcerer-?” echoed Leon.

His voice was hollow, dangerously lacking in emotion.

“Y-yes-,” Anna choked out, “he came by earlier today with a little shopkeep. She seemed lost so I helped her out while-, while Godfrey-, while they-,”

She trailed off and sank into a nearby chair, gazing at Frey’s body in the floor.

“Did he-, did that sorcerer-, hurt my Angel-?” the merchant asked.

Her voice shook and Takumi slowly put his fingers to Frey’s throat.

For a long while, he felt nothing and closed his eyes.

*Please, he thought, please, we didn’t say a proper goodbye. This isn’t how we do things in this*
world. You may not be from here but... but... you have to say goodbye! You owe me that!!

Do I?

And for a moment, Takumi felt a beat beneath his fingertips. He waited in agonising silence for a second.

And it came. And so did a third.

“Sweet Holy Dawn Dragon on High,” he swore, staring, “Frey’s alive.”

***

“What are you planning, Takumi?” asked Leon, who was frowning as he followed the prince towards the stable.

“We need a healer,” said Takumi, as though it were obvious—it was—“and I’m going to take Frey to one.”

“And I’m gonna help,” said Marc, appearing in the doorway, “because Fafnir and I are partners and Frey is precious to me. And if you try to stop me, I’ll be forced to fight you.”

Takumi nodded; he wouldn’t deny Marc this.

“You’re-, going to go to Hoshido?” Leon demanded, disbelieving.

“If they don’t aid me when I’m in dire need,” said Takumi, helping Marc get Frey seated atop her pegasus, “then those people aren’t my family; they never were.”

Leon blinked, shocked by Takumi’s willingness to throw away his old life for someone like Godfrey.

“I think I was starting to really get somewhere,” the prince said softly, “with who I wanted to be, and with who I wanted to surround myself. Now it’s time to put that to the test.”

“Will you be safe?” Leon asked.

It seemed so uncharacteristic, especially given the awful things Takumi had said to him earlier when they’d discovered Frey’s unconscious form.

“That or I’ll die trying,” said Takumi with such determination, the likes of which Leon had never seen.

Marc leapt to take her place at Fafnir’s back, easing his reins into her fists and inhaling a steadying breath; she had to focus now.

“Oh, and one more thing,” said the prince, turning now to Owain, who was busily trying to console Anna.
“Owain,” he said, and the mage looked up, “there was a message I was supposed to give you. I didn’t understand at first. But now, I think I do.”

The calamity that they’d tried so hard to prevent was finally beginning. It was time to take sides and Takumi wanted to be sure he was on the one that was winning.

Owain nodded, “Sure, what is it?”

Takumi closed his eyes for a moment, recalling his conversation with Frey. It felt like so long ago.

And at the time, he hadn’t understood what the storyteller was trying to tell him.

*It isn’t Leon who doesn’t think, he realised, it’s me. Frey tried to warn me that this would happen and yet I didn’t*,

He shook his head; now was not the time to give up.

Now was the time to fight. And to do that, they needed everyone at their best.

“*The Demon Sword...*” Takumi said softly, raising his gaze and centring it on Owain, “it thirsts for the blood of men.”

Chapter End Notes

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as always, thanks for sticking with me, everyone! i cant wait for us to head to Hoshido and find out how Takumi and his friends are received! Let's wish them plenty of luck! <3
Lost in Translation

Chapter Summary

With Frey gravely wounded, the group must come to terms with losing not only their guide, but also their friend. With his return to Hoshido, Takumi must face his family. Determined to support his allies, Leon makes his way into the kingdom that has stood as his enemy for decades. Owain takes a stand, and Marc must begin to decide the fate of their rag-tag group of rebels.

Chapter Notes

me, unveiling my plans and shouting: MYSTLETAINN!
AHAAH! I've been waiting to share that last chapter with you all for forever!!
since there was so much plot last chapter, we're switching to character stuff this time around! and we get to see some familiar faces again at last! (my personal thanks to hinoka, who is officially Big Sister of the Year <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Setsuna.”

With the exception of her ever-faithful, though equally aloof retainer, Princess Hinoka sat alone beneath Hoshido’s soft blanket of stars.

“Do you see that pegasus?” the princess asked, squinting skyward, “ready your bow; it might be an ambush.”

The archer hummed and drew up her weapon. However, after only a moment, she eased back into a relaxed position.

“Setsuna, what are you-,”

“If My Lady really wants me to shoot her brother down, I’d gladly do it,” Setsuna said, “but I dunno if that’ll be good for anyone. You included, Lady Hinoka.”

“My brother-?”

Her face scrunched up in minute confusion but once it became clear that it was not Ryouma in the sky, the princess hurried to her feet.

“Something’s wrong,” she said, “let’s head for the stables. Get Asama.”

“Kay,” said Setsuna, hooking her bow over her shoulder and jogging off.

Despite her quick reflexes, Hinoka was sure the archer would be a while before returning to her side.
“That’s okay too,” she muttered to herself, “it’ll be best not to overwhelm that dummy.”

“Hold on tight, buddy,” Takumi murmured as he carefully lowered Frey’s unconscious form into Marc’s awaiting arms.

“Get your sister,” the flier ordered; her gaze didn’t move from Frey’s gaunt face.

Takumi didn’t need to be told twice. He turned on heel and sprinted towards the castle.

“Hold on tight, dammit,” he muttered, feet slamming on the smooth wood of the entranceway.

And though darkness had long since fallen, the prince had no trouble weaving through the hallways of his childhood home.

For only a moment, Takumi slowed before Ryouma’s chamber. To his surprise—and horror—the High Prince was perched just beyond the doorway.

And at the sound of the prince’s footsteps, Ryouma opened his eyes. He gazed at Takumi for a long moment.

And then, just as he was readying something to say, the prince turned.

And he ran on.

_I can’t deal with him right now! Not when Frey’s-, not when Frey’s-!_  
The prince yanked opened Sakura’s door and found her standing alone, holding her stave. She was looking uncharacteristically contemplative, fingers tapping a forgotten lullaby against the worn wood.

“S-Sakura-?”

“Big Brother-?! What are you-,”

“No time!” Takumi said, grabbing her by the arm, “Frey needs help!”

And though she did not fully understand, the little princess hurried after him towards the stables.

“Takumi-,” she said as they neared, “who’s Frey?”

The prince slowed and turned to look down at her.

“Godfrey. They’re my-,” he blinked.

_This is just like-,

“Your friends are all waiting.”_

“My friend,” he finished, surprising the both of them.

Sakura was stunned into silence for a moment; how much her brother had grown!

She recovered quickly, shaking her head to dismiss the thoughts and turning to look into his face.
He watched her, somewhat apprehensive; surely he wasn’t worried that she’d deny her aid-!

Sakura gave him a shy smile.

“A-Alright-!” she said, nodding once, “I-let’s go! I said that I’d-, that I’d do whatever I could to help, so-! So I want to help!”

Takumi, despite the situation, laughed.

“That’s good to hear,” he said softly as they entered, “you’ve grown so much while I’ve been gone, huh?”

Sakura pinked but all traces of her gladness evaporated as her gaze slide past Takumi and landed on Marc.

The flier didn’t look good; she was cradling Frey in her lap, face pale and gaze hazy.

“Marc-!” Takumi whispered, going to his knees at her side, “are you alright-?”

“Fine, fine,” she said, though she didn’t even look at him.

She was holding Frey’s jynxpiece in her open palm; the blue stone was covered in miniscule cracks.

Takumi carefully took it from her and slipped it into his pocket for safekeeping; Frey would appreciate it later. Then, the prince huffed out an annoyed sigh.

“You’re pretty troublesome for a retainer,” he muttered, flicking Marc in the forehead.

“Ow,” she said, lifting her emptied hand to her head and rubbing at her irritated skin with a frown.

“Let the master do her magic,” said Takumi, and there was no room for argument in his tone.

The flier blinked; the words seemed to take a long time to register with her.

“Oh,” she said, but didn’t move.

It took a new face to draw her from her daze.

“HEY-!!” came a voice from the doorway.

Sakura and Takumi jumped, startled by the sound.

“What’s the meaning of this-?!”

At the irritated tone, Marc was on her feet in a moment. She’d laid Frey down gently and now stood protectively in front of them. Her lavender wings leapt into view, blazing brilliantly at her back.

“Who are you?” she hissed, her teeth sharpening into points.

Takumi turned to her and blinked, hurriedly lifting his hands in an effort to calm her, “M-Marc-,”

“No closer,” the flier seethed as she pushed Takumi protectively behind her.
Her double sets of eyes opened, pupils slitting like a cat’s.

“Marc, she’s not-,”

“I’m the First Princess of Hoshido,” said Hinoka, “who the hell are you?”

***

“Remind me again why we didn’t simply take a pegasus?”

Anna’s leg was bouncing. She was perched next to Owain, who had traded his wizardly wear for something a bit more practical.

“My sister is the only one who knows how to ride,” he said by way of apology.

Leon clicked his tongue in disapproval and spurred the horses on, wordlessly worrying from his spot at Owain’s side.

“I guess I should be thankful that this mage prince knows how to drive a wagon.”

Leon turned to shoot her an exasperated look.

“I know we’re in a hurry,” he muttered, “but would you kindly refrain from trying to slip from my good graces?”

“I don’t give a damn about your graces,” said Anna, voice low with uncharacteristic seriousness, “my darling Angel is bleeding out across the border.”

Leon snorted.

“Have you so little faith in Princess Sakura?” he asked, refusing to meet her gaze as he urged the stallion pair closer towards a breakneck speed.

“Don’t worry, Anna,” reassured Owain—the ever-sunny optimist—“Marc and Takumi will make sure that Frey’s okay.”

Anna looked down at the box in her lap. It contained Frey’s first Kalimba, a tiny ten-keyed thing; the only one left now that Frey’s usual seventeen-key had been splintered. She’d tuned the older piece to the best of her ability before they’d set out.

Wait for me. I’ll be there soon, Angel.

“Owain,” said Leon.

The swordsman blinked and turned his attention on his liege—could their relationship even be sorted so simply anymore?

“Y-yes?” he said, suddenly apprehensive.

In their frenzy, the pair hadn’t had the time to discuss all that had transpired between them.
Like my status as a foreign prince, Owain thought but didn’t say.

He hadn’t wanted to complicate things.

“About that sword…”

The swordsman laughed uncertainly, “I-, I’ve been searching for it for a long while. I didn’t realise that Frey was safekeeping it for me.”

“What do you mean-?”

“My cousin, the Princess of our Halidom,” said Owain, “she inherited the Exalt’s blade, the divine Falchion.”

“He which slays dragons,” said Leon with a nod, “I’ve heard the stories.”

Owain nodded, “Yes. There was another blade, one of similar legend: The Demon Sword. Its power could’ve been of great use to us during The War.”

“That’s why you were searching for it?” Leon asked.

Owain hummed in agreement, “Yeah. I didn’t want my cousin to go through with the Rite to fix our future. I was worried that something would go wrong. She was our pillar, our unbreakable leader. If something had happened…”

He shook his head and Leon bit his lip, turning his gaze upon the road ahead.

“I didn’t have a chance to use the sword then,” said Owain quietly, “but…”

“But?” said Anna and Leon in unison.

The swordsman put a hand to the blade’s ancient sheath. It gleamed beneath the pale glow of the dawning sun.

“But I think perhaps Frey knew that this would happen, that this world would be struck by calamity. And they kept the sword hidden away until the time was right.”

Leon blinked, surprised by Owain’s intuition; it wasn’t often that he heard the swordsman speak so seriously.

Were his theatrics merely a front…?

“Mystletainn,” Owain whispered.

Leon and Anna studied him quietly.

“Listen, Lord Leon,” said the swordsman—he had that determined look on his face again—“I really have no right to ask this after deceiving you for so long, but, mind if I lend you my power?”

The knight blinked again in wordless surprise.

“Owain,” he said softly, turning his attention back to the road, “you swore fealty to me when
you drank from my cup. Our bond cannot be broken so easily. Regardless of your status as a prince
elsewhere, you’re my retainer here. I expect you to give it your all.”

A slow disbelieving smile spread across Owain’s face.

“How keep overdoing it like usual,” Leon said, mouth twitching into a smile.

“Overdoing it like usual-?” the swordsman echoed, thoughtful.

Anna let out a long sigh and realised that it was probably Leon’s unintentional comment that had left
a big impact on Owain.

*And his self in Askr*, she thought but didn’t say.

***

“Takumi!” hissed Hinoka, “we need to talk. Outside. Now.”

Marc took an unsteady step towards the princess; she seemed to have difficulty moving her body
when her Fell Blood boiled to the surface.

“Don’t order him around, Red,” she warned.

Her magic coiled up the sleeves of her flier’s uniform and Takumi watched her Brands glow from
beneath the cover of her gloves.

Hinoka squinted at her.

“My name is Princess Hinoka,” she said, “and you will address me as such.”

“Oh, pardon me,” Marc shot back without remorse, “allow me to introduce myself then. I’m
Second Princess Marc of the Exalted Bloodline, spawn of the Fell Dragon. You’d best watch your
tongue, Princess.”

“Spawn of the-? What?” said Hinoka, “you mean to say you’re a princess of Nohr?”

Marc sighed, exasperated, *Hoshidans. Do I really look like one of those porcelain princesses? I
hail from Ylisse, though I doubt you know of it.”

“That’s not-, that’s only a Halidom of legend! Ylisse isn’t-!”

“Despite the legends,” Takumi said softly, putting an arm between the two, “Marc is still from
there, Sister.”

He turned his attention upon the flier and gave her a teasing smile, “Guess that makes you legendary,
huh?”

She blinked and her wings dissipated, extra sets of eyes closing up.

“I-, I guess so-,” Marc said with a disbelieving laugh.

“What the hell is going on-?” Hinoka muttered.
“Marc,” said Takumi, patting her on the arm, “this is my big sister Hinoka. I’m gonna go chat with her since I haven’t seen her in… uh… a while.”

The flier frowned but didn’t argue with him, instead simply waving him off and returning to Frey’s side; she was confident that Takumi would simply call for her if he had need of her.

Sakura was perched at Frey’s side, eyes closed in concentration as her stave began to glow.

Marc sat down and leant back against the wooden wall of the stable, closing her eyes and praying she’d wake to some good news.

Takumi shook his head and when it was clear that Sakura had no intention of parting from Frey’s side as she worked, he turned his attention back upon Hinoka.

She gestured for him to follow her out of the stable.

The night air was cool as Takumi trailed after Hinoka into the open fields surrounding Shirasagi Castle.

“Hey,” said the prince by way of a better greeting than earlier.

Hinoka stopped and turned to face him.

“You okay?” he asked.

And then she was hugging him.

“H-hinoka-?”

“You’re such a dummy-!” she whispered into his hair, “you’re a big ole dummy, Takumi!”

The prince blinked and then reached up to pat her on the head.

“You took good care of the others while I was gone, huh?”

She withdrew and wiped at her cheeks, as though embarrassed for having cried at their reunion.

“Ryouma said some awful things when he returned with Sakura,” she said quietly.

Takumi lifted a brow, surprised. Then, as he remembered the events that had taken place, he found Ryouma’s reaction unsurprising.

“Oh,” he said, “oh, yeah.”

“He said you’d defected to Nohr-!” Hinoka whispered, incredulous, “but that’s not-, that couldn’t possibly be true, right? I mean, out of all of us, you were the one who hated-,”

“Yeah,” said Takumi, eager to get away from the subject of his past, “yeah I guess it sounded like that to him.”

She frowned.

“What happened-?”
“A lot,” the prince said, “like, a whole lot. I don’t even know where to begin.”

“What happened with Ryouma-?” she clarified, though she meant him no harm in asking about their brother first.

Takumi wasn’t surprised by that.

“I-, I didn’t want to come back to Hoshido with him,” he said finally.

Hinoka said nothing; Takumi wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Did you find something worth protecting?” she asked, and the question was very unlike her.

Hinoka still didn’t look at him.

“Yeah,” Takumi said.

I wanna protect my family. And all the friends I’ve made. And especially this world we live in. And in order to do that, I have to fight.

“Good,” said Hinoka.

Takumi blinked; had he heard right?

He turned to stare at her and found that a shy smile had crept its way onto her face.

“I’m glad,” she added, “glad that you found something.”

“You’re not mad that I’m gonna leave Hoshido?”

Hinoka turned to gaze at him.

“No,” she said gently, “no, I’m not mad, ya’ dummy. You’re my little brother. If you’ve found something out there worth protecting, you’d better do your damn best to protect it.”

“I-, I will,” he said, taken aback by her sincerity.

She nodded and slung her arm around him in a lazy embrace.

“That’s good,” she laughed, “you’ve got my support on this, okay?”

Her willingness to offer her aid when the time came reminded Takumi of Sakura.

“Thanks, Hinoka.”

“Hey, it’s just what big sisters do,” she said, shoving him playfully.

“Cheap shot,” Takumi muttered with a laugh, shoving away from her.

“Lemme get a look at you, now,” said Hinoka, looking him up and down a few times, “you almost look taller!”

Takumi pushed up onto his tiptoes, “Yeah?”
Hinoka came to his side and put a heavy hand atop his head.

“Oh, wait, no. Nope, you’re still just the same old short stuff.”

“Mean-!” Takumi laughed.

Hinoka giggled until she snorted and then she only laughed harder.

“And you’re still snorting! Now who hasn’t grown?”

“Still you!” Hinoka shouted, “ya’ gotta face the facts, Takumi! You’re always gonna be my baby brother!”

“You’re gonna eat those words when I tower over you!” he threatened, though there was no venom in his voice.

“Well whatever,” Hinoka said, settling in the grass, “I’m just glad to see you again.”

Takumi laid down next to her and stared up at the stars.

“I’m glad too,” he said.

“Even if you’re still a shorty, your hair’s grown pretty long since I last saw you,” she commented.

Takumi pinked, “You think so?”

But then, as he thought it through, he realised it didn’t make any sense.

He sat up and looked down into her face.

“Wait, what’d you just say?”

“Your hair,” Hinoka repeated, “it’s grown. Like, a lot.”

Takumi reached behind himself and sure enough, to his surprise, his hair trailed down farther than ever.

“Oh,” he said, “well this is uh-, interesting.”

“Why? It’s just hair.”

The prince, realising he didn’t wanna go into specifics when it came to Leon—let alone Leon’s spell from the Invisible Kingdom—he lifted a hand in surrender.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said, though the worry in his chest didn’t ease, “I didn’t notice, that’s all.”

Hinoka rolled her eyes.

“And you’re still a dummy too, I see,” she muttered with a laugh.

Takumi shrugged, “Some things don’t change! Like the fact that you make cooing sounds at stray pegasi.”
“We could always use more pegasi! If only they didn’t startle so easily…”

“You should meet Marc’s pegasus,” Takumi suggested, eager to talk about literally anyone other than himself.

“I’ll be sure to drop in and see them,” Hinoka said, “which reminds me, while I’m doing that, you should really go talk to Ryouma.”

“Ryouma-? Why?”

Hinoka got to a stand, stretched, and then offered a hand to Takumi. He took it and she pulled him easily to his feet.

“Because. I think he misunderstood you earlier. He was so worried about Sakura that he probably couldn’t think straight.”

“Well,” said Takumi, unsure, “if you really think it’d make a difference…”

“I think his support means a lot to you,” said Hinoka, “and so I’d like to see the two of you get things sorted properly.”

“Whoa, insightful,” said Takumi, “maybe you have grown-!”

“Oh, shut up,” Hinoka laughed, shoving him playfully again as she walked back in the direction of the stable.

Takumi watched her go.

“Go see Ryouma!”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbled, waving her off, “easy for you to say.”

Takumi looked back towards the castle, thinking on his brother’s surprised expression from earlier.

“Dammit,” he muttered as he paced ahead.

***

Leon was explaining the process of becoming a Nohrian retainer to Anna when he was suddenly interrupted by a weight landing behind him in the wagon.

Owain’s hand went to the Mystletainn at his side and Anna’s lantern flickered as her fingers curled around it.

“My, my, Lord Leon,” said a coy voice that the knight hadn’t missed, “a little birdie told me you needed an outlaw’s assistance.”

“Zero-!” exclaimed Owain, whose hand dropped from his sword easily, “how did you find us?”

“Kamui,” Zero supplied with an easy shrug.
“Wrong bird MU,” muttered Anna, who eased back against Owain with a sigh of relief.

The swordsman turned to Zero.

“Why did you come all this way? Is anyone else with you?”

He was hoping his cousins and Selena had made the trip.

“Kamui and his carriage are coming along,” Zero said, glancing over his shoulder as though to catch a glimpse of them.

“In any case,” said Leon, “I appreciate your timely arrival.”

“If it weren’t for your skill and your brother’s unwavering love for me, I doubt things would’ve gone this smoothly,” the archer replied with a wink—was it?

Leon envied him for only a moment; Zero was able to view the world with such ease.

Zero served Leon and loved Kamui and that was all he cared to know in Nohr. Leon had wanted a life equally as simple; he’d wanted a life that was not driven by the demands of his father, the shadow of his brother, or the schemes of his tutor.

“Is that all?” Leon muttered, more to himself than to anyone else.

Zero got to an unsteady stand—it was unwise to stand so precariously when it came to cheap wagons—and kissed the top of the knight’s head.

“I can practically hear those gears spinning in that bright head of yours,” he said with a chuckle, “don’t think on it too deeply, Lord Leon. You did wonderfully.”

Leon pinked at the praise.

“But seriously, why’re we headed for Hoshido?”

“I have to check on something,” was Leon’s vague reply.

Zero looked to Owain for an explanation. The swordsman mouthed Takumi’s name and Zero could only chuckle.

“An impulsive lovestruck prince?” he murmured, “sounds like a fun recipe for disaster.”

“Lay off, Zero.”

***

Ryouma’s chamber was dimly lit when Takumi cautiously stepped into the doorway.

The High Prince was pacing the length of the room, eyes closed in concentration. The Raijinto Blade was perched in its scabbard, humming softly from where it sat on display.

Takumi cleared his throat awkwardly and rapped lightly on the wooden doorframe.
Ryouma’s pacing stopped and he turned, grey gaze landing on his brother.

“Takumi-?” he murmured, voice almost deafening in the silence.

The prince lifted a hand in unsure greeting.

“H-hey,” he said.

Ryouma paced towards him, slowly, as though a quicker approach would frighten Takumi off again.

“I-,”

The Trueblade had so much to say and yet couldn’t force the words into the air.

“Your hair,” Ryouma breathed finally, deciding to take the path of least resistance.

Takumi pulled his thick mane over one shoulder, fingers slipping through the silvery strands.

“Turns out magic does some pretty incredible stuff,” the prince said, unsure of how to interpret Ryouma’s comment.

“What are you doing here?” the High Prince asked, blunt as ever.

Takumi tried not to let out a frustrated sigh; he’d known that this question was coming.

“I needed help.”

“What kind of help-?”

Takumi toyed with the ends of his hair.

“Healing magic,” he said finally.

Ryouma’s hands were upon him suddenly, first a palm at his brow—checking for a temperature—and then fingertips trailing down his arms and waist.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Ryouma asked carefully, though his big hands didn’t stop their exploration.

“N-no-,” Takumi answered unsteadily, “my friend was injured.”

Ryouma’s hands slowed to a stop but they remained seated at Takumi’s hips.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Ryouma asked carefully, though his big hands didn’t stop their exploration.

“N-no-,” Takumi answered unsteadily, “my friend was injured.”

Ryouma’s hands slowed to a stop but they remained seated at Takumi’s hips.

“Your friend?” he echoed.

“They’re an innkeeper from Cyrkensia,” the prince supplied, “a gentle musician named Frey.”

“I’m glad you’re unharmed,” Ryouma said, and his expression was so tender that Takumi had to avert his gaze.

The prince laughed, uncertain, “Me too. But… Frey’s been so kind; they shouldn’t have been hurt.”

Thinking about how Macbeth had taken advantage of Anna’s hospitality only to strike down her
lover seemed too cruel.

*We have to stop him. We can’t let him manipulate anyone else. Things got too close this time. We can’t just let him do as he pleases until he kills someone-*!

Takumi clenched his fists.

“Hey, hey,” said Ryouma, and his calm voice brought Takumi back from his thoughts, “don’t get worked up over your friend. You and I both know that Sakura is an incredible healer; she’ll be able to fix everything.”

“Everything?” Takumi echoed before he could stop himself.

There was an entire list—it was getting longer!—of things that Sakura’s healing magic could not mend.

“Perhaps not everything,” Ryouma amended softly.

Takumi resisted the urge to bark out a laugh and add: “You don’t say!”

He did not, however, because he didn’t even get the chance.

Ryouma tipped his head to one side and kissed Takumi open-mouthed.

The prince’s mind shut down, sending incomprehensible waves of static through his mind until Ryouma withdrew. As Takumi regained himself, he was disarmed by the quickness with which Ryouma had undone his blouse.

“R-Ryouma, what-,”

The High Prince’s thumbs met Takumi’s chest and he arched involuntarily against the pleasure, pressing closer with desperate need.

Ryouma chuckled, amused.

“I’d almost forgotten how much you like it here,” the Trueblade murmured.

His words sank into Takumi’s heart like a blade.

“You like it here… and here too… and especially here,” Leon—no, Takumi reminded himself, *Macbeth*—had said to him.

It felt so impossibly long ago and yet-,

Takumi shoved away from him.

“D-don’t-,” he choked out, “don’t touch me-, please-,”

Ryouma followed him until the prince was pressed up against the wall. The Fuujin Bow dug painfully into Takumi’s back. It reminded him, distantly, of the time Leon—*Macbeth*, he corrected himself again—had shoved him up against the wall and threatened him.

*And just after Zero had returned the Fuujin Bow to me*…
“Takumi,” Ryouma whispered, “are you alright-?”

He didn’t understand. And that was to be expected. And yet-

“I-, I can’t-,” Takumi said, “please-, not again-,”

“I don’t-, what’s happened to you-? Brother, please.”

It hurt to hear the confusion and ache in Ryouma’s voice. And yet Takumi wanted nothing more than to flee.

He wanted to run into a comforting embrace.

Except the person who I want to comfort me is standing right here and yet I-, and yet I-!

I don’t want him. I want...

Marx’s face flashed in Takumi’s mind—the tender expression that the Paladin had made as he eased himself inside the prince. And then, of course, Camilla’s face was soon to follow.

“We’d be made more perfect with you,” she’d told him. And despite the fact that her words had been born of Macbeth’s spell, there was some truth to them.

Elise’s face was next, which was a surprise.

“I’m really glad you’re sticking with us,” she’d said back at The Sleeping Goat.

And then there was Leon. Takumi remembered the moment well; it was just before they’d discovered Frey.

“What I mean to say is that I’m glad you’re here as well,” the knight had said.

“I-, I have to go-,” the prince said, dropping his gaze so that he didn’t have to look into Ryouma’s face.

The Trueblade frowned, confusion giving way to anger.

“I don’t understand-!” he hissed, “Why are you avoiding me? Have I done something wrong-? I wanted—and still want—only the best for you-! Yet still you’d spurn my help? What happened to you in Nohr-? Why have you changed-?”

Takumi bit his lip.

“That’s not-,”

“I’m your brother,” Ryouma said, “I know what’s best for you. Despite what may have happened in Nohr, I will be the one to protect you. I will be the one to take care of you. It’s always been this way, Takumi. And it always will be. That’s what families do, Takumi. Don’t you remember?”
Something about his tone reminded the prince of an earlier conversation he’d had with Leon; it had been on their way into Cyrkensia.

Leon had been talking about memories of Sakura—ones that couldn’t possibly be his own.

“She cares deeply for you,” the knight had said. Takumi had been uncomfortable and responded with something he thought was natural: “she’s my sister, after all.”

At the time, the prince hadn’t understood Leon’s next words.

“Is that really all it takes?”

But now, in the present, Takumi finally understood with chilling clarity.

“No,” he said.

Ryouma’s face blanked with surprise.

“The fact that you have to speak it so plainly is evidence of the truth,” Takumi said softly.

“What are you-,”

“You may be my brother,” Takumi said, lifting his gaze to meet Ryouma’s, “but you don’t know what’s best for me.”

Before Ryouma could reply, Saizou and Kagerou appeared in his doorway.

“My Liege,” said Kagerou softly, “an escort wagon has arrived at the main gate.”

The Trueblade blinked.

“What-?”

Saizou came to his side, offering the High Prince a few layers to cover his loose garb.

“The entourage looks to be made up of Nohrians,” Kagerou added with unabashed distaste.

Ryouma drew on his robes hurriedly and Takumi seized his opening, rushing back out into the hall.

“Nohrians?” he murmured to himself as he hurriedly clasped his blouse shut.

Is it Leon-?

Takumi was the first one to the main gate, startled to find a wide wagon waiting.

Leon handed the reins to Zero and leapt down from his perch, hurrying to the prince’s side.

“Leon-!” Takumi said, surprised, “you’re-, you’re here-!”

“Hey, Takumi,” the knight greeted easily.

A cautious gladness flickered in his chestnut gaze.
“Oh, Lord Takumi!”

The prince glanced back up to the carriage.

“Zero-?”

The archer waved, “You’re looking lovely as ever. One might say you’re almost like a fairytale prince-!”

“Zero…” Leon grumbled.

“No worries, My Lord,” Zero reassured, “I’ve only got eyes for your big brother.”

“I hope he doesn’t mean Marx,” Takumi whispered.

Leon blinked, and then busted out laughing before he could stop himself.

“Yeah,” he agreed once he’d regained his composure, “that’d be too wild, even for him.”

Despite everything that had transpired with Ryouma, Takumi found himself smiling.

“Boy am I glad to see you,” he murmured.

Leon turned to stare at him disbelievingly.

“Although, what are you doing here-?”

The knight pinked.

“You were… taking too long,” he replied lamely.

Takumi snickered.

“Say what you mean, Leon.”

“Don’t embarrass me, Takumi,” he muttered, though there was no venom in his voice.

“Oh,” said Takumi, realising this was a perfect opportunity, “there’s something I gotta ask you.”

Leon blinked, “W-well, what is it?”

Takumi squinted at him; why was he behaving so strangely?

“What exactly did you do to my hair?”

The knight frowned, “It was a growth spell from that Invisible Kingdom’s spellbook, why?”

Takumi freed his hair and it tumbled far down his back, curling at his knees.

“Sweet Dusk Dragon,” Leon swore, “that’s certainly-, something.”

Takumi laughed uncertainly, “Uh, yeah. Any ideas?”

“Have you tried cutting it?”
The prince bit his lip, “I don’t really-, do that.”

“Right,” said Leon, remembering a few Hoshidan traditions, “well, if it isn’t going to upset you, I could cut it for you.”

“With your magical sword?”

“I was thinking something more along the lines of… scissors, but-,”

“Scissors are good,” Takumi interrupted.

As he was preparing to say more, Anna approached, Owain wordlessly supportive at her side.

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” she said, “can you take me to-,”

“Sure,” said Takumi, taking her hand, “Frey’s this way. Marc and Sakura are watching over them. Hinoka too, probably.”

“Three princesses?” muttered Leon, “I guess your Angel’s pretty important, Miss Anna.”

The merchant snorted, “You’re damn right, mage prince.”

***

“Orochi-? What are you doing out here?”

The diviner turned and lifted a hand in lazily greeting, “Lord Ryouma, it’s nice to see you.”

“Agreed,” the High Prince said quickly, “now, where is this carriage I’ve heard so much about?”

Orochi gestured.

“It’s empty,” Ryouma observed.

“Yes,” the diviner agreed, “so it is.”

The Trueblade tried not to show his irritation.

“Have the castle grounds been beset by intruders?” he asked finally.

“No,” said Orochi.

“Orochi-,” he murmured, voice dangerously low.

The diviner lifted her hands, “Easy, easy, little porcupine. They headed for the stables.”

“The stables-?”

“The rest of your family is already there,” she supplied.

Ryouma set his jaw; how had he—the High Prince of Hoshido—been the last to know the going-ons within his own castle?
“Nevermind that,” he muttered to himself, turning on heel and stalking off.

“He’s certainly in a bad mood,” Orochi mumbled once Ryouma was out of earshot.

“Is he really the one to run this kingdom now that your queen has fallen?”

The diviner whipped around, startled by the new voice.

“Hey.”

“Who are-?”


Orochi pulled a scroll from her waistband with a frown; had there been intruders after all-?

“Easy, mage,” said Zero, “don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Are you with the others then?” she asked, squinting at him.

Zero bowed with uncharacteristic gusto, “Retainer to Second Prince Leon, My Lady.”

She clicked her tongue, “I’m thoroughly dumbstruck.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean ‘lovestruck’?” Zero asked with a teasing grin.

“I know what I said,” was Orochi’s stony answer.

And then, she elaborated with: “Besides, you’re not really my type.”

“What a coincidence,” Zero replied, unbothered, “you’re not mine either. I much prefer a certain dragon prince.”

“And I prefer a certain busty ninja,” Orochi retorted.

“Glad we got that settled,” said the archer.

The diviner glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

“Are all Nohrians this charming, or only you?”

“Just me.”

Orochi snorted.

“Yeah, I doubt it.”

Zero shrugged and leant back to rest against the carriage.

“You wanna join our entourage?”
“Me, a Hoshidan? Join a Nohrian entourage?”

“It’s a bit more *multikulti,*” Zero said, using Leon’s older slang.

*Damn that prince, he’s never around to hear me say witty things.*

Orochi frowned, confused.

“We’ve got Hoshidans,” Zero explained, “and a few Ylisseans.”

“Ylisseans-?”

The archer shrugged, “A couple of kids from the Halidom of Ylisse. Supposedly.”

“The Halidom of legend?”

“Beats me.”

Orochi’s frown deepened as she thought over his spontaneous invitation.

“What do you call yourselves? A good name is a must when it comes to rebel groups.”

Zero snorted, “You bet. But uh, as for a name, we haven’t really decided yet.”

“That’s a shame.”

“You can skip initiation if you pick a good name,” Zero offered.

Orochi laughed, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

***

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to do it,” said Leon, who was already holding a good lock of Takumi’s hair in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other.

The prince shook his head, “I’ve already got one foot in a storybook. I’d rather not stick the other in there too. You heard Zero earlier.”

Leon snorted but didn’t disagree with him.

“Alright,” he said, “then I’m going to start hacking.”

“Hack away,” said Takumi, who felt that there was a better joke to be made.

*If Frey were here, I’m sure they’d be able to come up with it…*

“Speaking of,” said Takumi as Leon’s scissors snipped away at his thick mane, “do you think the others are alright?”

“I’m sure Owain can keep the situation under control,” said Leon.

“Never thought I’d ever hear you say those words,” Takumi admitted with a small laugh.
Leon snorted again, “I am right there with you.”

“Thanks for doing this,” said Takumi softly.

The knight’s movements slowed and he trailed his fingers idly through Takumi’s hair.

“This was also simply a selfish act,” Leon admitted.

“You keep saying that,” Takumi replied, “but part of me wonders if you’re just afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Acknowledging the fact that you’re showing me kindness even though I’m Hoshidan.”

Leon hummed thoughtfully.

“You may be right,” he allowed, “but the simpler truth is that I don’t wish to grow close to you.”

He’d moved to cut Takumi’s fringe so that it properly framed his face again.

The prince watched him until the last possible moment, only shutting his eyes to avoid getting hair in them.

“Is that true?” Takumi asked quietly when Leon withdrew to study his work.

They were perched together on the floor of the prince’s private chamber.

“Yes and no,” Leon said, and for a moment, Takumi got a full view of his unguarded expression.

“Explain it to me,” the prince urged; maybe this would explain Leon’s strange behaviour from earlier…

“Takumi,” said Leon, and the prince’s heart quickened at the sound of his name on the knight’s tongue, “when we were all together at The Sleeping Goat, your sister and I talked for a bit.”

“You and Sakura?”

“Mhm,” Leon hummed with a nod, “and she said something that startled me.”

Takumi raised a brow; it was unlike his sister to speak out of turn.

“I… wanted to deny what she’d said but, the longer I thought on it, the more I realised that she had only spoken the truth.”

“The truth? About what?”

Leon reached up carefully and brushed a few stray strands of hair from Takumi’s cheek. His hand was shaking.

“My feelings towards you.”
“Tell me, what is the meaning of this?”

Marc woke with a start at the sound of Ryouma’s voice. She was on her feet and bristling before she’d even remembered where she was.

The High Prince’s gaze fell upon her and he frowned with undisguised distaste.

“I see my brother’s brought his little monstrous retainer,” Ryouma commented.

Marc clicked her tongue and her Brands began to glow beneath her gloves.

Owain, who’d been mid-conversation with Anna and Hinoka, went silent and watched the pair for a moment.

“What’d you call me?” Marc demanded with uncharacteristic softness.

“Monstrous,” Ryouma repeated shamelessly.

Owain got to a slow stand, hand dropping down to the hilt of the Mystletainn blade.

“I’ll ask that you not refer to her using such crude language,” he said with uncharacteristic seriousness.

Anna and Hinoka stared at the princes and even Sakura, who’d been silent in her concentration, glanced up from Frey’s body to get a glimpse at the pair.

“You’re the one from earlier,” Ryouma mused aloud, “the one with the pegasus, the one who calmed this, this-.”

He trailed off, gesturing to Marc. Her second and third sets of eyes had opened, rolling until they centred on Ryouma.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘Princess,’” said Owain.

In a different context, his witty reply would’ve been light-hearted. Now, however, his expression was hard, unforgiving.

“Princess?” Ryouma echoed, disbelieving, “what poor humour is this?”

“Ryouma-,” muttered Hinoka, lifting a hand and shaking it just beneath her chin.

It was a wordless suggestion: “Cut that out-!”

His gaze flickered to her only minutely before returning to Owain and Marc.

“The fact that my brother thinks it appropriate to allow such a-,”

“That’s enough,” said Owain with enough command to silence Ryouma.
The High Prince stared, dumbstruck; clearly no one had spoken to him with such authority in a long while.

“I won’t permit you speak of my sister that way,” the swordsman continued.

“For my brother-, to pick such a companion-;”

“Was a wise decision,” finished Owain, grey gaze unwavering, “he isn’t deceived by such petty factors like appearances.”

Ryouma gaped at the unspoken insult.

“Between the two of you,” said Owain, grip on the Mystletainn tightening, “I think he makes for a much better High Prince than you do. After all, he’s going to lead this rag-tag group to victory.”

“To-, victory-?” echoed Hinoka, who seemed interested in what he’d said.

Owain glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Yeah,” he said, “Takumi’s gonna help save the world.”

Before anyone could say any more on the subject, Ryouma turned briskly on heel and exited the stable, leaving them wordlessly.

He’d get the answers he was seeking one way or another. And right now, he was going to demand them from Takumi.

“Are you okay?” asked Owain, setting a gentle hand on Marc’s arm.

“Yeah, yeah,” she mumbled.

“You’re not a monster,” he reassured softly as he pulled her into a hug.

Marc lifted her hands and clenched her fists in his tunic, burying her nose against his chest; she focused on the steady beat of her brother’s heart.

“I know,” she murmured, “I know.”

***

Leon had taken Takumi’s hand and given it a squeeze before leaning to press his lips against the prince’s.

It was the most uncoordinated, uncertain, nervous kiss that Takumi had ever experienced.

And it was great. Because it was just Leon.

It wasn’t that forceful domineering side of the knight that the Heben spell had brought forth, and it
wasn’t that practiced motion that Marx had provided, and—more than anything, especially now—it wasn’t demanding like Ryouma.

“I-, I’m sorry-,” Leon said, withdrawing too quickly.

Takumi—for reasons he could never explain—was saddened that they’d parted so soon.

“I thought it would be best just to-, I’m sorry. I really have no right to feel this ways towards you, especially with all that I’ve done-,”

“That was Macbeth,” Takumi reminded stoutly.

Leon blinked.

“But some part of me-, I mean, it’s not like you’re-, you could never return my feelings after-,”

“That may be true,” said Takumi—who wasn’t so sure himself—“but when you and I recovered our memories, I saw something.”

“You saw a lot of things.”

“Yes,” agreed Takumi, “but I saw you. I mean like, the tortured side of you, Leon. The part of you that stays hidden in a sea of darkness and yowls at you from the corners of your mind.”

“You heard her-?”

The prince nodded wordlessly.

“And I saw you fight her,” Takumi continued, “you fought against her schemes. And you did it for me. You may have been driven by the wickedness that Macbeth instilled with you, but you cannot deny the part of yourself that sought to help me, to keep me from that cruelty, even at your own expense.”

Leon stared at him and a tear rolled down his cheek. And then another, and another.

“I-, uh, didn’t mean to upset you,” said Takumi, suddenly unsure of himself.

“No, that’s not it,” Leon reassured, “it’s just-, no one’s ever said that-, I was so afraid of what the others would think if they knew about her; I’ve never told anyone, not even Marx.”

“I’m sorry,” Takumi breathed, and he embraced Leon, “I’m sorry that you had to suffer all alone.”

Leon withdrew and wiped his face with the backs of his hands. The gesture was surprisingly childlike and Takumi squeezed his hand.

“May I kiss you?” he asked.

Leon blinked again, stunned.

“Wh-what-? You want to-, to kiss me? I’m not very good at it-,”

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” said Takumi with an amused laugh, “your kiss was great, Leon.”
The knight pinked and then nodded, “I-, I’d like to be kissed.”

Takumi smiled at him.

“It’s good to know what you want,” he said, and then put an arm around Leon, pulling the knight closer as he kissed him gently.

Ryouma stood in the doorway, staring wordlessly as his brother pulled a Nohrian Prince into a kind kiss.

“What in the Dawn Dragon’s holy name is going on here?” he murmured. Leon jerked away from Takumi as though the prince’s touch had been charged with lightning.

“I-, It’s-,”

He moved backwards unsteadily as Ryouma came into the room.

“You could’ve knocked,” Takumi muttered.

“I was under the impression that you and I were far past that,” Ryouma replied, grey gaze hardening. Takumi got to a stand and then helped Leon to his feet before turning back to his brother.

“Well?” he said, “what’s of such great importance, Ryouma?”

“I wanted to inquire about a few things,” the High Prince answered, “but that display certainly gets priority.”

Takumi frowned at him.

“I came here for Sakura’s help,” he said, ignoring Ryouma’s secondary comment, “that was all; I have no plans to remain in Hoshido.”

“This is your home,” the High Prince said.

Takumi’s frown deepened.

“Yeah,” he said thoughtfully, “I’ve been thinking about that a lot, actually.”

Leon blinked, recalling what the prince had said earlier.

“I guess I belong here, with everyone.”

_Hoshido isn’t his home. Instead_,

***

“Orochi said that if we just came in-, here-,”
At the wide array of faces that greeted him, Hinata trailed off, blinking.

“‘Well hey there, Lady Hinoka, Lady Sakura,’” he greeted, uncertain, “‘and company.’”

“Hinata,” said Hinoka, surprised, “Oboro!”

Marc got to a stand and hurried over towards them. Oboro glowered for a moment until the flier bowed low to them.

“M-my name’s Marc-!” she said, uncharacteristically shy.

“What’re ya’ Nohrians doing in Hoshido?” Hinata asked, patting Oboro’s arm comfortingly.

“We aren’t actually Nohrian,” said Marc, straightening, “my brother and I are Ylissean. Frey and Anna are from Cyrkensia. Sort of.”

Oboro brightened at the mention of the festival city, “Oh, are you performers?”

“Frey can play some ancient lullabies,” Hinoka said, proud to share her newly-acquired knowledge.

“I’m just a merchant,” supplied Anna with an apologetic shrug.

Hinata turned back to Marc, “Not to be rude, but what’s with the bowing?”

“I-, thought it was Hoshidan custom,” she said, more to herself than to him, “and I wanted to thank you for taking such good care of Takumi.”

The two of them blinked.

“Taking care of… Takumi?” Oboro echoed, minutely confused.

“Following his capture,” supplied Marc, “I was recruited by the youngest Nohrian Princess as a mercenary. Though it’s a bit more complicated than that, the long and short of it is that I’m acting as Takumi’s retainer.”

Hinata let out a disbelieving laugh and Oboro ruffled Marc’s hair with startling familiarity.

“Leave it to Takumi to find such a cute girl for a retainer!” said Hinata with another laugh.

“Yes,” agreed Oboro, studying the seams of Marc’s uniform, “is this the typical garb in Ylisse?”

“Uh-, I’m not really-,”

Hinata patted her on the back, “Don’t mind Oboro, she gets real excited about all that fashion stuff.”

“O-oh-,” said Marc, nodding, “that’s certainly a nice hobby-,”

“Hang on,” said Oboro, seeming to interrupt herself, “if you’re Takumi’s retainer, does that mean that he’s-,”

“Is he here right now?” asked Hinata, realising what she was getting at.

“Oh,” said Marc, nodding, “Y-yyeah. I think he went to his chamber to deal with a wardrobe malfunction.”
“Without me-?” muttered Oboro, “the nerve of that prince-!”

Hinata laughed as she took him by the arm and promptly turned on heel to investigate the fashion fiasco that she’d been left out of.

“Nice meeting you, Marc-!” Hinata called over his shoulder, “glad to serve by your side! Oboro’s glad too, she’s just-, preoccupied!”

“Okay-!” Marc replied, honestly unsure how to interpret any of the events that had just happened.

Hinoka laughed once Marc returned to her spot at Owain’s side.

“The three of them basically grew up together,” she supplied, “so I’m sure they’re thrilled that you’re joining their little gang.”

“It might be the other way around,” Marc murmured thoughtfully; would those two choose to side with Takumi?

*Or does their loyalty truly lie with that damned High Prince-*?

***

“Please, Brother, can you hear yourself-?”

Takumi took Leon’s hand and the knight blinked, startled by the gesture.

“If you take issue with the fact that I’m refusing you,” said the prince, “then you need to take a good, long look in the mirror, Ryouma.”

The High Prince bristled; he’d had about enough of everyone talking down to him.

“You will not speak to your brother that way,” Ryouma said, and Takumi tensed beneath the command in his voice.

Leon felt that he should step in but he had nothing to say; what words could he—a Nohrian—offer that would quell the maelstrom within the High Prince’s heart?

Takumi blinked and then shook his head.

“My brother-?” he echoed.

The uncharacteristic neutrality in his voice made Ryouma hesitate.

“Don’t misunderstand,” said Takumi, frowning, “you and I may share blood but if you order me around like some simple soldier, don’t you *dare* call yourself my brother.”

Leon remembered his conversation with Kamui back when he’d brought Takumi into his chamber.

“And now you dare *call yourself* my brother?”
“Bonds of blood mean nothing if you use them for ill,” said Takumi.

Ryouma stared at him.

“I hated Kamui for abandoning us,” the prince continued, “but maybe he was happy with the family he found in Nohr.”

“You’d dare-,”

“Shut up-!!” Takumi roared, “can’t you listen to me for once-?!”

Ryouma slowly shut his mouth, clenching his jaw.

“You’ve done so much for me,” the prince said, calmer, “and I appreciate that more than you could ever know. You did your best to guide me after Father died. But you and I aren’t the same, Ryouma. You, wielding your Raijinto Blade and me with my Fuujin Bow. We’re completely different.”

“Yes, but even so-,”

“I can’t keep that up,” Takumi said, “I can’t continue to do as you do. You’re going to become King, Ryouma. And you need to keep that in mind, and start acting like it.”

Just as the High Prince was about to respond, footsteps thundered down the hallway.

And then Hinata and Oboro were tumbling through the doorway, easily avoiding Ryouma only to crash into Takumi and Leon.

“Lord Takumi-!” they shouted in unison.

The prince blinked, startled.

“O-oboro-? Hinata?”

“It’s been a while,” said Hinata, sitting up and rubbing the back of his head; he’d hit it when they’d tumbled to the ground.

“We’re here to make sure you don’t make a fashion faux pas,” said Oboro, righting herself. She glanced over at Leon and frowned.

“This is Leon-!” Takumi introduced awkwardly, “he’s my-,”

He trailed off suddenly, entirely unsure how to explain their relationship.

“Temporary impulse control,” the knight supplied with a shrug, “I can’t live with him, and yet I can’t live without him.”

Hinata laughed, but Oboro continued to scrutinise him for a few moments longer.

Ryouma watched them quietly.

“So that’s how it is,” he murmured.

He turned to leave, but Takumi got to a hurried stand.
“We’re not done here,” he said, clenching his fists so that their shaking was not so obvious.

Ryouma turned to glance at him.

“I have other matters to attend to,” he said icily.

Takumi gritted his teeth, but didn’t attempt to stop the High Prince as he left.

Oboro pushed herself to a stand and Hinata helped Leon onto his feet.

“What was that all about?” Oboro asked, straightening the folds of her tunic.

“I dunno,” said Takumi, “but I’m glad to see you two!”

“You didn’t tell us you got such a cute retainer, Takumi!” said Hinata with a wide grin.

The prince blinked.

“You’ve met Marc?”

“And Owain and Anna,” Oboro added, “and Frey too. Sort of.”

“Yeah, your cute little friend was still passed out when we went to visit.”

“They’re married,” said Takumi with a giggle, “so you’d better watch your back, Hinata. Anna might just bite your head off if you make a move. Besides, Frey’s pretty shy.”

“Nothin’ wrong with that,” Hinata replied.

Takumi shook his head; a good strike from Anna’s lantern would show him the truth of things.

“That’s all well and good,” said Leon, seeming to have finally regained his voice, “but we’ve really got to check up on our friend. They were doing pretty poorly when we arrived.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Oboro asked, fixing him with a curious look, “because you’re worried about your-, your friend-?”

“Yes,” said Leon earnestly, “Frey has been a very important factor in our decisions lately.”

“Whose decisions?” Hinata asked. “You and Lord Takumi?”

“And some others too,” the prince said, “there are uh-, a lot of us.”

“A lot of you? What are you, a rag-tag group of do-gooders?” Oboro asked.

Her expression brightened when she laughed and Leon preferred her that way.

“Yeah,” said Takumi, surprising all of them, “I guess we kinda are.”

Hinata blinked, “Wait, what-?”
“Bad things are brewing,” the prince supplied, “and we all want to stop them. The war began when King Garon killed my father all those years ago. But now, an ancient evil is rising to engulf everyone and everything in war.”

“If that happens,” said Leon, “none will survive.”

“Sounds bad,” said Hinata and Oboro elbowed him.

Takumi nodded, “It is bad. Like, really bad. But we’re gonna stop it.”

“Ah, jeez, Takumi,” Hinata said with a shake of his head, “what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Nothing I intend to back out of,” the prince replied stoutly.

“I guess it can’t be helped,” said Oboro with a shrug.

“We’re coming with you,” finished Hinata.

***

Sakura let out a deep sigh and fell back against the straw.

She took a few moments to gather herself before speaking.

“Frey should recover nicely,” she said finally—and all of her previous shyness was gone in the face of the group’s worry over their storyteller—“I’ve stabilised them but with their condition, they’ll sleep for a long while; that’s the best way for the body to recover from wounds like these.”

Anna nodded and Owain reached over to squeeze her hand supportively.

“But,” said Sakura, worrying at the edge of her wide sleeve, “it was strange. I’ve never seen wounds like that. Such powerful magic-, how did Frey get hurt?”

Marc clenched her fists.

“They were ambushed by a Nohrian sorcerer,” she gritted out, “and we’re going to make him pay for what he did.”

“He’s been terrorising Leon and Takumi,” Owain added and this had Hinoka going red in the face.

“And,” said Anna, “Frey’s made it seem as though he’s the one pushing us towards the brink of war.”

“That’s awful,” said Sakura, and she seemed dejected.

“Thanks for healing our friend,” said Owain with an appreciative nod.

“I wish I could fight for you, and help protect everyone,” the princess said softly.

“Your healing is just as important,” Marc reassured with a soft smile.
“You two run on ahead,” said Takumi, “I’m sure you’re dying to hear about my adventures with Marc.”

“It’s not like we’re not gonna have the opportunity to go on plenty more,” Oboro muttered as Hinata pulled her excitedly out into the hallway.

Takumi waved them off and then turned back to Leon.

“You okay?” he said.

The knight nodded.

“I-, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to defend me earlier.”

“Ryouma was being a jerk,” Takumi said, “I didn’t want him to talk down to me anymore.”

Leon seemed unconvinced; that wouldn’t do.

“Listen,” said the prince and he took Leon’s hand in his own, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately. About myself and about what I want to do.”

“Yeah,” said Leon, “you mentioned it a bit earlier. Before we-,”

He trailed off and then bit his lip.

“Before we found Frey,” Takumi finished solemnly, “yeah. And after we found them, I said some rotten things to you. And that wasn’t okay. And I’m sorry.”

Leon snorted, “How can you-, how can you apologise so easily-?”

“I don’t-,”

“You’re too kind,” the knight whispered, “you’d willingly embrace me, when I’ve already made so many attempts to tarnish you-? I assure you that I am not worth-,”

“That was Macbeth,” Takumi said again, “and besides, that isn’t true anyway. You’re not dead weight, Leon. You’re a capable mage and you’ve got a brilliant mind. I dunno how you got Zero to meet up with us here, but I know you were the one to bring him. And that’s pretty incredible.”

Leon pinked and the colour filled his cheeks slowly.

“O-oh-,” he said and his voice was very small.

Takumi gave him a gentle smile.

“Macbeth might’ve knocked us down a bit,” said the prince, “but we’re not down and out yet. Let’s get up and try again, okay?”

Leon blinked.

For so many years of his life, the knight had heard the opposite; he could make no mistake and lose
no battle.

And yet now, despite having lost so much, he was being offered a hand.

“We can still win,” Takumi assured him.

“Yeah,” said Leon, squeezing the prince’s palm with his own, “yeah we can.”

***

“Marc!!”

At the shout, the flier leapt to a stand, alarmed. But she eased into a relaxed position when Hinata and Oboro came into view.

Oboro waved in greeting, “We talked with Lord Takumi and he said you had some pretty interesting adventures.”

“That doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Owain murmured from his place at Anna’s side.

She had fallen asleep against his shoulder and Hinoka had offered her feathered mantle wordlessly.

“Th-thank you,” said Owain, surprised by the gesture.

“Don’t mention it,” the princess replied, though her tone was not so cold.

Owain shook his head; this was Takumi’s elder sister?

She hadn’t said much to anyone save for Lady Sakura and Anna, despite knowing the rest of the party was mainly neutral.

“Are you okay?” the swordsman asked, hoping she wasn’t nearly as irritable as her younger brother.

“Yeah,” she said.

They fell back into silence, simply watching Marc excitedly explain her travels with Takumi to the others.

Hinata and Oboro were overjoyed.

When Marc told the particularly funny details, Hinata slung an arm around Oboro as he guffawed and she held him up with a few stray giggles.

“Actually,” said Hinoka, surprising Owain, “I’m worried. About my brothers.”

“Takumi? And Prince Ryouma?”

“After Mother died,” the princess said quietly, “Ryouma didn’t want to grieve. I think he blamed himself for her death, and some part of him wanted to take her place.”

“That’s how he got captured?”
Hinoka shrugged. Without her feathered mantle, she looked very small with her legs pulled to her chest as they were.

Owain had the strange urge to embrace her; she reminded him a bit of Cynthia and he wanted to ease her worry.

Then again, he worried he was simply projecting onto the princess; Owain worried that without Selena and Lucina, as well as the Justice Cabal, Cynthia would be entirely upset and alone.

*The Justice Cabal…*

Marc had mentioned it to him earlier, though he couldn’t quite remember why.

“I think he was hoping for a quick death,” Hinoka said, and this launched Owain from his troubling thoughts, “but then Takumi traded places with him.”

Her face was a mask of distress. Owain shifted uncertainly.

“That didn’t leave Ryoma much time to grieve for Mother,” she added, more to herself than to him, “and he’s been trying so hard to act as our eldest brother and as our High Prince.”

Owain’s thoughts drifted to his own life, and his mind settled on a memory of Lucina, who had temporarily gone to pieces when her mother had died; she’d only ever shown that side to Owain and he’d been the only one to understand her pain.

“We did our best to pretend that nothing was wrong,” Hinoka admitted, “but the cracks were too big and there were too many and we fought a lot during Takumi’s absence. He uh-, I think he actually held us together pretty well. It’s a shame we didn’t notice until he was gone.”

The princess paused to lean over and smooth her sister’s hair. Sakura had fallen asleep shortly after finishing her healing process upon Frey; no one could blame her, for the entire exchange had been stressful.

“We could’ve used his help in rebuilding everything,” said Hinoka, but she didn’t seem angry, “and Sakura missed him. They were always been inseparable, you know.”

Owain recalled the gentle ways in which Takumi talked to his younger sister and supported her. He glanced over at Marc, who was presently putting on the smallest magic show detailing her past travels.

She was almost glowing as Oboro and Hinata marvelled at her magic, their eyes wide with child-like intrigue.

“I see,” Owain said, and understood with frightening clarity.

Hinoka went quiet again and the swordsman leant back into the hay with a heavy sigh.

“I think we took Takumi for granted,” she said finally, “Ryouma most of all. My brothers had always truly loved one another in every possible way.”
She looked contemplative.

“Takumi was always there to support Ryouma and so my brother was able to grow into a proper High Prince.”

Owain nodded, eager for her to continue.

“But no one considered how that would affect Takumi,” she said and she sounded guilty.

“What do you mean?” the swordsman dared.

“Where Ryouma excelled, Takumi found himself stunted. There was no proper give-and-take,” she admitted, “and we were all blind to it until he was gone.”

Owain frowned.

“During his time in Nohr,” Hinoka said—and she did her best not to spit the word—“it seems like he’s really grown. Now, of course, with his return to Hoshido, I doubt Ryouma can recognise him; he isn’t quite like the way he used to be.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, no,” Hinoka said quickly, “it’s all good, great, actually. He deserves to grow and become a proper prince, as he always has. But, uh-, those changes have already impacted his relationship with Ryouma.”

Owain was quiet as he thought over this.

“Try to understand,” said Hinoka, “Takumi’s never refused my brother. For him to suddenly reject a return to Hoshido—and before Ryouma’s entire entourage—was a grave awakening for my brother. Probably for the both of them.”

“What does that mean for them?”

Hinoka levelled her gaze with his.

“Things can never go back to the way they were.”

***

“I can’t believe he interrupted us,” Takumi mumbled and Leon blinked, confused.

“What? That’s what you’re focusing on?”

He laughed a bit, surprised.

Takumi shrugged.

“Well,” he muttered, “I guess it doesn’t really matter.”

“What do you mean-?”
The prince pulled Leon to his chest and captured his mouth in another kiss. It was warm and welcoming and the knight relaxed into Takumi’s warmth.

When they finally parted, Leon was staring at him.

“Wh-why are you staring-?”

Takumi went red in the face and the knight broke out into laughter.

“It’s just-, you’re very bold this morning, Prince Takumi.”

“I’m sure we’re far past titles at this point, Prince Leon,” he retorted with a teasing smile.

His gaze was heavy with exhaustion—he hadn’t slept since they’d found Frey—yet still, he was glowing.

Leon realised he was probably letting the silence hold for too long.

He quickly spat out a reply: “Perhaps you’re right.”

“But I guess I’m just feeling very bold today,” the prince said with a shrug, “after all, I just dissed my brother in front of a Nohrian Prince and two of his own very important subjects.”

Leon shrugged, “That is a bold move.”

Takumi laughed, “He’s gonna hate me.”

“He’s your brother.”

“Yeah, not totally sure that matters anymore,” the prince said honestly.

Leon frowned.

“I didn’t mean to make things tense between the two of you.”

“Not to sound rude,” replied Takumi, “but it doesn’t really have much to do with you. This would’ve happened eventually.”

“But instead of later, it happened now, all because your big brother caught you locking lips with a Nohrian Prince.”

Takumi laughed again, uncertain “Yup. But uh-, it’s not like I could help it.”

“Huh-?”

“I’ve kinda wanted to kiss you for a little while,” the prince admitted, and he dropped his gaze, “but I wasn’t sure how to tell you. I was worried that you’d think I liked being a prisoner. Th-that’s not it at all, of course, but-, uh-, yeah.”

Leon blinked.

“W-wait. Y-you wanted to-, you wanted to kiss me too-?”

Takumi pinked hard.
“Yes, jeez-! This is embarrassing-!”

“How long-?” Leon asked, incredulous, “how long have you wanted to kiss me-?”

Takumi frowned, thinking.

“I dunno,” he said, and quickly elaborated with: “I just knew I wanted to kiss you a whole lot when you rescued me from Ryouma.”

Leon blinked again.

“When I-,”

“You looked so cool,” Takumi said, and he was absolutely refusing to meet the knight’s gaze, “you had your magical blade and you hooked your arm around me like it was the most natural thing in the world and said that sly line: ‘someone really ought to teach your big brother to mind his manners.’”

Leon stared at him.

“Sweet Holy Dusk Dragon,” he swore, “I could kiss you again just for telling me.”

“Oh, no,” Takumi deadpanned, “that’d just be absolutely horrible.”

Leon rolled his eyes.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” the prince said with another laugh.

“Just kiss him already,” said a voice from the window, startling the two.

“Z-Zero-?” Leon hissed, disbelieving.

“Orochi-!?” Takumi breathed at the same time, mouth dropping in surprise.

She waved, “Hey, fluffy chicken, glad to see you!”

“I told you not to call me that,” he muttered, and Leon tried—to no avail—to silence a snort behind his hand.

“Augh, what are the two of you doing here? And more importantly, how long have you been standing there-?”

Zero looked at Orochi and she shrugged.

“We showed up when you got all sappy,” the diviner said with a wink.

“Actually, why are the two of you together anyway?” Takumi asked.

“We’ve decided we’re in love,” Zero said seriously.

“You’re gay,” Leon and Takumi said in unison.

And then, recalling some more controversial information, Takumi continued with: “You’re engaged
to Kamui, and you—,”—he pointed to Orochi—“are literally mid-wedding plans with Kagerou.”

Zero lifted his hands, “You caught us: illicit love affair!”

“All you did was watch us,” snapped Leon, “I hardly think that counts!”

Orochi snapped her fingers and brightened, “You’re right! Congrats, Nohrian Prince, you’ve saved my marriage!”

“Mine too!” said Zero with a gracious bow.

“This is the worst,” Takumi muttered, though there was no venom in his voice.

“No, but seriously,” said Orochi, “have you two named your rebel group yet? Because if it has a lame name, I’m not joining.”

Leon stared accusingly at Zero.

“What lies have you told this woman-?”

“No lies!” the archer promised, crossing his fingers at his temples, “just the truth: that you and Lord Takumi are the leaders of an incredible group of rag-tag warriors looking to save the world from calamity!”

Leon let out a long, tired sigh.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Takumi, however, was staring at Zero.

“You think we’re… rebel leaders-?”

“Well,” said Orochi, “you aren’t entirely with Hoshido. And you’re also not with Nohr. You’ve got a pack of children calling themselves ‘Ylisseans’ and your main base is located in Cyrkensia, the most neutral city in the world. So yeah, I think that makes you a textbook rebel group, Lord Takumi.”

“Dawn Dragon,” he swore, “when you say it like that-,”

“So,” she said, “what are you called?”

Takumi looked at Leon. Leon shrugged at him.

As the prince was getting ready to admit the fact that they hadn’t planned that far ahead, there was commotion in the hall.

Takumi and Leon turned, startled to see Marc and Owain come bowling through the doorway, accompanied by a cackling Oboro and Hinata, who shoved Asama and Setsuna into the room with Hinoka.

“Hey,” said the princess.
“Hey yourself,” Zero purred from the window before Orochi clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Hey, Sis,” greeted Takumi, a bit confused.

“We were wondering… if you have room for three more-?” she said, and her cheeks were nearly as red as her hair.

The prince blinked and he glanced at Leon, who was staring, startled.

“You want… to join us?”

“Owain and the others explained things a bit,” Hinoka supplied, “and I think I wanna help. After all, what sort of a big sister would I be if I let my little brother be the only one to look cool?”

Takumi blinked again, wordless for a long moment. Owain elbowed his sister as if to get her to say something.

“W-we don’t even have a name yet,” the prince admitted.

He was thankful for Hinoka’s willingness, but felt foolish involving her simultaneously.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you earlier,” said Marc, surprising everyone.

She looked at Owain and he gave her a thumbs-up; Cynthia would surely approve.

“In honour of a friend close to our hearts,” said Marc, clenching her fists as Cynthia’s smiling face flickered in her mind, “we’re gonna call ourselves the Justice Cabal.”

Chapter End Notes

i have existed without a slowburn fic for much too long. and now that leon and takumi have kissed properly, im finally going to take a nice long nap

much love, and lets pray that we'll see the Justice Cabal again soon! as always, id appreciate some feedback! (i love the motivation!) <3
The Last Magician

Chapter Summary

The Justice Cabal returns to Cyrkensia, where Aqua reveals that Godfrey may be more than they appear. When the others lose track of Takumi, they begin to fear for the worst. Leon's final showdown with Macbeth will determine the fate of his friends, and the world itself. Marc makes an awful discovery.

Chapter Notes

its up to interpretation as to who the "last magician" truly is ;-)  
(im gonna mention here that there's a slightly graphic scene towards the end of the chapter, so be warned!)  
and without further chatter, here's chapter ten!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was Owain who directed the wagons into the barn; there was an extra one now that their party had nearly doubled in size.

The swordsman was accompanied by Zero and Orochi, surprisingly, who they’d found perched in their wagon when they’d prepared to head back to Cyrkensia.

Leon had demanded to know what she’d wanted.

“I keep my word,” she’d supplied easily, “and because your ‘Justice Cabal’ has a properly good name, you’ll be welcoming my magic!”

She’d had no qualms in leaving Hoshido, not with Mikoto dead and gone as she was.

“There’s nothing here for me now,” she had admitted.

Zero hadn’t missed the forlorn look on her face as they made their way to Cyrkensia; surely her thoughts were filled only with the one person she’d left behind.

“I knew you couldn’t stand to be apart from me,” Zero teased and that earned him an elbow to the rib.

Owain glanced at the pair over his shoulder.

“You didn’t have to come along; everyone else is already inside.”

Zero shrugged, “I was wondering what happened to make you start carrying a sword.”
Orochi frowned, “Now that you mention it, this one was a mage last time I saw him.”

Owain’s hand fell to the Mystletainn at his hip.

“I have always been a swordsman,” he said quietly as he turned to secure the first wagon into its proper place.

Zero snorted, “More stories?”

“My two friends who came to Nohr with me,” he continued, undeterred yet refusing to meet their gazes, “they were both swordsmen as well. Well, Selena was a swords...woman, but you get the idea.”

“Selena?” said Zero, frowning, “I thought her name was-,”

“I didn’t want to dredge up my past once I came to Nohr,” Owain admitted, “but it seems that it’s no longer possible to ignore.”

Orochi and Zero watched him as he straightened and then bowed to them with a formality that was most unlike him.

“I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused,” he said—and it was as though he were apologising to more than just Orochi and Zero—“My name Owain, and I am the First Prince of the Halidom of Ylisse.”

***

With Frey officially on the mend, Anna had begun to return to herself, brightly welcoming their newest friends into The Sleeping Goat.

Kamui’s small entourage had met them on the doorstep and they were all chatting happily in Anna’s tea parlour.

As the merchant stepped into the kitchen to retrieve some more cakes, she caught Leon asleep at the small table.

She blinked, momentarily surprised to find him apart from the others, but her gaze softened as she realised how tired he must’ve been.

Anna set the smallest of meals out for him before sneaking back into the hall.

“Maybe you should take a break,” said Marc, startling her.

“Marc-!”

The flier took the plate of cakes from her and waved her back towards the kitchen.

“You need to rest a bit,” she said, “you can’t entertain if you’re not at full power, ya’ know.”
Anna blinked.

“It’ll be fine,” she said, “they’re just sharing stories in there anyway.”

The merchant nodded wordlessly and stepped back into the kitchen, taking a seat across from where Leon was asleep at the table.

After a moment of silence, she snatched up one of his baguette slices and bit into it before it got cold.

As Marc headed for the tea parlour, she caught Takumi easing into the darkened hallway with an apologetic wave to the party within.

She ducked behind Anna’s grandfather clock and watched him curiously. When the door to the parlour finally shut, the prince let out a tired sigh and his smile dropped from his face.

He looked immensely burdened.

Marc whispered out a cloaking spell as Takumi made his way further down the hallway.

He walked right past her and towards Frey’s study.

For a moment, Marc turned to follow. And then, remembering that she’d sent Anna away to rest, paused.

“Dammit,” she muttered, turning her back on Takumi and pushing open the door to the parlour.

She’d confront him about his shady behaviour later.

“Alright,” Takumi whispered as he eased the door to Frey’s study closed, “I’m in.”

He was met with only silence for a long moment, but Frey’s voice finally bounced around in his mind.

“Good,” they said, and their voice was hoarse, “you’ll want to find my Kalimba. We’re going to need it.”

Takumi paused and withdrew Frey’s jynxpiece from his pocket, looping the worn chain over his head so that the soft stone settled low down his chest.

“Did you talk to Marc earlier? She was holding this,” he said, tapping the jynxpiece.

“Be careful,” said Frey, ignoring the question, “that Sorcerer damaged it earlier.”

“Why are you asking me to do this?” Takumi asked, digging through the storyteller’s artefacts, “Why didn’t you have me give the jynxpiece to Miss Anna? I’m sure she’s better suited to the task.”

Frey was quiet for another long stretch of time and the prince sighed, exasperated.

“Just tell me if you’re not going to respond,” he muttered.

“My wife has enough to deal with as it is,” Frey answered finally, and Takumi detected the slightest tinge of anger in their voice.


“But I don’t?” he said, barking a laugh, “C’mon, Frey. You can’t seriously consider lying to me when I’m essentially holding your life in my hands.”

“As I mentioned earlier,” Frey responded—quicker this time, Takumi noted—“I will still live thanks to Lady Sakura’s healing magic, but—”

“But you’ll sleep forever,” Takumi interrupted, “I remember.”

“You chose to pick up the jynxpiece,” said Frey, voice gentler, “so now you must help me.”

“Do you not want Miss Anna to know that you’re going to the forest? To-, to ‘Avalon-?’” Frey said nothing.

“Okay,” said Takumi, “that answers one of my many mounting questions, at least.”

“She cannot go into Avalon,” Frey supplied quietly.

“Why not?” Takumi asked, and he found the storyteller’s ten-key Kalimba sheltered beneath a complicated—yet careful—wrapping on their desk.

“The creatures of magic that reside there will prey upon her.”

“Why?” Takumi asked again, “Marc and Owain are creatures of magic, aren’t they? Since they’re children of a dragon?”

“They are different,” Frey interrupted, “they are not like other creatures of magic.”

Takumi straightened and made for the door, tucking Frey’s instrument protectively into a satchel at his hip.

“And what about you?”

I cannot ignore what I am.

-

***

Leon woke to Anna’s soft snoring. There was half a baguette slice in her hand.

He shook his head as an amused smile spread across his face.

“I knew you needed a nap,” he muttered, though there was no venom in his voice, “you stubborn woman.”

He smoothed a few stray hairs from her face and stepped out into the hallway.

Leon was surprised to find Aqua and Kamui quietly whispering to each other in the narrow corridor.

He frowned.

“Excuse me,” he said, announcing his approach.

Kamui jumped guiltily and then turned to glance at Leon over his shoulder.
“Oh,” he breathed, relieved, “Brother, it’s only you.”

Leon quirked a brow.

“Who were you expecting?”

“Takumi,” answered Aqua.

The knight cocked his head, “What do you mean? Isn’t he in the parlour with everyone else?”

Aqua bit her lip.

“No,” said Kamui, “he left earlier. And he’s been gone for a while.”

Something that would later be identified as worry began to bloom in Leon’s chest and he clenched a fist slowly at his side.

“What did you just say?”

***

“I feel like dumping your body into a wheelbarrow was not the greatest plan,” Takumi said as he paced towards the line of trees; he was grateful that the trek was not uphill, for he was confident he wasn’t strong enough to push the wheelbarrow up an incline.

“You cannot carry my body on your own,” said Frey, “and more to the point, the less who accompany me, the better.”

Takumi frowned, “Hey, Frey? I’m not in, uh-, I’m not in any danger or anything, right?”

“You’re a prince,” said Frey by way of explanation—was it?—“you should be able to handle yourself.”

Takumi shook his head; that didn’t exactly reassure him.

“Slow down,” Frey warned, “things are unnatural in Avalon.”

The prince recalled how he’d seen Frey earlier—before they’d been properly introduced—as the storyteller was playing their tune at the entrance.

“You were playing the Renewal Arrangement,” he said, more to himself than to Frey.

“You heard me?”

“Marc started humming it when you got too far to hear,” he said, “I thought it was strange; that’s why I remembered.”

They fell back into silence as Takumi pushed the wheelbarrow deeper into the forest.

Fog seeped between the trees and the prince felt the hair on his arms stand up.
“I don’t feel good about this,” he whispered.

“It’s okay,” Frey reassured, “we’re nearly there.”

“Nearly where?”

“Here,” the storyteller breathed and Takumi halted when the edge of the wheelbarrow grated up against a slab of stone.

“What is this?” the prince murmured, “it looks like a-, like some kind of a-, a coffin-!”

“Close, but no cigar,” Frey muttered, “you’re gonna need to put my body on that.”

“What-?! That’s crazy-! I’m not leaving your body out here in this creepy-,”

“You must!!” Frey exclaimed, and Takumi sank to one knee beneath the force of their voice.

“Keep it down in there,” the prince said, “don’t shout at me. All I’m saying is that it’s madness to leave you here undefended.”

“I will not be undefended,” Frey said, considerably softer—though no less determined—“please, you have to leave me here. If you do not, I’ll sleep forever.”

For a long moment, Takumi considered leaving. He could toss Frey’s jynxpiece into the lake on the outskirts and let the storyteller sleep for an eternity.

“I don’t want to go back to sleep,” Frey whispered, and their voice was uncharacteristically fragile, “please, I can’t do that again.”

Again?

“Alright, fine,” said Takumi, “I’ll put your body on the slab. But only on one condition.”

“Name it. I’m yours.”

“You tell me everything I want to know.”

***

“And things were just… different,” Orochi said, “after Lady Mikoto died, it was like the kingdom fell apart.”

Owain was propped up next to her in the hay, Zero perching on the edge of the wagon. He nodded his sympathy as Owain patted the diviner’s arm in wordless support.

Orochi went silent at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Owain’s hand went to the Mystletainn and Zero’s gaze flickered to the doorway.

The barn doors flew open and Owain was surprised to find a very frustrated Marc standing before them.
“Marc-?” he said, blinking, “What’s-?”

“Is Takumi here?”

It was Aqua who had spoken, stepping into the barn and golden gaze flickering across the few gathered there.

She frowned, arriving at her conclusion.

Owain looked at Marc, who was squinting accusingly at him. He leapt to a stand and lifted his hands in surrender.

“N-nothing happened,” he said quickly, “we were just-, talking.”

“Why are you looking for Lord Takumi?” Orochi and Zero asked in unison.

“He’s missing,” Kamui provided.

“Okay,” said Owain as nervousness pitted in his stomach, “well, who saw him last?”

Aqua looked at Kamui. He looked back at her and shrugged.

Owain looked at his sister and her face was a mask of horror.

“Sweet Naga,” she breathed, “it was me. I saw him last.”

“Where?” asked Zero, not sensing the danger.

Marc swallowed hard.

“Frey’s study,” she whispered.

She’d been so foolish! She’d turned her back on him and now he was gone-!

“What study-?” said Kamui, brows furrowing.

“C’mon,” said Owain, gesturing for them to follow as he took Marc by the arm and headed back towards The Sleeping Goat.

Leon followed them wordlessly, unable to contribute; he felt uncharacteristically lost and confused.

Where’s Takumi? Where’s Takumi?!

***

“You’re heavier than you look,” Takumi muttered, once he’d finally gotten Frey’s body atop the slab.

“That wasn’t very polite,” the storyteller retorted, but Takumi could hear their soft laughter in the back of his head.
“Alright,” he said, straightening, “I’m just gonna-, put your arms like-, this-,”

“I look like a saint,” Frey commented, “what a wonderful change in pace.”

Takumi positioned the storyteller’s hands over top of one another across their middle and smoothed the lines of their dark tunic.

It was still stained with dried blood.

“Is that all then?” he asked, uncertain; Takumi didn’t want to stay here any longer than was absolutely necessary.

“Not quite,” said Frey and the prince sighed.

“What else is there to do?”

“You’ll need to wake up those two,” the storyteller said.

And just as Takumi was about to ask who Frey was talking about, his gaze fell upon two sleeping forms.

“Beasts-?” he hissed disbelievingly, shaking the jynxpiece, “Frey, what the hell is wrong with you-?!”

“They’re under the sleeping spell,” Frey reassured, “you were in no danger.”

“And what about when they wake up-?!”

“Ah. And that’s why I only brought you.”

“You’re the worst,” Takumi muttered, pulling Frey’s Kalimba from the satchel at his side.

“You’ll have to play the Renewal Arrangement yourself,” the storyteller said calmly.

“I don’t know how to play-!”

“It’s easy. I’ll guide you. Get your thumbs ready and hit the keys in the order that I say. You’ll only have to do the core melody; it’s simple.”

“As soon as you wake up, I’m gonna kill you,” Takumi threatened, but he positioned his thumbs across the metal tongs all the same.

***

“N-no-,” breathed Aqua, stepping into Frey’s study, “this can’t be right.”

“Aqua-?”

It was Kamui, concerned at her side. Her distress evidently had some effect on him, if his antlers and tail were any indication.
Marc, however, was delighted by the display. Owain patted her on the shoulder and shook his head in wordless warning: ‘Now isn’t the time for that.’

She sighed and went to Aqua’s other side.

“Lady Aqua? Is everything alright?”

The Songstress gazed at the artefacts that decorated Frey’s private room; they’d been collecting such items for years.

“I-, I’m not sure,” Aqua said finally, which did nothing to reassure anyone.

Zero and Orochi traded concerned glances from just beyond the doorway. Leon stood behind them, worrying away at the cuticle of his left thumb with his teeth.

“It’s just-, strange,” murmured Aqua, lifting a hand cautiously to touch one of Frey’s artefacts.

It was a crystal ball, and it produced a faint glow at the Songstress’s touch.

“Frey’s into some weird stuff,” Marc said by way of explanation (and apology).

“That’s not it,” Aqua said, “it’s more like-, these look like treasures from my homeland.”

“The Invisible Kingdom?” said Marc and Owain in unison.

Aqua nodded, “Y-yes. I haven’t seen such things in a long time. It makes me wonder… who is your friend? This ‘Frey’ character?”

“Oh they’re quite the character,” Marc muttered.

“They’re our mentor,” Owain supplied, “in a manner of speaking. But that was-,”

He paused, remembering the conditions that had led up to their meeting.

Lissa’s broken form flashed in Owain’s mind for a moment and he squeezed his eyes shut. Marc reached over and took his arm gently, seeming to realise what memories had arisen.

“Frey has been our long-time friend,” Marc offered, “though they’ve taken to traveling with Anna for the past few years. Obviously, the pair have settled in Cyrkensia for the time being.”

“And from where does your friend hail?” Aqua asked.

Zero lifted a brow: “Didn’t they just say Frey was from the-, whatever you called it-,”

“The Invisible Kingdom,” Orochi provided, and Zero nodded.

Aqua looked to Owain and Marc for confirmation.

They both shrugged.

“Frey doesn’t talk much about their past,” Owain admitted, “but it wouldn’t surprise me if they were from the Invisible Kingdom.”
Aqua nodded wordlessly.

They all watched her, apprehensive.

“Alright,” she said finally, “just one more question.”

“Bring it on,” said Marc.

Aqua frowned and then turned to look at her, “What does Frey look like?”

***

Takumi closed his eyes and for a moment, he could swear he felt Frey’s gentle touch against his arm, fingers tapping the rhythm against his bare knuckle.

“Are you ready?” the storyteller asked, voice soft.

“Am I gonna fall asleep?” Takumi asked, recalling how he’d gotten drowsy earlier in the study.

“The exhaustion will hit you,” Frey admitted, “but no, you will remain conscious.”

Takumi sighed.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, “that works for me.”

Frey’s quiet laugh echoed around in his mind and the prince closed his eyes, straightening.

“Finger on Key 1,” Frey murmured.

And the prince began to play.

The sound was soft, melody like the stuttering beginning of the autumn’s first rain.

Takumi was distantly aware that Frey was humming the tune in his head, but the prince could pay no mind, distracted by the way the fogs of Avalon seemed to dance merrily around his ankles.

“They like your music,” Frey commented quietly as Takumi repeated the same few notes.

The beasts at the foot of the stone slab began to wake and the prince cracked open an eye to study them.

For a moment, he thought he saw a multitude of glowing eyes within the fog, all watching with an aching hunger.

“That’ll be enough, now,” Frey said softly, and Takumi sank to his knees.

It took him great effort to place the storyteller’s Kalimba back into its place in the satchel at his side.

“What happened-?”

The voice caught Takumi by surprise and his head snapped up, eyes gazing straight into those of a
Before Takumi could get a proper answer, the second beast spoke, voice gruff and fur bristling.

“Are you responsible for bringing the Master to us in this sorry state?”

The prince turned and was met with the lumbering form of a Wolfssegner.

“Wh-what-? You mean Frey? No, no. They were injured by an evil sorcerer.”

The Wolfssegner seemed unconvinced and Takumi swallowed hard.

As he was trying to decide how to prove his innocence, the fox approached, sniffing him experimentally.

“I think he’s telling the truth,” the Nine-Tailed Fox said finally, “despite how he smells.”

“How I smell?”

“You reek of magic,” the Wolfssegner grumbled, “and more importantly, the Master’s sacred blood.”

Takumi frowned.

“Sacred blood? What are you talking about?”

The Nine-Tailed Fox and the Wolfssegner stared at him for a long moment, both evidently startled by his lack of knowledge on the subject.

“You don’t know it?” the Nine-Tailed Fox asked, “the Master carries the First Blood, the blood of dragons.”

***

Marc looked at Owain and he looked back at her with a confused shrug; he didn’t seem to understand Aqua’s question either.

“Frey’s fragile; most performers are. Long hair, a round face, slightly foreign appearance.”

Aqua nodded approvingly, “What’s so foreign about them?”

Marc looked to Owain.

“Spindly fingers, a slight hunchback. Honestly, Frey’s so breakable that it’s a miracle they can function.”
“What about a more- general appearance?” Aqua said, seeming to think a different question would yield better answers.

“If you’re looking for something specific,” muttered Zero, “you might wanna ask directly.”

Orochi nodded in agreement.

“Well Frey’s got really long hair,” Owain offered with a half-shrug.

“Oh yeah-!” Marc interrupted, “and it’s golden! Hair like the sun and eyes like the moon!”

Aqua blinked.

“Hair like the-,”

Owain reached over and mussed Marc’s hair, “You know damn well Frey’s hair is red-!”

The flier dug her fingernails into his arm, “That’s not true! Ugh, you’re just a colour-blind bard!”

“Bard-?!”

“Yeah! You heard me!”

Orochi hid a giggle behind her hand and Zero pinched his nose with an amused sigh.

“And you say the last place you saw Takumi was in here, Lady Marc?”

Aqua’s third question had the small party going quiet; why was she so fixated on this? And why had she been so particular about Frey’s appearance?

The flier frowned, confused as to how the two things correlated, but she nodded nonetheless.

“I fear I’ve met your friend once before,” said Aqua, “and they are no friend of mine.”

Marc bristled and Owain put a calming hand on her arm.

“Pray tell, Lady Aqua,” he said, “what do you mean?”

“I do believe your friend is a creature of magic,” she said, “the vehement vrykolakas.”

***

“I- I’m going to go see what’s taking the others so long,” said Sakura, getting to an awkward stand.

Hinoka turned to look up at her.

“Takumi’s been gone a while, huh?”

Sakura nodded, “I- I want to make sure he’s okay. And I should probably change Godfrey’s
bandages soon as well.”

“Do you want help?” Hinoka asked.

Her sister lifted her hands in surrender, “Th-that’s okay! I don’t wanna trouble you!”

Hinoka laughed and got to a stand, ruffling Sakura’s hair.

“You’re never troubling me. Besides, now that we’ve joined the Justice Cabal, I’ve got plenty of time to ask your brother all the questions I have for him.”

“That-, is very true,” Sakura agreed; she had some questions of her own.

When the two made their way into the hallway, however, they caught Prince Leon stumbling for the door.

“Prince Leon-?” Sakura murmured, and her soft voice halted him for a moment.

“I-, I have to go,” he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

And without further comment, the knight shoved out into the street; he did not look back.

Sakura looked to Hinoka, who frowned.

“Something isn’t right,” she said, clenching her fists, “let’s get some answers.”

Leon rounded the side of The Sleeping Goat. He did feel some remorse for leaving the others in the dark, but if Aqua was right about her suspicions, Takumi was in grave danger.

“C’mon,” he muttered, “c’mon, they should be well-rested enough-,”

And when Leon finally arrived at the stables—the short trek hadn’t felt so—he was gladdened to see Skinfaxi brighten at the sight of him. Hrímfaxi was less enthused, but Leon was used to his cold reception.

“Liebchen,” he greeted easily, lifting a hand to stroke Skinfaxi’s snout.

“Can you help me?”

The stallion bowed his head low and Leon smiled, relieved, “Meine Sonne, vielen Dank.”

He clambered atop Skinfaxi’s back, grips on the reins tightening.

“We’ve got to hurry to Avalon; think you can do it?”

As if offended by the implication that he may be unable, Skinfaxi snorted.

“I’m glad to see you’re bright as ever,” Leon said with a pleased nod.

For a moment, as the knight directed his stallion down the smooth stone path, he glanced over his shoulder.

The others were, by now, realising the danger. They wouldn’t be quick enough. Even now, as Leon saw them begin to stream from the building, searching for anything that could carry them to Avalon quickly, he knew they would not make it.
“It’s up to us then,” he murmured, and guided Skinfaxi into a faster trot.

***

Kamui stepped in front of Aqua, baring his pointed teeth as his tail whipped up dust from the cobblestone flooring.

“You will not yell at her-!” he seethed.

Hinoka clicked her tongue, irritated.

“I want to know where my brother is,” she said, directing the question to Owain.

He was minutely surprised, but recalling their earlier conversation, figured she’d deemed him a suitable ally.

“He’s-,”

When the swordsman stumbled to formulate a proper answer, the Hoshidan Princess clenched her fists.

“Is this some sort of a setup-?!” she demanded, turning her attention back upon Aqua and Kamui.

“N-no-, Hinoka, we’d-,”

“We-?” the princess echoed, incredulous, “You’ve been my sister for years, Aqua, but he-,”

And she pointed to Kamui accusingly, “betrayed us without a second thought-! And now you mean to tell me that you’ve lost track of my brother-?!”

There were angry tears in her eyes and Aqua bit her lip, unsure of how to respond.

Sakura glanced towards the door, recalling Leon’s apologetic—though no less hasty—exit.

“U-uhm,” she whispered, and her legs were trembling with some many eyes upon her suddenly, “was Prince Leon going after him?”

Owain blinked, “Lord Leon-?”

He turned and glanced around, suddenly seeming to notice the knight’s absence.

Marc, arriving at the same conclusion, wasted no time slipping out the back door.

“Damn that boy,” she hissed, her Brands blazing to life, “he doesn’t know what he’s getting into-!”

She clicked her tongue and hefted up a leg, breathing a sigh of relief as Ser Fafnir swooped to her side, stirrups grazing her thigh.

Marc quickly righted herself atop his back and patted his neck.
“I don’t trust that girl,” she murmured, “calling Frey an enemy, who does she think she is-?”

Fafnir had no answer and Marc clicked her tongue again, frowning as storm clouds began to gather overhead.

“We don’t have much time,” she admitted, “so we’d better make it quick.”

She turned to glance over her shoulder.

“I didn’t wanna stay stuck with those arguing Hoshidans anyway,” she muttered.

Marc wished her brother had come along but since he was the one Princess Hinoka trusted the most, it was better for him to remain with her and the others.

“C’mon then, you,” she muttered, digging her heels into Fafnir’s sides, “let’s head for Avalon.”

***

Before Takumi could enquire further about Frey’s mysterious bloodline, the storyteller’s body convulsed on the stone slab.

And they tried—to no avail—to push themself into a sitting position, grey eyes flying open.

Takumi carefully went to their side and eased them up a bit.

“H-hold my hair-,” Frey choked out.

The prince frowned, holding the storyteller’s mass of golden hair loosely in one fist, confused.

And then, before Takumi could ask for an explanation, Frey turned to the side and retched.

They wiped their chin with the back of their hand before turning back to the others as though nothing had happened; Takumi didn’t miss the smear of blood across their knuckle.

“You’re awake!” the Nine-Tailed Fox chirped, tail whipping back and forth excitedly.

Frey moved their hand in an uncoordinated sweeping motion until their fingers grazed the fox’s thick coat.

“Hello, hi there, here I am. I’m glad to see you, Nishiki,” the storyteller said with a weak smile.

“Tell us, Master,” said the Wolfssegner, “is this Prince really innocent?”

Frey turned their attention upon him with a giggle that devolved into a violent cough.

When they recovered, they nodded.

“Yes, it’s true. Were it not for Lord Takumi’s help, I wouldn’t have been able to recover, Flannel.”

Takumi snorted, “You hardly look it.”
Frey’s shoulder jerked in a poor attempt of an upwards motion—something Takumi would later realise was a shrug.

“I am conscious,” they amended, “and that is enough.”

“Uh, did you forget the part where you spat up a gallon of blood?”

Frey lifted their hand slowly—the motion was still clumsy—and pushed at Takumi’s chest.

“What are you doing?”

“You-, don’t stand so close,” they said.

Nishiki and Flannel were at Takumi’s sides, sniffing at the storyteller worriedly.

“Are you hungry?” Nishiki asked.

“We can hunt something down for you,” Flannel assured.

Frey shook their head.

“N-no-,” they hissed, insistent, “I don’t need anything.”

The beasts—as well as Takumi—were unconvinced, but they did not try to persuade Frey otherwise.

“The Prince has questions for you,” Flannel said instead.

Takumi nodded, “That’s right. You owe me some answers, Frey.”

The storyteller smiled ruefully, “I suppose you’re right, Lord Takumi. What would you like to know?”

***

As they strode into Avalon, Leon eased Skinfaxi into a more suitable pace.

“So it’s manifested as a forest in this world, huh?”

In many of the legends, Leon had read that Avalon took on the form of an island. Here, however, it seemed to have chosen otherwise.

“A paradise for the dead,” Leon noted, grips on the reins tightening as the fogs began to roll in, “such a perfect place for the vrykolakas to hide…”

The knight didn’t want to believe Aqua’s accusations, but he could not simply ignore the way in which Godfrey had intentionally left themself shrouded in mystery.

And as much as Leon despised him, the knight couldn’t ignore Macbeth’s words; they’d stayed with him since his dream.

“A storyteller should stay on their side of the story! Your little friend aims to rewrite a path already
Leon frowned.

“Rewrite a path… already chosen?”

And though many of Frey’s gifts could be explained through feats of magic—they had called themself a diviner, after all—there were certainly other things that made no sense.

Powers… that make no sense.

“But if what I’ve read in my textbooks is true,” Leon murmured, “I’m not sure any of this matters, including Frey’s feelings towards any of us.”

Skinfaxi snorted and Leon sighed; he wasn’t expecting the stallion to be willing to go much farther.

Without another word, the knight dismounted and withdrew the Brynhildr Tome from his saddlebag, tucking the volume protectively under one arm.

He patted Skinfaxi’s side and turned his attention down the winding path.

“After all,” he murmured to himself, “creatures of magic cannot resist their true selves.”

***

“It’s true,” said Frey, “I hail from the Kingdom of Valla. Though perhaps you know it only as ‘the Invisible Kingdom.’ Before Valla’s fall, I served as a member of Lord Ryuurei’s court.”

Takumi frowned, “Lord Ryuurei?”

“He’s the king responsible for bringing peace to the people and to the creatures of magic!” Nishiki supplied, eager to share what he knew.

Frey reached over and ran their fingers through the fox’s fur, “Yes, that’s right. I’m glad that you remember.”

“King Ryuurei welcomed many creatures into his kingdom,” Flannel supplied, easing into a more comfortable position at the foot of the stone slab, “and he wanted their help in building a peaceful kingdom.”

“So you helped him with that, Frey?” Takumi asked.

The storyteller laughed uncertainly, “Not as much as I would’ve liked. If anyone is to thank for that bond, it is Lord Hydra.”

Takumi blinked.

He’d… heard that name before.

*It was so long ago but… I’m sure of it!*
Shortly after Takumi had met Marx and been sent to a proper room, he’d overheard Owain and Azure chatting in the hall.

They were talking about their Brands... and Hydra’s magic-!

“Was Hydra a mage?”

“More than that,” Flannel muttered.

“He was a god,” Frey said softly.

***

Owain lifted his hands, “Please, I’m sure everything is okay, Princess. Frey wouldn’t do anything to hurt Takumi.”

“Perhaps Frey is not the person you knew them to be,” Aqua suggested.

Owain turned to look at her for a long while.

“I don’t mean to discredit you, My Lady,” he said quietly, “but I know Frey; we have a history together. They would not betray me, nor my sister, nor any of our friends.”

Aqua opened her mouth to interject but Owain continued.

“As you well know by now, Marc and I are creatures of magic,” the swordsman said, and he dropped his gaze to the ground for a moment—there was a lingering shame that came with being Grima’s descendant—“and Frey helped both Marc and myself in learning to control ourselves. I’m sure you can understand.”

He looked pointedly at Kamui and Aqua, who both refused to meet his gaze.

“As for you,” and he turned to Hinoka and Sakura, “the Justice Cabal is truly trying to prevent the war. Please understand that we would never have agreed to form this group were it not for your brother.”

“Yet you’re not going to look for him?” said Kamui, disbelievingly.

“No, you’re wrong,” said Owain, glancing at the dragon prince over his shoulder, “I figured we should clear a few things up before we head out.”

“I don’t think Princess Aqua and Lord Kamui should go with you then,” said Zero from the doorway.

Orochi nodded, “It’s best to avoid confrontation at this point; let Takumi’s siblings go to him.”

Kamui clenched his fists; he had almost snapped at her about how he was, in fact, Takumi’s family. His choosing Nohr over Hoshido, however, was enough to silence the retort on his tongue.

“No,” said Aqua, “I, at least, must go.”
“Why?” Hinoka demanded, “You’re the only one who distrusts Frey. And with no basis, according to Prince Owain.”

At the title, Owain pinked—it had been a long time since anyone had called him that so directly.

“That’s precisely why I must go!” Aqua replied, insistent, “If Frey is truly what I think they are, Takumi may be in danger!”

“Frey is not dangerous!”

At the voice, Aqua and the others turned to look towards the doorway.

A red-faced Anna was standing before them. The lantern at her hip emitted a ghostly glow.

“Let her come with us,” said the merchant, voice fiery and yet cold simultaneously, “let her see how wrong she is.”

***

“If the king was friends with a god, how did Valla fall?” Takumi asked.

Frey smiled sadly, their grey gaze lifting towards the stormclouds overhead thoughtfully.

“Hydra was a god of chaos,” they admitted, “and though Lord Ryuurei could calm him with a song, it did not last; and Hydra became a monster.”

“The kingdom’s biggest ally became their biggest foe,” said Flannel, who closed his eyes and rested against the stone slab.

Frey reached down and made an attempt to scratch behind the Wolfssegner’s ear; their motions were still clumsy, but Flannel didn’t seem to mind.

“Cyrkensia is very similar to Valla in terms of atmosphere,” Frey explained, “which is why many of us came here after the fall.”

“What happened to King Ryuurei?”

Frey closed their eyes.

“He was slain by Hydra.”

They were all quiet for a long while, and the only sound was the distant ribbit of the forest’s frogs coupled with Frey’s ragged breathing.

“That didn’t quite answer my question,” said Takumi.

“It was Lord Ryuurei who shared his blood,” Frey supplied finally, “and inducted me into his court. From what I can gather, it’s not unlike the process of swearing in a retainer.”

“So when it comes to Nohrian practices,” Takumi assured.
“Okay,” the prince said, “next question. And, for now, the final one.”

Frey let out a relieved sigh.

“Can’t say that I’m disappointed,” they admitted.

“I’ve been wondering since you mentioned it earlier,” said Takumi, “what kinda creature of magic are you, Frey?”

Though the question seemed to attract Nishiki and Flannel’s attention, Frey themself was unsurprised by it.

“Yes,” they mused, “I was wondering if you were going to ask about that.”

“The Prince doesn’t know?” Flannel asked, clearly taken aback.

“Lord Takumi and the others have only just learnt that I’m the storyteller,” Frey explained gently, “and, more to the point, I was injured before I could explain further.”

“Doubt it,” murmured Nishiki, his tone teasing, “I’m sure you were gonna keep it a secret!”

“It wasn’t relevant to the plot at the time,” Frey muttered, more to themself than to the others.

Takumi lifted a brow.

“Well?” he said, “tell me.”

“I’m the last of my kind,” Frey said tiredly, “Lord Ryuurei’s vehement vrykolakas.”

Takumi blinked.

“You’re his what-,”

The rest of his sentence was lost, however, as Flannel and Nishiki leapt to attention, startling him.

“Wh-what’s-,”

The Fuujin Bow’s spiritual string lit up across the prince’s back and he immediately slung it over his head, drawing the weapon up before his actions had fully registered.

*Why did I-?*

“Ah, you have company then, Innkeeper. I see you’ve learnt from our last encounter.”

Takumi gritted his teeth.

“Macbeth,” he spat.

***
Marc’s pegasus had refused to carry her in the direction of Avalon, instead electing to head for Elise’s unit.

“No, no, Ser Fafnir,” the flier hissed, pulling insistently at his reins, “that’s the wrong way. Besides, Lady Elise is with the others back at-,”

Marc sighed; they were nearly to the Nohrian border at this point.

“Don’t you get what we’re-,”

The rest of her sentence died on her tongue as she spotted a small entourage camped on the outskirts of the city.

“Nohrians? But why are they coming to Cyrkensia?”

She frowned; it made more sense for them to head for Hoshido.

But then, the tome in her saddlebag let out a soft jingle.

“Grima’s Truth is-,” reacting-?”

For a moment, Marc was dumbfounded; why would her heirloom have any reaction in this world?

Luci’s Parallel Falchion never did anything strange, so then why-

With only a moment’s consideration, the flier urged Fafnir closer to the entourage.

It was only when she caught sight of Princess Camilla and Prince Marx that Marc realised why Grima’s Truth had awakened.

“Azure’s here, isn’t he?”

***

“Nishiki-!” Frey hissed.

The Nine-Tailed Fox ducked low as Takumi took aim at Macbeth.

“C’mon,” Nishiki said, “climb on my back. We have to get you out of here.”

“I-, I can’t leave-,” said Frey, “Avalon hasn’t restored me yet-!”

Takumi glanced at them over his shoulder.

“Alright then,” he murmured, “that makes this kinda hard. Stay low. Nishiki, take care of Frey. Flannel with me.”

The Wolfssegner perked up at the command, minute disgruntlement quickly replaced with eagerness; it had been a long while since he’d been given a proper order.

“Got it,” he hissed, rising to his full height and throwing back his head to let out a ground-shaking howl.
Takumi blinked.

“Alright,” he said, wordlessly praying to the winds to guide his arrows, “let’s fight.”

The sounds of battle distracted Leon from his musings. Whatever he’d been thinking about Frey was lost the moment that he heard the guttural growl of a Wolfssegner.

It was the sort of creature he’d been taught to avoid like the plague.

“And now I am… going right towards it,” he acknowledged with a sigh, “great plan, Leon.”

But as he thought of Takumi, guided into Avalon alone by someone Aqua thought their enemy, the knight knew he could not turn away.

And he took off running through the trees, desperate to find the source of the sound.

“Where?” he murmured, irritated, “Where are you, Takumi?!”

“I’m here.”

Flannel snorted, “I know where you are, thanks.”

Takumi blinked, realising he’d spoken aloud.

“No, I-,”

He let the rest of the sentence die on his tongue as another of Macbeth’s spells careened towards them.

I heard a voice…

Takumi slowed for a moment and glanced around; was this one of Macbeth’s tricks or had he truly heard Leon?

Is that even possible-? I’m no mage…

“Lord Takumi-!”

It was Frey’s voice that broke him from his thoughts, and the storyteller’s body slammed into his as a line of lightning arced through the spot he’d previously occupied.

“Frey-! Are you-,”

Their nose was bleeding and they quickly wiped their sleeve across their face, smearing red across one cheek.

“He’ll kill you! You have to get out of here-!” Frey hissed.

“No-! I’m not gonna leave you!”

The storyteller clambered off of him and shoved him roughly, “Go! If you die, he’ll win! War will break out and the world will be lost to the calamity!!”
“Guess I’d better not die then!”

Frey bared their teeth, “Leave!”

“I won’t!”

At this point, Macbeth had slowed his attacks. Nishiki limped towards them, a smouldering wound gaping at his shoulder as he collapsed at Frey’s feet.

“Enough, enough!” Frey yowled, turning to face Macbeth, “You cannot have the Hoshidan Prince!”

A small grin eased across Macbeth’s face.

“Oh, no,” he said, voice sickening saccharine, “I’m not here for him, Innkeeper.”

“Wha-,”

“I’m here for you.”

“Turns out you’re quite the rare find,” said Macbeth, stalking towards them.

Takumi moved to draw up the Fuujin Bow and Frey lifted a hand.

“Hold him,” they commanded, and Flannel’s heavy paw crushed the prince flat against the soft earth.

The bowstring’s glow faded as the weapon slipped from Takumi’s grasp.

“Flannel-!” hissed the prince, “What are you doing-?!?”

The Wolfssegner bared his fangs, “Don’t interrupt. Whatever the Master does, they do for the good of this world.”

“That sorcerer is gonna kill ‘em!”

Frey got to a shaky stand and watched Macbeth for a long while in the silence that followed.

“What do you want with me?” they asked, cautious yet curious.

Macbeth withdrew a small vial from the folds of his cloak.

“It’s not often one finds a specimen carrying three bloodlines.”

Takumi struggled beneath Flannel’s weight.

“Frey!” he shouted, “What’s he talking about-?”

The storyteller turned, “I was once a human, and I carry that human blood. I was given the First Blood by Lord Ryuurei. And I am the last of my kind, carrying the only remaining blood of the vrykolakas.”

“You have no idea what your body is worth,” said Macbeth, “and yet you refused to spill your
“You did assault me in my own home,” Frey reminded him coldly.

“Yes, and I thought it would be enough to startle you into transforming,” Macbeth replied.

Evidently, he had not achieved what he’d set out to do. But now…

“I trust you’ll let Lord Takumi leave Avalon unharmed if I give you the blood of the vrykolakas,” said Frey.

Macbeth nodded, “I’m glad you understand. It was cheap of you to keep your monstrous blood out of reach. I’m glad now, that I did not kill you earlier.”

“Admittedly,” said Frey, “I cannot control that side of myself. Surely in all your studies of Valla and her court, you understand the difficulties.”

Macbeth clicked his tongue, disappointed.

Frey laughed weakly, “So unless you have a spell to change me yourself, you’ll have none of my blood.”

“That would be quite true,” the Sorcerer allowed, “if you were not so hungry.”

Frey blinked.

“What-?”

Macbeth stalked past them and squatted beside Takumi, taking his chin roughly in hand.

“Unhand me, Magician-!”

“It would be poetic, I think,” said Macbeth, “for you to awaken the same way you did originally: with a taste of First Blood.”

And he drove his thumbnail across Takumi’s cheek, opening a shallow wound.

“ Aren’t you hungry, vrykolakas?”

***

“Azure!” Marc shouted, bringing Fafnir down to the entourage’s camp.

Prince Marx was cleaning his divine weapon when Marc approached him.

He raised his head and squinted at the flier curiously.

“Pardon,” he said, “did you need something? Did you get separated from your brigade?”

Marc reminded herself not to scoff at him; he was Nohr’s Crowned Prince, after all.
“I’m looking for Azure,” she said.

The paladin frowned, not comprehending.

Lazwald came out from Marx’s tent and upon seeing his cousin, promptly dropped the armour he’d been toting.

“Azure! There you are!” Marc said, brightening.

“Lazwald, what’s gotten into-, you-,”

The paladin trailed off, turning to look between the two of them.

“Why did she call you-,”

“You haven’t told Marx yet?” Marc said, surprised.

Lazwald went red in the face.

“No, Marc! I haven’t! Am I the only one to have taken Hydra’s words seriously-?!”

Marx blinked, astounded by the outburst; he had never heard Lazwald speak as angrily as he did now.

“Hydra-?” he echoed, curious.

Lazwald turned to him.

“I’m sorry, Lord Marx, truly I am. I did not mean to deceive you.”

The paladin frowned.

“How is it that you’ve deceived me?”

At this point, the pair was drawing a small crowd. Among them were Selena and Camilla.

“My name is not Lazwald,” the swordsman said softly.

Marc took a step back, seeming to just realise that she’d spoken horribly out of turn.

“My name is Azure, and I am the Second Prince of the Halidom of Ylisse.”

Marx watched him for what felt like a long while. And then he gently leant his Siegfried blade against one of the camp’s barrels.

“Azure?” he said, testing the name on his tongue.

Azure ducked his head as Marx approached, inspecting him with a newfound interest.

“Come-, let’s speak more inside my tent,” the paladin said.

As Marc eased back, preparing to make a hasty retreat, Azure caught her by the scruff of her collar.

“Oh no you don’t,” he muttered, “you mucked this up for me and now you’re gonna suffer right along with me, Brainiac.”
“Look at me,” said Marx, and Azure raised his head with a great deal of effort once they were alone.

Marc tried to look intensely focused on the Crowned Prince’s tactical notes.

The paladin lifted a hand and gently cupped Azure’s face, running a thumb over the swordsman’s cheekbone.

“So this mark in your eye, it’s the Brand of the Exalt? The proof of your royal lineage?”

Azure nodded, “That’s right. We’re each born with the Brand.”

“Well, except Selena,” Marc added, “and Jerome.”

She avoided mentioning her mother’s lack of a Brand, only because Owain had once remarked that it had always deeply upset Lissa.

Marx turned to look at Azure for an explanation.

The swordsman pinked.

“Selena’s-, that is to say, Luna-, is my sister-in-law,” he supplied, “and was tattooed with the Brand upon her engagement to my sister: The Crowned Princess.”

Marx nodded; as strange as it was, perhaps the proof of lineage was far more important in Ylisse—and far more important to its people—than it was in Nohr and for Nohrians.

“And Jerome?”

Azure scuffed his boot against the soft earth.

“Laz-, Azure-?”

“Jerome’s his fiancé,” Marc said.

Azure lifted his middle finger at her. She shot him a toothy grin and shrugged.

“Your… fiancé?” Marx echoed.

It was only at his look of blatant surprise—and one of miniscule hurt—that Marc realised The Crowned Prince was in love with her cousin.

“Oh,” she said, and deflated a bit, “oh.”

Azure turned to shoot her an unimpressed look.

“For being the result of two royal bloodlines and serving as our resident tactician,” he muttered, “you’re sure dense, Brainiac.”
“Oh, yeah, like you’re any better, Lover-boy! You knew you were engaged and you went and wooed the Crowned Prince of Nohr!”

“Yeah,” said Azure, “I, uh-, didn’t plan that.”

“What, did he see you dance the Queen’s dance and then fall immediately in love with you?”

It was then thanks to both Marx and Azure’s silence that Marc confirmed she was surrounded by lovesick fools.

“This is disgusting,” she said.

Azure gave her the double-bird with a disapproving frown.

“But that reminds me,” said Marc, “why are you heading into Cyrkensia?”

Marx raised his gaze and fixed it upon her.

“Your general did not inform you? We’re to mount an attack on the rebel force residing there.”

Marc’s blood chilled.

“Y-you’re-, what-?”

“We’re going to wipe out the Justice Cabal.”

***

Hinoka adjusted her arm around Sakura’s middle and whistled to her pegasus, eager to head for Avalon and retrieve her missing brother.

Owain urged his borrowed stallion—it was the other half of Leon’s pair: Hrímfaxi—into a steady trot, Aqua wordlessly stiff at his back.

“Do you truly doubt that Frey is our ally?” he asked as their small party departed.

The songstress was quiet for a while and just when Owain was beginning to think she wouldn’t honour him with an answer, she spoke.

“In my experience, the vrykolakas is a vehement creature of magic. They’re the sort to tear each other apart over a petty squabble. And though a handful of them chose to be Good, it was not enough.”

Owain shook his head as they traversed the winding cobblestone pathway.

“That doesn’t sound like Frey at all,” he admitted, “and besides, that sort of stuff doesn’t matter to people like us. Marc and I are both descendants of the Fell Dragon. By all accounts we should’ve been slaughtered at birth.”

Though his tone was light, Aqua did not miss the uncharacteristic distance he put between himself and his situation.
“Where is Miss Anna? I thought she was accompanying us,” said Aqua, eager to change the subject.

Owain urged Hrímfaxi towards a faster pace as Avalon came into view over the rolling hills.

“Oh she’ll be along soon,” he promised, “no need to worry.”

***

Frey tensed the moment that they saw the line of blood at Takumi’s cheek.

Macbeth turned to them and cocked his head, curious, as he approached.

“So then,” he said as a drop of Takumi’s blood dripped from his thumb.

It made no sound when it hit the soft earth, but Frey’s gaze darted down to the tiny speck for a moment too long.

A pleased smile lit up Macbeth’s face as he came to stand before Frey, who went to their knees, fists clenching.

“Give in to it,” the Sorcerer whispered, crouching to lift Frey’s chin so he could look down and into their eyes, “give in to your true nature, vrykolakas.”

The storyteller closed their eyes in wordless refusal and Macbeth swiped his bloodied thumb across their bottom lip.

“You cannot resist it forever,” he promised.

Frey’s tongue darted out and they tasted the blood with a shiver.

Macbeth watched them, intrigued; he could hardly contain himself now that the blood was nearly within reach.

When the storyteller reopened their eyes, they were glowing an electric blue.

“Please-,” Frey choked out, “I can’t-,”

“You’re doing this to save Prince Takumi, remember?” Macbeth said serenely, “You’d do anything to save Queen Mikoto’s children, wouldn’t you?”

Frey dropped their gaze; they couldn’t argue with that.

“Frey-! C’mon! Don’t listen to him!”

Takumi’s shouting was loud.

But the sound of his heartbeat was louder.
“Be brave,” said Macbeth, trying a new tactic, “embrace your desire.”

Frey lifted a hand and clenched their fist in the fabric of Macbeth’s loose trousers.

“Please-,”

The Sorcerer put his thumb to Frey’s mouth and the storyteller lifted their head, trembling, as they welcomed Macbeth’s finger between their lips.

“See?” the Sorcerer breathed, fiercely victorious, “That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?”

Seeming to finally sense that something was amiss, Flannel’s weight shifted from atop Takumi.

“Master-,” he breathed, “you shouldn’t-,”

“How troublesome,” Macbeth breathed, lifting his free hand from Frey’s golden hair and striking Flannel with a spell.

The Wolfssegner went to his knees, fur smouldering as he joined Nishiki on the ground.

“Flannel-!” Takumi hissed, grabbing the Fuujin Bow and getting to a stand.

“Give me Frey!” he shouted, “They’re not your plaything, Sorcerer!”

Macbeth, delighted, pried the storyteller from his hand and crouched at their side, gesturing to Takumi.

“Look now, vrykolakas,” he murmured, “First Blood.”

The prince took a hesitant step back; this was not the Frey he knew.

“You want it?” Macbeth whispered, “You may have it!”

Frey descended upon him like a starving animal, which was—in a way—exactly what they were.

“Frey-, wait-,”

The storyteller crushed him up against the nearest tree, baring a set of pointed teeth.

“This isn’t-,”

And they bit into Takumi’s shoulder.

The prince cried out as Frey’s fangs pierced his skin, the pain temporarily whiting out his vision.

“Frey-,” he choked out, sinking to the ground as the storyteller’s mouth moved upon him.

For a moment, he was dazed, and then he heard Frey’s voice, sobbing in the back of his head.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Lord Takumi. I thought I was stronger than this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sor
The storyteller’s tears wetted Takumi’s bare skin and he lifted his free hand weakly to the back of their neck.

“’S okay-,” he said, throat tight against the ache.

“You’ve both done so well,” Macbeth murmured, coming to Takumi’s side and withdrawing a narrow athamé.

He wordlessly dragged the blade across Frey’s arm before setting a glass vial against their bare skin to collect what he’d come all this way for.

Frey moaned helplessly against Takumi’s skin and the prince’s hand slipped down their back, stroking them carefully in an attempt to reassure the storyteller. (And maybe, though he didn’t want to admit it, himself as well).

“No pawns have played their parts better than the two of you,” the Sorcerer whispered as he corked the vial and stowed it in the folds of his cloak for safekeeping.

“Damn-, you-,” Takumi bit out from beneath Frey.

Macbeth sheathed his athamé and withdrew a worn scroll.

“What’re you-,”

“Hush now,” the Sorcerer hissed, “this spell has been in the works for generations. And now, with a single drop of blood, it will finally be completed.”

“A spell-?” Takumi echoed dazedly.

Macbeth chuckled, “Oh yes. How fortuitous it was to push you closer to the prince.”

To… Leon-? Why-?

Takumi didn’t have to wait long for an answer, however, as the edge of Macbeth’s sleeve went to ribbons beneath a strike of magic.

“Ah,” the Sorcerer breathed, unsurprised, “our most favoured guest has finally arrived.”

Takumi blinked slowly as black spots danced across his vision; he hadn’t imagined that his death would come at a friend’s hand, let alone having his life drained from him as it was being now.

“Most favoured-?”

“Takumi!!”

It was the last thing that the prince heard before he slumped back against the tree.

***

“Macbeth!!” Leon yowled, magic sheathing up his arms into the gauntlets he’d used earlier
during their duel in the library; it felt so long ago now.

The Sorcerer grinned, “Hello again, sweet prince. I trust you’ve been waiting for this.”

“What have you done to Frey? And what have you done to Takumi?! I swear, if you’ve hurt him in any way-,”

“Oh, so righteous!” Macbeth said, pleased, “Well done, Leon! You’ve become just the sort of knight that your brother would be proud to see!”

Ordinarily, Leon would’ve been thrilled by the compliment, especially at the mention of Marx. From Macbeth’s mouth, however, it spelled only ever disaster.

“Don’t talk about my brother,” the knight hissed, “you have no right to even speak his name!”

“Still holding onto your lingering love for Prince Marx, then, are you?”

Leon launched himself at the Sorcerer, summoning the Iceblade mid-air.

“You’ll pay for that!!” he seethed, swinging the blade with wild strength.

Macbeth ducked and the tip of the sword only grazed his shoulder. It was enough to tear the fabric from his skin, however, and the magical blade’s ice spell seemed to slow the Sorcerer.

“You’ve improved since last we fought, Leon,” he continued, pleased with the knight’s rage.

“Perhaps you’ve just grown weaker,” Leon retorted, as a spell gathered in his freehand.

Macbeth lifted a hand and put his fingertips to the knight’s breastplate. The armour exploded and Leon choked at the sudden pain in his chest.

“Wh-what did you-,”

“I wouldn’t worry, Leon,” the Sorcerer assured coolly, “you’ll recover eventually.”

“N-no-, w-what did you do to my friends?” Leon demanded, grip on the Iceblade tightening as he waited for Macbeth’s next attack.

The Sorcerer blinked, taken aback by the fact that Leon was so invested in what had happened to the others; had the Hoshidan Prince truly awakened such tender feelings within him after all?

“I needed something from your little vrykolakas,” Macbeth said with a shrug, “and now I have it.”

Leon gritted his teeth and set his jaw.

“What did you do?!?”

“One must awaken the vrykolakas with a temptation of blood,” the Sorcerer supplied, “and yours only seems to respond to First Blood.”

They were both quiet for a moment while Leon connected the dots.

And when he did, a wide crack shot up the length of the Iceblade.
“You-, you *used* Takumi-?!”

“It might come as a shock,” said Macbeth, “but you’re not the only one I’ve used, Leon.”

The knight took an unsteady inhale; he had to keep his head.

He closed his eyes for a moment and focused.

*There is only one way to beat Macbeth, and that’s to fight him using his own power.*

“What’s this, Leon? Have you decided to give up?”

The knight lifted his head.

“Nah,” he said, “actually, I think… *I’m stronger than this.*”

And he flung his spell at Macbeth.

***

“We’ll have to walk from here,” Owain said, dismounting and offering his hand to Aqua.

She took it and he carefully helped her down to the soft earth.

Hinoka and Sakura met them at Avalon’s entrance; the small Hoshidan Princess was clutching her stave in a death-grip.

“We don’t know what to expect in there,” Owain said softly, drawing the Mystletainn from its sheath at his side.

The blade sang, so brilliantly alive, against the fogs of Avalon.

“Sakura, stay close,” said Hinoka, twirling her naginata and nodding in approval.

“Alright,” she said, turning to Owain and Aqua, “let’s go.”

As the group paced further into the trees, Hinoka tensed, Sakura shaking at her side.

“I don’t like this,” the flier said.

“Bear with it for a bit, if you would,” said Owain.

His Brands were glowing from beneath the cover of his sleeves.

“Your arms-!” Sakura whispered.

“I am a creature of magic,” the swordsman supplied, “and this place is teeming with power; Avalon welcomes those like me.”
“And what about-, those who-, who aren’t like you?” Sakura asked.

“You have my blessing,” Owain reassured carefully, “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She swallowed and nodded.

“I thought you said that Miss Anna would be joining us?” Aqua said, glancing at Owain questioningly.

He nodded.

“She’ll be here.”

He was about to elaborate when Hinoka took his arm.

“Sh,” she whispered, “do you hear that?”

There were voices just beyond.

“A clearing?” Sakura murmured, “Should we go look?”

Owain clenched his teeth; he had to know the truth.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Hinoka took Sakura’s hand, “I’ll protect you.”

The little princess smiled at her, “I know.”

Aqua drew up her lance and the group stepped into the clearing.

During their duel, Macbeth and Leon had destroyed a fair amount of the clearing, felling trees and shattering rock formations.

Leon was poised over Macbeth when the others arrived, wordless as they surveyed the scene.

“Finally learnt how to utilise disarming spells, I see,” Macbeth murmured with a tight smile.

“IT’s over,” Leon said.

He dropped the Iceblade and it vanished in a puff of smoke as he sank to his knees, breathing hard.

“What will you do now, Leon?” the Sorcerer asked, “You and I are trapped eternally in this battle. I cannot slay you and you cannot slay me; we are both too important to the king.”

Leon choked out a laugh.

“Oh yeah? Hate to break it to you, but that’s not true at all. You’re as much his pawn as I am yours. And my father doesn’t care for me; he sees me as my brother’s replacement, should Marx ever grow soft. You and I are both expendable.”

Macbeth snorted.

“Garon would not abandon me.”
Leon got to a slow stand and lifted his hand. The Iceblade materialised in his grip and he drew the sword up slowly.

“He already has.”

***

Before Leon could prepare to land the killing blow, a spell settled over him, locking his limbs.

“What’s-?”

The others who were gathered at the entrance of the clearing shied behind what remained of the trees.

“What happened-?” Hinoka whispered.

“It looks like Lord Leon set Ser Macbeth beneath a binding spell,” Owain supplied, squinting at the pair, “but now, Lord Leon himself seems to be beneath one as well.”

“But who-,”

Before Sakura could finish her question, there was a spark of light and Anna dropped gently to her feet in the clearing.

Her lantern was glowing at her hip.

“And there she is,” Owain said, answering Aqua’s question at last.

“She can warp-?” the songstress asked, surprised.

Owain chuckled.

“She can do anything.”

Anna turned and her gaze landed upon Frey, who was unconscious in Takumi’s lap.

They were in poor shape: bags heavy beneath their sunken eyes, skin sickly pale, and dried blood crusted at their chin.

The others watched wordlessly as she turned away from the storyteller and focused her attention back upon Macbeth and Leon, who were frozen before her.

“Don’t worry, Angel,” she murmured, “I’ll crush this bastard.”

***

It took a lot of effort to blink. Takumi did it anyway.

Frey’s unconscious form was crumpled against his chest and he adjusted so that their positions were
not so awkward.
“What’s going on?” he wondered softly, sitting up slowly; the movement was tough and it made his head spin.
In the clearing, the prince saw Macbeth splayed out across the soft earth.
Leon was standing before him, frozen.
“Binding spells-?”
He smoothed Frey’s wild hair as he studied the setup.
Anna was there too, which was strange, because Frey had mentioned how she shouldn’t step foot into Avalon.

*Maybe they were… mistaken?*

Anna was holding Leon’s Iceblade, which was also strange.
Takumi blinked again as his dizziness began to subside. As he glanced about, he noticed Sakura and the others hidden from Anna’s view.

He was tempted to call out to them. But after a moment’s hesitation, the prince decided that it was best to read the situation before drawing any attention to himself.

*Yeah, last time I did that, Frey came at me like a wild beast, so…*

Takumi rested his head back against the tree and as he eased into a more comfortable position, the prince felt the cool wood of the Fuujin Bow beneath his palm.

His hand tightened around it.

Anna took a moment to weigh the Iceblade in her hand thoughtfully.

“Miss Anna-,” Leon hissed, “what are you doing-?!”

She looked him in the eye for a long moment and the silence between them was achingly tense.

“My duty.”

And then she lifted the blade above her head.

For a moment, all of Avalon stood still. Above Anna’s head, a single word appeared:

“REPLICATE”

The gathered group watched as several other Annas materialised in the clearing, each holding Leon’s Iceblade.

A second word appeared, replacing the first:

“HAWKEYE”

“Wh-what is this-?” Macbeth demanded.
Anna paced forwards until she stood before him, staring down into the Sorcerer’s face.

Macbeth frowned up at her as the third word appeared:

“ASTRA”

The heavy silence was shattered by Macbeth’s broken yowl as Anna’s replicas all hefted up their Iceblades and drove the swords into his body.

Hinoka covered Sakura’s eyes and Aqua put a hand to her mouth in horror at the display.

Owain turned his head, refusing to watch his friend turn their enemy into a pincushion; such cruelty was not something any of them had approved of.

After a moment, a single word appeared above the Sorcerer’s head:

“MIRACLE”

Anna chuckled, though there was no joy in it.

“Ah,” she said quietly, “I didn’t expect such resistance.”

Macbeth took a few laboured breaths.

“You-, cannot kill me,” he spat, and a drop of his blood landed on Anna’s cheek.

She stared down at him unblinkingly.

“Is that what you think?”

He stared up at her and cracked a mocking grin. Blood dribbled over his bottom lip.

“Even-, with all that magic-, you couldn’t destroy me-,”

“Yes,” Anna agreed softly, “because I wanted the pleasure of killing you myself.”

She tossed Leon’s Iceblade to the side and drew her Levin Sword from where it’d been sitting at her hip.

The final words—an impossible skill—materialised above her head, the letters encased in golden light.

“RIGHTFUL GOD”

Macbeth’s eyes widened for a moment, disbelieving.

Anna watched him as she raised the weapon and prepared to call down an arc of lightning.

“I make deep cuts,” she said.
Many things happened at once.

Takumi, who had finally found the strength to draw up the Fuujin Bow, prayed once more to the winds to guide him.

The bowstring lit up and an arrow notched itself as the prince took aim.

“This is for everything you’ve put me through!” he hissed, and the light arrow leapt from his bow, piercing the Sorcerer’s chest.

Anna’s binding spell over Leon shattered and he lifted his hand, the Iceblade jumping into his awaiting palm.

Anna took a step back and hefted up her Levin Sword.

As her lightning descended towards Macbeth’s flayed body, Leon stumbled past her and buried his blade in the Sorcerer’s throat.

“You’ve failed,” Leon breathed raggedly, “you’ve lost everything, Macbeth. Now, die like the coward you are.”

***

Takumi let his head fall back against the tree’s tough bark when it became clear that Macbeth would never move again.

He let out a long, tired sigh, and trailed his fingers idly through Frey’s hair. The pain at his shoulder blazed through his veins like hellfire.

“Lord-, Takumi-?”

It was Frey’s voice, worn and hoarse.

But it was Frey. Takumi lifted his arm—the one that wasn’t aching—and loosely embraced the storyteller.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I-, I drank-, I-, I’m-,”

Takumi patted them on the back.

“It doesn’t matter,” he reassured, “we won, Frey.”

The storyteller blinked and then slowly readjusted in Takumi’s lap so that they could survey the damage done in the clearing.

Nishiki and Flannel were beginning to stir as Owain and his small group cautiously emerged from
beyond the trees.

Anna sheathed her Levin Sword and wordlessly made her way over to Frey.

“Hey, Angel,” she breathed, dropping down to her knees, “how ya’ doing?”

Frey took one look at her and then burst into tears, flinging their arms around her and sobbing into her shoulder.

Takumi smiled weakly at her.

She nodded to him; they had some strange connection now, having slain Macbeth.

He had caused both of them so much pain and now, they’d destroyed him.

It wouldn’t erase their suffering, but their revenge was the first step in healing.

“Speaking of healing,” Frey said, once they’d calmed down, “we need to go home; I need my medicines to close Lord Takumi’s wound.”

“Wound?” said Sakura, coming to her brother’s side.

She peeled back his sleeve to reveal the giant fang marks in the prince’s shoulder. Takumi hissed at the movement and she released him instantly.

“S-sorry-, I didn’t mean to-,”

“It’s okay,” he said, lifting his good arm and patting her on the head, “you can help Frey find the medicines, right?”

She nodded vigorously, “Y-yes!”

He gave her a small smile, “Good.”

Owain went to Leon’s side quietly. A part of him—the part that had served as the knight’s retainer—was content to wait patiently for Leon to speak first; he would talk when he was ready.

But Owain was not a retainer, not truly. He was a prince.

And so he spoke.

“He’s finally dead,” the swordsman said softly.

Leon nodded solemnly, “So he is.”

“Are you glad?” Owain asked.

The knight nodded again, “Yeah. I’m-, I’m very glad.”

“That’s good.”
Leon turned to look at him, surprised; he had not expected for his feelings to be validated.

Revenge is such a terrible, traitorous thing… and for me to feel any joy over killing Macbeth so violently seems almost…

“It was like that for me too,” Owain explained softly.

Leon blinked.

“In my original timeline,” said Owain, “it was my father who became host to a terrible monster. He killed all his friends. He killed my mother.”

Owain removed his cloak and tossed it over Macbeth’s body as they stood together quietly.

“When we travelled back to rewrite the past,” the swordsman finally continued, “and we beat that terrible monster and saved my father, saved his friends, saved my mother, everyone-, I was glad. We destroyed an evil back then.”

Leon nodded again.

“And we destroyed an evil just now,” Owain finished, reaching out and squeezing the knight’s hand.

“You understand?”

Leon raised his gaze and looked into the swordsman’s face.

“You’re a pretty good prince, Owain.”

“So are you,” he returned with a chuckle.

Aqua made her way cautiously over to Frey, who was finally upright, though their weight was against the wide trunk of one of the remaining trees.

Hinoka and Sakura had helped Takumi to the pegasus and were attempting to find the easiest way to get him atop her. Anna was doing her best to give them proper directions.

“You’re the vrykolakas, then,” Aqua said quietly.

Frey glanced over at her.

“Lady Arête-?” they murmured, eyes wide for a moment.

Aqua dropped her gaze.

“No-,” Frey breathed, “you’re-, the lost princess. My Lady, the Princess Aqua.”

The songstress blinked, head jerking up at the title.

“I-,”

“Hello again, koukla,” Frey said softly, “it’s been a long while since I’ve laid eyes upon a Vallite.”
Aqua stared at them for what felt like a long time. And then she sank to her knees.

“Chrysó mou,” she choked out, “you’re alive-?”

At the tender petname, Frey smiled softly.

“It’s been an even longer while since I heard your father use such a name,” they said, offering the princess their hand.

“I-, I thought you were-, one of the-, the others-,”

“It’s alright,” the storyteller reassured, “now, let’s go home, yes?”

She took their hand and got to a stand, “Yes. I-,”

For a moment, Aqua paused, unsure of what she could say to them now that they’d been reunited; she had only flashing memories of Frey’s gentle laughter from her childhood, the ever-present presence at her father’s side.

And yet, to have even the smallest remains of Valla within her grasp-,

“I miss him,” she murmured, the words out before she could stop them.

Frey lifted a hand and patted her gently atop the head; it was the same motion they’d done so many times when she was still a child headed off to bed.

Her father had smiled tenderly at her and given her a wave, always bidding her sweet dreams.

“I know,” Frey answered quietly, “I miss him too.”

They were both wordless for a long moment.

“Did you ever consider restoring my father’s kingdom?” Aqua asked finally.

“I became lost,” Frey admitted, “and I did not know the way. It was Anna who rescued me. If ever I had found a way, you must know I would’ve done all in my power to bright back what Lord Ryuurei created.”

“Good,” the songstress said, “I want your help in restoring the kingdom now.”

Frey blinked, grey eyes widening at her words.

Aqua offered them her hand.

“What will it be?”

The storyteller lifted their hand, pale skin nearly glowing beneath Avalon’s fogs.

“I accept, My Princess.”

***
Hinoka and Sakura had taken Takumi back to The Sleeping Goat while Owain and Aqua had gone to find Leon’s twin stallions on the outskirts of Avalon.

Anna helped Frey hook their arm over her shoulder.

“Are you-, sure you can warp us both?” the storyteller asked, worried.

The merchant gave them a soft smile, “It shouldn’t be any trouble for me.”

Frey nodded and Anna’s lantern began to glow.

The storyteller glanced back over their shoulder, surveying the aftermath of the day’s events.

Leon stood wordlessly over Macbeth’s body; his expression was unreadable.

Anna’s magic whirled up around them and Frey blinked.

“The Last Magician,” they whispered.

And then Leon was alone.

***

In the days that followed, the Justice Cabal did their best to patch up their members and develop a plan for their next move forward.

There was still no sign of Marc, and Owain spent the majority of his time worrying over Takumi in her stead.

Though perhaps his worry at Takumi’s side was truly over his missing sister, and not her broken liege.

The prince had slept for most of his recovery—an aftereffect of Frey’s mysterious medicines—and it was only in the early morning of the second week that he’d woken.

“Owain,” he said, “has Leon come to visit?”

The swordsman laughed awkwardly, “I don’t think so. Not yet, anyway. Though, he’s been doing a lot of thinking lately. I-, don’t think he ever thought he’d kill Macbeth.”

Takumi nodded quietly.

“Yes, of course,” he said, “you’re right. Any sign of Marc?”

Owain’s grip on the Mystletainn’s hilt tightened.

“No,” he murmured, troubled, “I-, it’s not that I doubt her ability to take care of herself, but-, she just went off suddenly-.”
Takumi smiled softly at him.

“You must be tired. You should go, rest.”

“But-,”

“I’ll be fine,” the prince reassured, “it’s-, good to see you.”

Owain blinked, momentarily startled, and then his gaze softened and he patted the prince’s hand.

“It’s good to see you too,” he said gently, before turning on heel and stepping out into the hallway.

Once Owain had left, Takumi sighed and looked about the small room.

Nishiki was curled up at the foot of his narrow bed, sleeping quietly. Takumi was oddly reassured by his presence, Nine-Tailed Fox or not.

The walls of the room were a pale grey and sunlight streamed through the window, painting the lower half of Takumi’s creamy sheets a soft yellow.

As he glanced out the window, he caught a glimpse of Frey in the field, Flannel at their side.

Takumi frowned, wondering what they were doing.

The prince shook his head to dispel the rising suspicions; things were different between them now, that was all.

When that worry had subsided, however, a new one took its place.

Takumi was surprised that Leon hadn’t come to visit. And then, he chided himself for having the thought.

“Just because we-,”

It was silly of him to expect some sort of special treatment now that he’d acted upon his feelings for Leon.

*One little kiss doesn’t suddenly make us-,*

There was a knock at the door and before Takumi could respond, it came open and Leon padded inside.

The prince blinked.

“L-Leon-! I-, I thought you’d been avoiding me,” he admitted, the truth out before he had time to think.

Leon came to his side and perched on the edge of the bed, taking Takumi’s hand in his own.

“No,” he murmured, “it-, pained me to see you like that.”
The prince shifted his shoulder experimentally. The wound had healed nicely, the pain becoming a dull ache thanks to Frey’s medicine; the markings had not faded.

And they never will.

“I’m glad to see you,” Leon whispered, “glad that you’re awake at last.”

Takumi pinked.

“I-, I’m glad too,” he said lamely, “I was having a weird dream.”

Leon quirked a brow, “Oh? Do tell.”

“Nah,” said Takumi with a soft laugh, “I’m pretty sure I saw something I wasn’t supposed to. What’s been going on around here?”

Leon dropped his gaze and rubbed his thumb across the prince’s knuckle thoughtfully.

“Things’ve been busy,” he said, “the others have been sorting out a lot of their feelings.”

“Group therapy session,” Takumi muttered, “glad I missed it.”

“Yeah,” laughed Leon, “it was a disaster. We even tried to work together to bake a cake in some form of… what did Anna call it… a ‘bonding exercise’?”

“Sounds awful.”

“I’m fairly confident that Elise still has icing in her hair,” he said with a smile.

Takumi’s gaze softened and he squeezed the knight’s hand.

“I’m glad to see you.”

“You good?” Leon whispered against his mouth.

“Yeah, I said that earlier,” Leon said, giving him a funny look.

The prince shrugged, “I just wanted to say it again.”

Leon lifted his hand and gently cupped Takumi’s face.

“I want to kiss you,” he said.

“I would like that,” said the prince, heart stuttering in his chest.

Leon bent forwards and pressed his mouth perfectly over Takumi’s, fingers sliding through the prince’s silvery hair. After a long moment’s hesitation, the knight deepened the kiss and Takumi relaxed beneath him with a low groan.

“You good?” Leon whispered against his mouth.

“Y-yeah,” Takumi replied, cheeks stained with blush.

Leon kissed him again, quickly, and then ducked to press his mouth to the prince’s neck.

“L-Leon-,” Takumi choked out, hand clenching in the knight’s sandy hair.
The marks on his shoulder flared to life, emitting a ghostly blue glow.

Leon paused his ministrations and raised his head, studying Takumi’s skin.

“It’s shining-?” he murmured, more to himself than to the prince.

Leon turned his attention upon Takumi’s face, and found the prince digging his teeth into his bottom lip.

“Takumi? Are you alright? Does it hurt?”

“F-Frey said it’ll do that now,” he said tightly, “I’ll just-, *glow* sometimes.”

Leon quirked a brow, “Why-?”

“D-dunno. Lots of reasons, I guess.”

“Oh, well, that’s not so-,”

“That’s not the only thing,” Takumi forced out, “since Frey’s wound is still fresh, their magic is still in my system.”

Leon shook his head, not comprehending, “Yes, and-?”

“You’ve gotten me excited,” Takumi murmured, watching the knight from beneath his eyelashes.

Finally realising what the prince had been trying to say, Leon’s cheeks flushed deeply.

“O-oh-,” he said and his voice was very weak.

“Should I-, should I leave you alone-?” Leon asked, honestly unsure of how to proceed with this new knowledge.

“N-no-,” Takumi said, with more confidence than he felt, “stay. Please.”

Leon blinked.

“You want me here? Even after I-,”

He trailed off and glanced away, unable to look into the prince’s eyes.

Takumi reached over and took his hand.

“That wasn’t you,” he reiterated again, ever-vigilant and earnest in reminding the knight of the truth.

“But-,”

Takumi’s gaze softened upon him.

“Leon,” he said quietly, “I want you to kiss me more; it’s nice, and it makes me feel good. And… I wouldn’t feel good doing it with anyone else.”
Leon hoped he wasn’t obviously losing his composure over the admission.

“Oh,” the knight said, unsure of how to respond, “thanks. I- I mean-, okay. I’ll-, let me lock the door. One moment-,”

“Can’t you just-, use magic?” Takumi muttered.

Leon stiffened for a second at the prince’s comment, seemingly affronted by the remark; was it insensitive?

But then he simply rolled his eyes and stood, shooting the prince a teasing smile as he made his way across the room.

“Can’t I just use my hand? I swear, ye without magic know not the price we pay!”

His tone was joking and it was Takumi’s turn to roll his eyes, wordlessly agreeing that perhaps magic was not necessary for every little thing.

The pain in Takumi’s arm flared up again and he clenched his fist. The action only worsened the ache and he settled instead for setting his jaw.

The prince was grateful, at least, that Frey had warned him that such flashes would happen.

“Until your system can flush out my toxins naturally,” they’d said by way of apology, “you’re going to be a bit fragile.”

It was only now, as Takumi felt his body tremble at the thought of Leon indulging him, that he began to understand what Frey’s warning had truly meant.

“Come here,” Takumi murmured, hoping his impatience was not so obvious, “quickly now, Leon. Please.”

The knight returned to his side, retaking Takumi’s hand.

“I’m here,” he murmured gently, “I’m here.”

Chapter End Notes

is it weird that i had the urge to write rlly mean macbeth/frey fic while i was working on this? aw fuck,,,

(Leon’s stallions Skinfaxi (“shining mane”) and Hrimfaxi (“frost mane”) are named after those from norse legend, belonging to Dagr of the Day and Nott of the Night; Leon refers to Skinfaxi as "my sun").

(Frey refers to Aqua as "Koukla," a greek term of endearment meaning "doll," while Aqua refers to Frey as "Chryso mou" which is a term of endearment meaning "my golden one.")
Worthy is the Lamb

Chapter Summary

Despite their determination to see the end of the war come about through peace, the Justice Cabal must come to terms with the idea that not everyone involved shares their same sentiment. Takumi and Leon begin to explore their budding relationship. Kamui and Aqua make some interesting discoveries about the Yato. Marx must wrestle with some deep-seated fears regarding those around him.

Chapter Notes

i know im posting this earlier than usual but where i am (england! that's right, crow's doing some studies at a foreign uni!) its about 1:30am =>
(you guys pumped for the new tempest trials tomorrow?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Takumi lifted his good hand and cupped Leon’s jaw gently, bringing the knight’s face to his so that he could press his lips to Leon’s perfectly.

The prince could feel Leon’s smile against his mouth.

“What’re you grinning about? Do I have something on my face?” Takumi asked when he withdrew.

His cheeks were stained with blush—perhaps he’d misinterpreted Leon’s happiness as a more twisted mockery—and yet still, Leon found he could only smile.

“Takumi,” the knight murmured, and his voice was heavy with what would later be identified as fondness, “my heart has yearned for this for so long.”

The prince blinked, momentarily speechless at the admission; the weight of it hung in the air for what felt like a long while.

“Leon-,”

“I heard a voice,” the knight interrupted, and his face was a mask of thoughtfulness.

Once again, it seemed that Leon was adept at the Second Prince’s legendary ancient practice of saying something incredibly straightforward and tender before promptly moving onto the next subject without pausing to let his words sink in.

Takumi frowned, “When?”

“In Avalon,” said Leon, looking into his face, “it was yours.”

The prince recalled that echoing shout in the back of his mind.
“I-, yeah. You were calling out for me.”

“You answered,” Leon said, and he seemed genuinely taken aback by the revelation.

“Yeah, it was weird. I’m not a mage, so I don’t really know how-,”

“It’s been so long since someone responded,” said the knight, and his tone was enough to make Takumi stop short.

Leon looked at their hands, intertwined on the narrow bed.

“I’ve been calling to the others for so long,” he said, “to everyone, to anyone-, but-, I’d nearly forgotten what it was like to get an answer.”

Takumi squeezed his hand.

“Leon, I-,”

The rest of his sentence died on his tongue when the door to the room came swinging open.

Owain stood in the doorway, the remainder of his unlock spell still blooming across the doorknob.

“Sorry to bust in,” he said quickly, clenching a fist to extinguish his spell, “but there’s someone you two need to see.”

***

“What’s the meaning of this?” said Leon, who arrived in Frey’s private library with Takumi in tow.

The prince had insisted that he didn’t need help, but had not refused it when Leon offered.

“Takumi, Leon-,”

“Marc!!”

She lifted a hand in salute, “Didn’t mean to make you wait, Takumi. But, there’s something you need to know.”

“I hope you’re going to explain why you have my brother here,” said Leon, gesturing to Marx’s unconscious form.

The paladin was currently slumped back in Frey’s office chair.

“I think I… kidnapped him,” said Marc, wincing.

“You think?” echoed Leon, incredulous.

Takumi patted him, “Hey, now. Let’s hear what she has to say.”

“But-,” the knight sighed, “alright. You better have a damn good explanation for this stunt, Lady Marc.”
The flier straightened beneath his scrutiny.

“I do!  Ser Fafnir and I saw Marx’s force gathering at the Cyrkensian border and so we went to take a look and-,”

Takumi frowned.

“M-, Prince Marx was gathering his forces at the border?  But Cyrkensia is neutral territory, so then why-,”

Marc nodded, “Right.  So I did some digging.  And it turns out that the King’s ordered him to destroy the Justice Cabal.”

“Destroy the-?  How does he even know-,” Leon began, but quickly fell silent, realising with chilling clarity what had happened.

“What is it?” Takumi asked, seeming to sense that something was amiss.

Leon put a hand to his mouth.

“Macbeth told him everything,” he murmured from between his fingers, “he must’ve seen through my eyes.  I-, I had no idea-, I hadn’t even considered it-!”

“We don’t know that that’s what happened,” Takumi reassured quickly; even in death, it seemed Macbeth continued to taunt them.

“But it would make sense,” said Aqua.

The prince turned and found her standing in the doorway, Kamui at her side.

“Where are the others?” Takumi asked, “My sisters-?  Miss Anna?  Frey-?”

Marc bit her thumbnail, “I-, didn’t want to wake them just yet.”

“We’re the only ones who know about this then?” Leon clarified.

Marc nodded.

“Alright,” he said with a slow nod, “alright.  Let me talk to him.”

The others had no dissent to offer, wordlessly exiting to give the knight some privacy with his brother.

Takumi turned to leave as well, but Leon caught his hand.

“Stay,” he murmured, “please.”

The prince blinked.

“You want me-,”

“I need your support,” Leon supplied quietly, squeezing Takumi’s hand.

The prince nodded, “Okay.”
Takumi moved to take a seat in Frey’s worn armchair. As he did, he found Marx’s legendary weapon leant up against the wall. Carefully, the prince took the sheathed blade into his hands. The weapon buzzed in a low greeting, the gemstone in the hilt blazing to life at the attention.

“Hey there,” Takumi greeted quietly, running his hand along the edge of the ancient sheath. He curled his fingers around the handle, feeling the slight wear from Marx’s own grip through the years.

“Marx?” said Leon, and his voice was very soft. Takumi stiffened at the tone, suddenly recalling all the intimate details he knew of their relationship together; he found himself wishing he’d left with the others now.

The paladin stirred slowly, blinking awake and then squinting at Leon.

“Leon-?” he murmured, seeming to think his eyes had betrayed him.

The knight looked relieved at the recognition and hurriedly removed a pair of glasses from the pocket of his trousers; did he have a habit of carrying one around in case of this exact situation?

Nah, thought Takumi, with a snort of dismissal, there’s no way that Leon—even as tactical as he is—could have foreseen this turn of events.

...Right?

Leon leant over the table and hooked the glasses over Marx’s ears.

“Maybe that’ll clear things up,” the knight said gently.

Marx’s startled expression eased back into one of gentle fondness as he confirmed that it was, in fact, his brother who stood before him.

“Leon, what’s-, what happened? How are you here?”

“That’s my line,” the knight muttered, “is it true that you’ve been sent to destroy the Justice Cabal?”

Marx dropped his gaze and his lips formed a thin line at his face; Leon was ever-dutiful when it came to getting right to the point.

“Yes,” he answered quietly, and the single word stung more than any of them were expecting. Leon bristled against his better judgement; his spontaneous willingness to cast his loyalty to Nohr aside in favour of the Justice Cabal’s more neutral alliance was beginning to become a problem.

“Are you going to go through with that order?”

Marx recoiled at the question, his entire body rejecting it.
“Leon-!” he sputtered, disbelieving, “It’s-, it’s Father-! I can’t-,”

“You could-,” the knight interrupted, “you could refuse him.”

Marx stared at him.

“How could-,”

Leon looked away, “You know he’s been getting worse lately, Brother. It-, it’s not right, what he wants.”

“I could never-,”

“You could! You have a responsibility! You owe it to Nohr to do what’s best!”

Marx’s gaze darkened and the air went thick with unspoken tension; it hung over the room like a murky fog.

Takumi hated that.

“Leon,” Marx said, and his voice was stern—maybe even cold—“you speak out of turn. It is not up to you to decide-,”

“It’s always been up to me!” Leon hissed, “I’m always the one to handle things! The responsibility that you could not—that you cannot—stomach, I have always been the one to do what must be done; you know this-!”

“He is my father!!” Marx exploded, and his voice then broke, “I cannot refuse him.”

Leon clenched his fists at his sides. For a split second, Takumi swore he saw the knight’s ghostly gauntlets begin to sheath up his arms.

But after the prince blinked, the magic was gone; had he only imagined it because Leon was getting so heated?

“I don’t understand! You must know that he’s wrong! What he’s done-, what he’s doing-! It’s all wrong! He’s become a monster, Marx!”

The paladin got to a hasty stand, hand dropping to his side for a hilt that didn’t greet him.

Siegfried hummed a double bass tune from beneath Takumi’s fingers, seeming to sense Marx’s rising desire.

“Don’t you ever-!” the paladin hissed, “Don’t you ever call our father that!!”

“Why are you defending him-?!” Leon demanded, all neutrality lost from his form.

Takumi got to a slow stand, unsure of how to quell their rising animosity.

*They love each other, so then why are they-?*

“He is the only one I have left-!” Marx seethed, and then all the tension left his body after the admission, “he’s-, my father. And he always will be. No matter how anyone else may ever see him, no matter what he may become, he is still my father. And I will still love him.”
“Hey, what’s up with you two?”

At the question, Aqua and Kamui turned, startled to see Marc approaching.

“Marc,” Aqua said, “what are you doing here?”

“Worrying about those three, same as you,” she answered with a shrug; it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the shouts from just beyond the door.

In the awkward air between them, Marc’s gaze dropped to where Kamui was holding his divine blade.

“What’s-,”

“This is the Yato,” the dragon prince provided carefully—though he seemed eager to speak in an effort to drown out the drama behind them—“it seems to be-, reacting in a way I’ve never seen.”

Three of its four gemstones were glowing, and the weapon sang in Kamui’s clawed hands.

He turned it over, revealing another set of gemstones. Three of them were glowing as well.

“We’ve figured a bit of this puzzle out,” Aqua admitted, gesturing to the blade, “these four here correspond to the divine weapons of Hoshido and Nohr.”

Marc blinked, “They correspond to-,”

“This is Takumi’s Fuujin Bow, Leon’s Brynhildr, Marx’s Siegfried, and Ryouma’s Raijinto,” Kamui said, touching each gemstone.

The stone that was supposedly linked to Ryouma’s Raijinto was dull, the light dormant.

“That’s three of eight,” said Marc, “excluding the High Prince’s, what are the other four?”

Kamui frowned, “I’m not sure. These three are glowing but I’m not so sure why; there are no other divine weapons.”

Aqua smoothed the front of her gown thoughtfully, “Even if we manage to recruit Ryouma and Marx, that still leaves one missing gemstone.”

“We’re not sure what to make of these other three either,” said Kamui, scratching his head as he sheathed his blade.

Marc watched the pair for a long while.

“Can I ask the both of you something really quickly?”

“You just did,” Kamui muttered, “but yeah, what is it?”

The flier tipped her head to the side, studying them. She thought over what Hydra had said to her
and to Lucina when they’d agreed to come to this world.

Marc remembered the simple wish that her family had asked Hydra to grant. She thought of her own wish.

“Could you have done it alone?” the flier asked.

“Done what?” wondered Aqua.

Marc gestured, “Any of this. Could you have united everyone on your own? Without Leon and Takumi? Without the Justice Cabal?”

Aqua looked away.

“No,” said Kamui, steadily meeting Marc’s gaze, “it would’ve been impossible. I was determined to save Nohr and in making that choice, I abandoned Hoshido. One or the other would’ve had to yield.”

“And now?” asked Marc.

The dragon prince closed his eyes, “Things are different now. With the Justice Cabal’s help, it’s become possible to save everyone.”

Marc blinked; Kamui’s words reminded her of her brother’s: ‘We’ll save everyone this time.’

She grinned her toothy smile at him.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Marc with an approving nod.

Aqua frowned at her.

“Why did you suddenly ask that?”

Marc shrugged, “Who can say?”

She pointed to Kamui’s sheathed sword.

“You should know that eight gemstones is no coincidence,” the flier murmured.

Before Kamui could ask her any more, Marc turned on heel and stalked off.

The dragon prince stared after her before turning to give Aqua a confused look.

“I don’t understand,” the songstress admitted, “in Hoshido, it’s believed that eight is a holy number. Some of the neighbouring territories believe it to be lucky. But, other than that-,”

“What do you think she was trying to say, Aqua? Why do the gemstones matter so much?”

“The Yato is a divine blade,” the songstress supplied, “I think we should look for an explanation for the eight gemstones. Maybe then, we can understand what lights those three on the reverse side.”

Kamui offered her his hand.

“Okay,” he said.
“I will destroy the Justice Cabal,” said Marx, and there was a fierce, lionhearted determination in his face, “I will not disobey Father.”

Leon clenched his jaw.

“Then you’ll have to kill me!” the knight seethed, “Because I’m a part of this.”

“No, Leon-,”

“Yes, Marx! I refuse to abandon my people!”

The paladin chuckled joylessly until the sound became a snarl, “Your people? You abandoned your people! Have you forgotten?!”

“No, Marx!” Leon shouted at him, “You abandoned your people! How long will you be able to keep this up-?! How long will you be able to ignore Father’s descent into absolute madness-?!”

“ENOUGH!!”

The rest of Leon’s spiel died on his tongue as Takumi flung out his hands.

Siegfried’s jet-black lightning snapped about his sheath, tendrils of brilliant red swirling in the maelstrom as it clawed its way around the prince’s arm.

Takumi hissed in pain, and startled by the weapon’s bite at his skin, he dropped it and took a step back, lightheaded.

After a moment, he sank to his knees, blinking slowly; Siegfried’s lightning had left his hair standing on-end and a slight burn across his palm.

“Takumi-!!”

Both Marx and Leon rushed to the prince’s side; their argument had been temporarily suspended in the face of Takumi’s pain.

Had they been in a different situation, the prince was sure he would’ve laughed at having two Nohrian princes wrapped around his finger.

“Sorry,” Takumi said instead, cradling his hand to his chest.

“Are you in pain-?” Leon asked, breathless with concern.

Marx took Siegfried, his touch seeming to calm the seething blade. It went quiet in his hand and he set it behind himself before turning back to Takumi, a careful hand perching at the prince’s back.

Leon frowned—he hadn’t missed the wordless caress of reassurance—and then tried to push out the jealousy that was rising in his chest; now wasn’t the time for such pettiness.
“I-, I don’t want you two to fight,” Takumi murmured, “I guess-, I made your sword upset-,”

“No,” Marx reassured gently, “it was I who-,”

Takumi gave him a tight smile, hoping the pain was not so evident upon his face.

“I burnt a bridge,” he said softly, “I turned my back on my brother. I’m lucky to have the support of the others at my side; it was only thanks to them—to you—that I was able to make it this far.”

Marx blinked, wordless in the face of the prince’s confession.

“But Nohr is not like Hoshido,” said Takumi, “and you two need each other.”

“We cannot be allies if-,” began Leon, before the prince hushed him with a look.

Takumi turned his attention back upon Marx.

“Now that you have your divine blade,” he said quietly, watching the paladin carefully, “what will you do?”

The three of them sat in silence for a long while.

“I-, must discuss my findings with my sister,” Marx said, dropping his gaze.

When it became clear that Takumi was in no immediate danger, the paladin took his supportive hand from the prince’s back and instead took up Siegfried, hooking the sheath properly at his hip as he stood.

Leon and Takumi looked up at him.

“I will give you three days,” said Marx, refusing to meet either of their gazes as he removed his glasses and gently set them upon Frey’s desk, “prepare yourselves; I will not hold back.”

Leon’s face twisted in disbelieving disgust.

“You-,”

“Leon,” murmured Takumi, voice stern.

When the knight looked into his face, the prince simply shook his head; there was a time and a place to sling insults and it was not here and now.

“Goodbye, Leon,” said Marx as he stepped through the doorway, “Goodbye, Prince Takumi.”

And then the two young princes were alone.

***

“Perhaps you should ask Lady Marc to return you to your camp; it would be faster than walking, Proud Lion.”

Marx stopped in his tracks and turned, gaze flickering across the street as he searched for the speaker.
A small form stepped from the shadows and they tossed back their hood, spilling a mass of golden hair down their back.

“Hello, Lord Marx,” greeted Frey with a curtsy, “how is Lord Garon doing?”

The paladin tensed.

“Address your king properly,” he muttered, too tired from the previous engagement to snap at Frey properly.

The storyteller shot him a tight smile, revealing a set of pointed teeth.

“The blood of the first dragons sings within you,” Frey commented, stepping curiously closer.

Marx’s hand fell to the Siegfried at his hip.

“Ah, ah,” Frey murmured, “you wanna duel? If you do, I’ll have to send you into a sweet, sweet slumber, My Lord.”

“Who are you? How do you know my father?”

“My name is Godfrey,” Frey provided, “and you have The Lady Katerina’s eyes.”

They had ignored the portion of Marx’s enquiry that they hadn’t liked; that attitude simply wouldn’t do.

Marx blinked.

“I-,”

Frey stepped up to him and looked into his face.

“And her determination as well, it seems,” they added, lifting a hand to carefully thumb a line beneath one of the paladin’s eyes; his exhaustion had made itself uncomfortably apparent in the form of bags beneath his eyes.

Marx blinked again, speechless at the motion; Frey’s hand was blessedly icy upon his face.

“You haven’t slept,” said the storyteller, “you’ll get sick at this rate.”

“That is no business of yours.”

Frey smiled softly at him, “No, but such sleepless nights would worry your parents.”

Marx bristled at their words.

“Remember, Proud Lion,” Frey murmured, cupping his face with their small hand, “there does exist a path where Nohr and Hoshido may meet halfway.”

Marx opened his mouth to snap a reply, but then slowly closed it; he’d remembered then, what he’d said to Takumi as he’d carried the prince back to his own bed.

It had been only just after they’d-

“I believe you said something like ‘You may be like cabbage and I like peaches, but I’d like to
believe that maybe-, with time-, we could meet halfway.’ Or something, right?”

Frey smiled gently up at him.

Marx jerked backwards, a grimace skirting across his face.

“How could-,”

The storyteller winked at him, “Don’t you know? I’m a storyteller, Love. There is no part of you that can be kept from my eyes.”

Marx stared at them; he seemed to be seriously contemplating drawing his sword.

Frey smoothed the front of their high-collared blouse idly before speaking again.

“Though you may be able to fool the others—maybe even yourself—I can see the truth within your heart; you do not want to fight the Justice Cabal.”

Marx let out a long sigh and then he drew his sword.

***

“Oh, Leon! Takumi! Where are-, are you guys going somewhere?”

Takumi looked to Marc and gave her an apologetic shrug, “Just remembered there’s a flower I wanted to show Leon.”

The flier blinked.

“A… flower?”

“Yeah,” the prince said as guilt bubbled in his throat, “I saw it from my window.”

Marc gave him a funny look but her expression was quick to melt into a twitching smile, “That’s-, that’s actually pretty cute.”

“Oh, shut up,” Leon muttered, pinking as he took Takumi’s hand and pulled the prince out into the street.

Once they were alone, Leon turned to him.

“Marx can’t have gotten far-,”

“What are you going to do, Leon? Surely you’re not going to duel-,”

The knight laughed coldly, “Oh, no. I cannot fight my brother.”

Takumi could understand that sentiment; he was the same, after all.

They found Marx pointing his blade at Frey’s chest in the middle of the street.
It was still much too early for the city to wake—for an audience to gather—but that did not make the situation any better.

“What’s-,” Takumi began, blinking.

Frey seemed to be exercising their incredible skill of getting into wildly unbecoming situations at the most inopportune of times.

'It’s for the plot, Takumi!’ the prince was sure they’d say.

By the time he returned to the present, Takumi was startled to find that Leon was already sprinting forwards.

Leon himself had scarcely registered that his feet were moving.

What was he doing? He didn’t have a plan-,

“Yeah,” the knight muttered, shoving Frey out of the way and taking the blow himself, “and I don’t need one-,”

“Leon-!!” Marx and Takumi shouted in unison.

Once he saw what he’d done, the paladin tossed away his sacred sword without hesitation and it clanged loudly against the cobblestones of the silent street, the jet-black lightning atop the blade crackling in the uncertain air.

Leon went slowly to his knees, slamming his hand over the wound Marx had made in his arm. Blood was already seeping through what remained of his creamy sleeve.

“Oh, wow,” Leon breathed shakily, “that hurt a lot.”

Frey’s head snapped up and they sniffed the air.

Everything was blessedly still for a moment.

And then Takumi was shoving past Marx and tackling the storyteller with a determination the others had not previously associated with him.

“Frey!” he shouted into their face, “Fight it, dammit!”

Frey unhinged their jaw with a growl, gaze going electric blue.

“Oh yeah,” Takumi muttered, “I hate this-!”

Marx stared at the pair.

“Wh-what’s-,”

“Jiangshi,” said the prince, “they’re a jiangshi, Marx.”

The paladin blinked.

“Vrykolakas-,” Leon spat, and then, realising that Marx wasn’t as diligent in his studies as he, hastily tried to elaborate: “uh, uh-, vampyr-! Gourmet vampyr who drinks only ever the blood of
first dragons!”

Marx blinked again; Leon’s words certainly explained Frey’s bizarre comment regarding his blood earlier.

“Oh,” he said lamely; how else was he to respond to the news?

If he’d intended to say anything else, the words died on his tongue as Frey slithered out of Takumi’s grip.

They launched for Leon.

But Marx was ready.

***

“It sure is taking them a long damn time to look at one silly flower,” Marc muttered to herself.

“Hey, Six-eyes,” greeted Owain, flicking his sister in the forehead playfully.

“Hey-! Dumb ole Bard!!”

The swordsman grinned at her, “What’re ya’ mumbling about now?”

The flier rolled her eyes in mock annoyance, but a smile broke out across her face shortly thereafter.

“Takumi said he was showing Leon a flower in the fields. But they’ve been out there for a while. I hope Leon isn’t trying to confess his love like in one of Selena’s steamy novels…”

Owain blinked.

“What? I was just out there,” he said, his grin dropping from his face only to be replaced with a frown of confusion, “doing my daily visit to the-, the willow tree.”

Marc squinted at him.

“What are you talking about? Don’t tease me, bro. We already lost track of Takumi once, I doubt it’s gonna happen again so soon-,”

“See for yourself!” Owain encouraged, sweeping his arm in the direction of the back door.

Marc frowned at him, but hurried out into the field behind The Sleeping Goat.

It was empty.

With the exception of the weeping willow and the unmarked stone at its base, there was nothing to be seen but rolling hills.

“Now that’s strategy,” Marc said with a disdainful frown, “I think I’m really starting to hate princes.”
“Leon-! Use your magic-, now-,” Marx hissed, arms beginning to tremble as he pinned Frey beneath himself.

The storyteller bared their teeth, struggling futilely against the paladin’s weight upon them.

“Ase me na fýgo!” Frey hissed, thrashing against the cobblestone.

“Leon-!” Marx called again, and there was a rare desperation seeping into his voice.

The knight gritted his teeth, lifting his injured arm and conjuring a spell.

It twisted and spun in his palm, irritated and unsure. Leon snapped, obviously furious at the display, and the magic leapt towards Frey.

It struck both Marx and the storyteller, effectively silencing the two of them into unconsciousness.

“L-Leon-, why did you-,”

Takumi was at his side, already hurriedly adjusting a makeshift bandage at the knight’s arm.

“Why did you knock Marx out too-?”

Leon let out a sigh, “He was pissing me off.”

Takumi blinked; that certainly wasn’t the response he’d been expecting.

“But-,”

“Nevermind that,” Leon muttered, “please, help me to my sister. I-, I need some help.”

Takumi stumbled into the foyer, adjusting his grip on Leon; he’d practically dragged the knight over the threshold.

“Elise-!!” the prince shouted, momentarily forgetting all courtesy in the face of worry.

The little princess came stumbling down the stairs of The Sleeping Goat, her hair hanging loose at her hips; she was still in her nightgown.

“Whatintheheck-, Takumi-! What happened-?”

The prince, seeming to realise that it was perhaps not the smartest idea to mention the truth to Elise, simply gestured to the foyer as he moved to help settle Leon in one of the chairs.

“Come, I’ll tell you in a bit. For now, please work your magic.”

“I-,” for a moment, a shred of total uncertainty passed across Elise’s face as she trailed behind him, “I’m not sure that I-,”

Takumi put a hand to her shoulder and squeezed her gently.

“You can do it,” he promised.
Something about the fierce determination in his eyes made her believe him.

“Okay,” Elise murmured, and went hastily to retrieve her stave.

“Takumi-,” Leon muttered, drunk on the shock of it all, “Takumi you’re here-, I’m so glad that-, that it’s you. I’m going to fall unconscious any minute now, but I-,”

“Hush,” the prince breathed, frustrated—though that frustration was aimed more at himself than Leon—“hush, you idiot. Focus on staying awake; we can talk later-,”

“N-no-,” Leon murmured, and there was a wildness in his eyes, “it can’t wait. I-, I should’ve told you sooner. I should’ve told you as soon as I kissed you.”

Takumi blinked; what in the hell was this knight going on about now?

“What-, what are you saying?”

Leon looked into his face.

“I’m saying that I’m absolutely in love with you, Prince Takumi.”

The prince stared at him.

He opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it without a word. Leon held his gaze quietly.

Elise stumbled back into the room, the tip of her stave already glowing.

“Oh!” she said, “I’m here, never fear!”

“I-, I should leave you to it-,” Takumi said, and his own hollow words echoed impossibly in his head.

Elise paid him no mind as he tottered back out into the street.

Marx and Frey were still stretched out across the cobblestones.

“He’s… in love with me, huh?”

***

With Leon safely out of the way, Takumi focused on rousing Frey; he found that at this particular moment, he much preferred the vampiric storyteller to the volatile paladin atop them.

I guess things change…

“Frey,” he muttered once he’d manoeuvred Marx’s body from atop the storyteller, “Frey, wake up-!”

They sat up slowly and stifled a yawn, blinking against the rising sun’s harsh light.

“Fuck, that bastard’s bright,” mumbled Frey, “the hell am I doing out here, Lord Takumi?”
“Are you kidding me? You don’t remember going all-,” he gestured to his mouth.

Frey squinted at him.

“If I recall proper, Lord Leon knocked me out with some half-forged chimera spell,” they muttered, “so do forgive me for seeming out of sorts.”

Takumi wasn’t sure how much of that was sarcastic in nature, and he wasn’t about to ask.

“Wait, no, a-, ‘chimera spell’-?”

“Yeah,” said Frey, pushing their golden hair from their face with a heavy sigh, “they’re usually only cast by apprentices, but I guess even geniuses have a few bad goes with magic.”

Takumi frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Uh,” the storyteller shrugged, “it’s like when- okay. When you wanna cast a spell, you envision it and then twist reality to suit your vision.”

That was simple enough to follow.

“But if one can’t get a good vision of what they want, the spell gets-, messed up.”

“So that’s what happened, then?” Takumi wondered.

He’d seen the way in which Leon had been angered by the magic he’d produced; it had jerked unsteadily in his palm.

“Yeah, well,” said Takumi, “he did just get slashed by the man he loves.”

Frey blinked.

“But I thought the man he loved was-,”

Instead of letting the storyteller finish their sentence—and thus remind Takumi of Leon’s desperate confession—the prince gestured to Marx’s unconscious form.

“We should probably get him back to his friends now, huh?”

Frey blinked again and then they nodded.

“Yes. I-, I’ll get Lady Marc.”

“You and I could do it, couldn’t we? Take him back to the camp, I mean.”

The storyteller smiled uncertainly.

“I’m not sure that you and I-,”

They stood and then turned, stepping in the direction of The Sleeping Goat.

“I’ll just get Lady Marc,” Frey repeated without expanding on their earlier comment.

Takumi watched them leave, surprised.
“I wonder what-,” he glanced down at Marx, “that was all about-,”

***

“He. I’m no expert when it comes to royal affairs, but you’re pretty antsy all of a sudden, Dancer.”

Azure spun, eyes widening in a panic, but it was only his sister-in-law who greeted him.

“Selena-,” he breathed, exhaling her name with relief, “I thought-,”

“What’s your deal? You’ve been weird ever since you saw Marc. Surely she didn’t spook ya’ that bad.”

Azure watched her quietly for a few moments, contemplating.

Then he sighed.

“I suppose I should’ve known that you’d notice; you’re always so quiet about it, I tend to forget that you really do see everything.”

The mercenary shrugged, “It’s part of being Luci’s wife.”

“Fiancée,” Azure muttered; he was always a stickler about that particular detail.

Selena snorted, “Don’t get upset just because I’ll be the first among us properly married now, Dancer.”

Azure wrinkled his nose, still smarting over the shock plastered across Marx’s face when he’d learnt of Jerome.

“Yeah, well, you’re lucky that you and Luci aren’t complicated.”

“Oh? I guess you’re right. We just get each other. But enough about that,” Selena said, shoving him slightly, “don’t try to distract me; what’s your deal?”

Azure glanced back towards Marx’s tent.

“I’m-, I’m gonna tell you something,” he said and refused to meet her eye, “but you can’t tell Princess Camilla.”

At the mention of her liege, Selena’s frown deepened. She said nothing for a few moments and Azure idled awkwardly at her side, unsure if he ought to proceed.

“Well go on then,” said Selena, crossing arms over her chest, “if this is Halidom business, you know I’ll keep it between the Cabal.”

At the name, Azure tensed.

“Yeah,” he murmured, “about that… when Marc showed up, she seemed pretty upset that Marx
was mounting an attack on Takumi and the others.”

“It’s that rat bastard of a sorcerer’s fault,” Selena muttered, “Takumi basically confirmed it earlier when we met; he’s known about Macbeth’s crap for a while now.”

“Yeah, well,” said Azure, “things just got a whole lot more complicated despite his timely demise.”

Selena quirked a brow, intrigued against her better judgment.

“Anyway, when Marc heard that Lord Marx was going to attack the Cabal, she sorta-, lost it.”

“Lost it? Like-, how?”

Selena’s unspoken question was knotted tightly in the air between them: ‘Did she go draconic-?’

“I-, I think my cousin might’ve kidnapped the Crowned Prince of Nohr.”

***

“Dusk Dragon-,” Marx swore, sitting up and clutching his head.

He blinked a few times, minutely disoriented.

“Marx-?” said Takumi, who then immediately cursed himself mentally for having dropped the paladin’s proper title.

_Damn him-! Were it not for that night we spent together-._

Before he could think any more on it, Takumi shook his head and turned his attention back upon Marx.

“Takumi-,” the paladin murmured, “what happened-? I-, did I-, where’s Leon-?”

There was a fragile look in his eyes—an aching desperation for a confirmation that contradicted the truth of past events.

“He-, he’s with Elise,” Takumi said carefully, unwilling to explain the situation in detail.

It seemed that such a thing was not necessary, however, as Marx dropped his gaze and studied his hands quietly.

He was pensive for what felt like a long time. Takumi perched at his side, hesitant to interrupt whatever difficult thoughts the paladin was turning over in his mind.

Finally, Marx looked into his face.

“What was that crea-, no-, who was that person? That one with the golden hair.”

“Uh-, that was Frey,” said Takumi, unsure why Marx had decided to focus on them in particular; maybe that was simpler than facing the fact that he’d harmed his brother.

The paladin nodded.
“Frey… Frey called themself a ‘storyteller’,” he murmured.

“I-, yeah. Yeah, Frey’s a creature of magic; they can see the threads of fate.”

Marx blinked.

“The threads… of fate?”

Takumi nodded.

After a moment, he brought his leg up to his chest and put a hand to his ankle.

“In some of Hoshido’s neighbouring cultures,” the prince said, “it’s said that the gods tie strings around people’s ankles so that they become destined to meet.”

Marx blinked again.

“So you’re saying… that your-, that that-, that ‘Frey’ can see those strings?”

Takumi shrugged and eased back into a more comfortable position, “That’s sorta what I got from it.”

Marx said nothing for a bit, but Takumi was content to simply stay by his side in the quiet as the city slowly woke.

“Did I really hurt my brother?”

Takumi glanced over at the paladin to gauge his emotions, but Marx’s expression was unreadable. After a long moment, he nodded.

“Y-yeah. Leon took the hit meant for Frey.”

“Why-?” Marx wondered aloud, “He’s-, I always assumed it would be Elise who’d make a foolhardy move like that. For Leon to be the one-,”

He shook his head, obviously puzzled by the turn of events.

Takumi lifted a hand as though to comfort him, but thought better of it; no good would come from him complicating his relationship with Marx any further.

The paladin got to a slow stand and Takumi hurried to do the same.

“Wh-what are you going to do?” the prince asked.

The idea that he and his friends would have to eventually fight Marx did not sit well with him. 

No, he thought, no I want to save everyone. I don’t want to fight Marx. He-, he helped me. And even though it was long ago, he said that he believed-, that we could meet halfway.

That sentiment—despite the fact that Marx had recanted it immediately—was still something that sat deep within his heart.

And that was something that Takumi could appreciate; it was something that was impossible to ignore.
“I cannot refuse my duty,” Marx said, though his tone was uncharacteristically unsure; perhaps he did not wish to fight either.

“Do you-, wanna talk about it?” Takumi asked, without having thought through the sentence before saying it aloud.

Despite the prince’s embarrassment over sounding so eager, a cautious smile graced Marx’s lips.

“You sound like-,” but he shook his head, dismissing the rest of the thought.

Takumi watched him, curious.

Marx offered the prince his hand.

“Come,” he said, “let’s walk a bit.”

Takumi glanced back over his shoulder; Frey was nowhere to be seen.

He decided in that split-second that if anyone were going to change Marx’s mind on the matters of the Cabal, it would be him.

‘It’s always been me-!’ Leon had seethed to his brother earlier.

Takumi sighed softly. He could relate; maybe it was simply the plight of all Second Princes.

***

When Frey swept aside the curtain of branches of the weeping willow, they found Flannel asleep beside the unmarked stone.

The storyteller sighed and eased themself down against the rock.

“Long time no talk,” they murmured, closing their eyes and resting their head back against the cool stone.

There was no response.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” Frey continued, undeterred, “I don’t think I can save everyone.”

They went quiet for what felt like a long while. The only sound was Flannel’s soft snoring.

Frey reached over and dragged their fingernails through the wolfssegner’s mattered fur, disentangling some of the rougher patches.

The storyteller opened their eyes slowly, staring up into the darkness of the weeping willow’s canopy.

“What should I do, Jake?”
“Forgive me,” said Aqua, “but I’m afraid I don’t quite understand; you’re going to offer your help, despite all that I said about-, about Frey?”

Anna turned and eyed her for a moment before pushing open the door to Frey’s private study.

“Of course I am,” said the merchant, gesturing for Aqua and Kamui to follow her in, “I know you were just trying to protect your friends.”

“But-,”

Anna went to the shelf and trailed her fingertips across the spines of the volumes.

“Those Ylisseans are like our own children,” she continued as she pulled a book from the shelf and blew a puff of dust from the cover, “and my Angel has grown particularly fond of this ‘Justice Cabal.’”

Aqua frowned.

“But I don’t see how that-,”

“Aqua,” said Kamui, and his voice was low, “we don’t need to know the specifics.”

Anna nodded and turned to them, offering the book.

“This is a text from-,” she paused, seeming to debate on offering up the name of another world —she was still smarting over having mentioned Askr’s existence to Prince Leon earlier.

“Nevermind where it’s from,” she amended, shoving the text into Kamui’s clawed hands, “all that matters is that it contains every answer to every question.”

“This is going to help us understand the Yato’s gemstones?” the dragon prince asked quietly.

Anna bowed her head.

“Like I said,” she murmured, “it’s got the answers to everything.”

“Why do you have such a thing?” Aqua asked, not entirely convinced.

Anna turned her attention upon the songstress. For a moment, Kamui feared she’s snap at Aqua. But instead, Anna’s expression morphed into her signature thoughtfulness.

“You’re very cautious,” the merchant commented, “I wonder if everyone from your kingdom is like that.”

Aqua blinked, startled by the casual mention of her homeland; how long had Anna known the truth about her bloodline?

“That aside,” said the merchant, shrugging off the information as though it were old news—maybe it was—“that text isn’t mine. It-, belongs to Godfrey. Now, anyway.”

Before Aqua could demand any more answers, Anna slipped past her and back into the hallway without another word.
The songstress frowned.

“Kamui,” she said, and it was now she who was thoughtful, “what do you think Miss Anna meant by that? Did Frey somehow inherit that tome?”

“I pity whoever carried it before them,” the dragon prince murmured.

Aqua turned to blink at him, confused.

“What do you mean?”

Kamui awkwardly shifted the book in his hands so that the songstress could observe its pages.

“It’s empty.”

***

“I’m glad to see that you’re doing well,” Marx said.

The comment surprised Takumi so much that he stopped pacing entirely, simply standing motionless in alley.

The city had begun to wake in earnest and so the two had ducked out of sight to avoid any unnecessary attention from the townspeople.

“Takumi?”

“It’s ‘Prince Takumi,’” the prince said, watching Marx from beneath his eyelashes, “remember?”

The paladin pinked and dropped his gaze; there was a minute pain that flashed across his face, but it was gone so quickly that Takumi wondered if he’d simply imagined it.


The prince raised his head.

“You’re wearing your crown,” Takumi reminded quietly.

Marx didn’t look at him.

“So I am,” he replied.

His words hung heavy in the air.

“Listen-,” said Takumi, “we don’t-, we don’t have to talk about the whole-,”

He gestured awkwardly between them.

Marx took in a slow breath and then nodded.
“Yes,” he said, “of course. It wasn’t-, I had no intention of-,”

He bit his lip, trying to find the proper words.

“I didn’t mean to drag you into all of this,” the paladin admitted finally.

Takumi blinked; he hadn’t been expecting for Marx to blame himself for-,

For anything.

“No,” the prince said hurriedly, stepping up to him and looking into his face, “no, I did this. I got involved. There were plenty of opportunities for me to turn my back, to run away. But-, I couldn’t let things stay as they were.”

Marx shook his head, “Why?”

Takumi thought back to his conversation with Aqua; it had been the first time he’d seen her back in the Northern Fortress since the impasse where Kamui had betrayed Hoshido.

“Everyone has a role they’re expected to play and so they do. When they have to. But that’s not who they really are,” he said, recalling the words he’d spoken to his sister.

Marx watched him wordlessly.

“I asked Aqua if she’d succumb to that too,” Takumi continued, “but she didn’t. And, it seems, neither did you.”

The paladin blinked and a look of surprise lit up his pale face.

“Despite the way you stand, the way you speak, the way you fight, I can see beyond that chilly façade of the Crowned Prince; I can see the Elder Brother.”

Marx quirked a brow, “Oh?”

“Yes,” Takumi breathed with a confidence he didn’t believe himself to possess, “despite everything, you haven’t surrendered yourself to that cold crown just yet.”

The paladin watched him for a moment. In the silence, Takumi could hear the sounds of delighted children echoing through the cobblestones of the street just beyond view.

“Prince Takumi,” said Marx, bringing him back to the situation at hand, “what is it that you’re asking of me?”

Takumi stepped closer until his boots were nearly touching the tips of Marx’s.

“You know damn well what I’m asking,” he said, looking up into the paladin’s face.

It took courage; Takumi was certain his past self would’ve never expected to be facing Nohr’s Crowned Prince as he was now.

But I-, I can’t ignore this any longer… I have to get an answer about all this between us-!
“Well,” said Aqua, tipping her head to one side, “it’s not entirely empty.”

She gestured to the horizontal line painted across the first page; it was the only marking in the entire tome.

“What, this-?” Kamui hissed, incredulous, “This is nothing-! Miss Anna’s toying with us; she’s still mad that we doubted her lover.”

“Easy, now,” said the songstress, patting his arm.

The lightning scar from Leon’s attack had faded significantly over time but even now, as Kamui glanced down at Aqua’s hand atop his arm, he felt icy rage roil the contents of his stomach.

“Kamui?”

The dragon prince blinked.

When he looked down, he realised—to his horror—that he’d slit a narrow cut across Aqua’s palm.

“Sorry,” he said, ducking his head, “I’m so sorry, I-,”

“It’s alright,” the songstress reassured gently, “I shouldn’t have riled you up. But I needed one of those claws of yours.”

Kamui blinked again.

“Wait, you wha-,”

“Look here,” said Aqua, dumping the open book into the dragon prince’s hands.

He held it awkwardly, unsure of why she’d suddenly given it to him.

“I think I get it now,” she said.

Before Kamui could inquire as to her meaning, Aqua swiped her bloodied palm across the page. It was only when her blood was smeared beneath the first line that the dragon prince realised what she’d discovered.
“I see, then,” the songstress murmured, already stepping away to rifle through Frey’s desk for a suitable bandage, “this tome is one of Archanea’s ancient artefacts: Kvasir. I don’t think Miss Anna was exaggerating when she said it has the answers to all of our questions, Kamui.”

“Alright then,” the dragon prince said with a nod—though he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss—“let’s see what this tome has to say.”

Aqua smiled at him as she wrapped her hand in gauze.

“Yes,” she agreed softly, “yes, let’s see.”

***

“You know what has to happen, don’t you?” Frey breathed quietly.

Flannel was still snorting by their side.

“Oh, Jake,” the storyteller murmured softly, “if you were here, Anna wouldn’t have gone to pieces earlier. You know, that sorcerer gave her quite the scare. But, then again, perhaps she was right to fear him.”

Frey went silent, thinking.

Flannel’s leg kicked in his sleep and the storyteller reached over to smooth another patch of his wild fur.

“He knew so much about the Invisible Kingdom,” Frey murmured, “almost as much as we do. I do wonder, Jake, if Anna and the others hadn’t killed him, could he have-,”

They shook their head, unwilling to finish their sentence aloud.

For a moment, they recalled the way in which Macbeth had so easily manipulated them, transforming them into their awful vampiric self.

And then making me attack Lord Takumi…

“I’m sorry,” Frey said instead, “I-, I know I shouldn’t try to rewrite our story. But it’s seems a bit unfair now, doesn’t it? Why, out of everyone, was it you who was fated to die?”

Flannel snorted and Frey bit their lip to silence their worries; this wasn’t the sort of thing they wanted to share with anyone else.

Blessedly, Flannel simply turned over onto his back, exposing his white belly.

Frey resisted the urge to pat him teasingly.

“Nevermind,” they said, getting to a slow stand, “your sacrifice won’t be in vain. And, with any hope, neither will mine.”

For a long moment, it was quiet beneath the weeping willow.

Frey took in a slow inhale.
“I will give these children a happy ending,” they said, clenching their small fists, “I will give them everything I have.”

The storyteller bent, scratched that perfect sweet spot behind Flannel’s ear and then straightened, smoothing the front of their inky tunic.

“Wish me luck, you beautiful ballistician,” they murmured, looking fondly upon Jake’s headstone, “I’ll be back before your girl has any time to worry over me.”

And with that, Frey parted the strands of the weeping willow’s branches and stepped out into the sunlight.

“It’s time to pay an old friend a visit.”

***

“Leon-!!” Owain and Marc hissed in unison when they entered the foyer.

“What in Naga’s name?” Marc demanded, “what happened to you-?! And where’s Takumi-?”

“Hello Ser Odin, Lady Eir,” greeted Elise, though she didn’t look up from Leon’s wound as it slowly closed up, “Takumi took a walk. As for this one’s injury… I’m looking for an answer as well.”

At the mention of their aliases, Owain and Marc looked uncertainly at each other; they’d forgotten that they hadn’t yet told Elise the truth.

“I-, I see,” said Owain, who had a multitude of questions mounting upon his tongue.

“So,” murmured Marc, squinting accusingly at Leon, “that must’ve been some flower to have gotten you so badly injured.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leon mumbled, “crazy strong flower with a pretty impressive swo-thorn. A pretty impressive set of thorns-!”

Marc stared at him, disbelieving.

“I swear-,” she muttered, turning on heel and exiting before Leon could attempt to provide a better excuse; it was obvious he didn’t want to share the details with her, and the flier wasn’t willing to let him waste any more of her time.

Owain took a seat at Elise’s side and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Anything I can do?” he asked.

Despite their differences, the swordsman couldn’t help but compare the little princess to his mother; in many ways, her boisterous, yet heartfelt behaviour reminded him of Lissa.

Elise gave him an appreciative smile.

“You being here is enough,” she said quietly, before turning back to study Leon’s wound.
Owain nodded and settled beside her in quiet support.

“Angel?”

Frey tensed at Anna’s voice behind them.

They turned slowly, feeling guilt pierce through their chest as confusion wrote its way across Anna’s face.

“Anna-,”

“Were you talking to Jake?” she asked, intent on avoiding the true topic at hand.

Frey glanced elsewhere—looked anywhere but into her face—“Yes. I-, I had to get some things off my mind.”

“Have you made a decision?” the merchant asked finally; she was nothing if not efficient.

Frey stepped up to her and took her hands in their own.

“You know that we couldn’t save everyone this time,” the storyteller said quietly, “it was Jake who showed us that. But-, but I have to do something for these children.”

Anna’s troubled gaze softened.

“Lady Mikoto and the others would be upset if you stood idly by, right?”

Frey blinked, startled by her concise understanding of the situation.

“They were my family all those years ago,” the storyteller admitted, “and I-, I couldn’t bear to let their children suffer as they do.”

Anna squeezed their hand.

“Alright,” she said, “do what you have to. But just-, make sure you come back to us, okay?”

Frey nodded.

“Jake and I will wait for you,” she murmured, “so hurry home, you silly storyteller.”

“I’ll be sure to, my marvellous merchant.”

Anna smiled into Frey’s face and bent to press a kiss to their forehead.

“Go,” she breathed against their pale skin, “go to your family and make everything right again.”

***

Against his better judgment, Takumi moaned into Marx’s mouth as the paladin’s hand trailed down his back before finally settling at his ass.
Marx took a step forwards, forcing the prince back until Takumi was pressed up against one of the narrow walls framing the alleyway; the location did not help alleviate the guilt that arose with such a forbidden act.

“M-Marx-,”

“Sh, sh,” the paladin hushed gently, “I know, I know. I didn’t mean to leave you alone for so long.”

Takumi’s eyelids fluttered as Marx ducked to suck a dark mark at the prince’s neck; it was right beneath his jawline and the resulting bruise would surely become impossible to miss.

“I-, learnt some unfortunate news earlier,” the paladin admitted, and his breath was feverishly hot against Takumi’s skin.

The prince blinked, mind hazy from Marx’s ministrations.

“Wh-what do you-,”

“I- I’ve been in love with my retainer.”

“Azure,” Takumi said, trying to ignore the overwhelming awkwardness of their entire situation, “yeah, I know.”

Marx pinked.

“I didn’t know. That I loved him.”

“Well-, how’d you realise-?”

The paladin took a step back and dropped his gaze, evidently embarrassed.

“It was only when his cousin mentioned his fiancé back in Ylisse that I realised. It hurt me, Takumi. To hear that Azure had a lover back in his homeland. I thought-, well, I don’t know what I thought.”

You thought you were special, the prince thought but didn’t dare say; he was, unfortunately, used to the feeling and could spot it a mile away.

Though it brings me no pleasure…

No one should ever be made to feel like that.

“And now-, now I don’t know what to do,” Marx continued, and it hurt to hear a man so powerful admit something so fragile.

He shook his head.

“I thought-, that if I embraced my feelings for you, maybe I could move past these feelings I’ve had for-,”

“I-, I gotta stop you there,” Takumi interjected quickly, “I understand that learning about Azure’s husband-,”
“Fiancé,” Marx corrected stoutly.

“His fiancé,” the prince amended, “was difficult. But I-, I’ve sorta got a thing with-,”

Marx was watching him intently.

Takumi trailed off awkwardly; he wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of explaining to the Crowned Prince of Nohr how he’d fallen for his younger brother.

“Oh,” said the paladin, surprising him, “oh. You’re involved with-, I-, I’m sorry. I-, if I’d known, I never would’ve-,”

He stumbled to explain himself, to apologise for his actions, to retake his mask as the Crowned Prince.

“It’s okay,” Takumi reassured; he was always a bit uncomfortable watching Marx scramble as he did.

The paladin simply went quiet and nodded.

“I gave you the wrong impression earlier, clearly,” the prince said, “I-, I was going to ask you-, going to ask that you avoid challenging the Justice Cabal.”

Marx blinked. And then his eyes went wide, as he realised that Takumi had not, in fact, been seeking a chance to be intimate with him.

“So you were asking-, earlier-,”

“I beg of you,” Takumi said, and the words tasted so very strange upon his tongue, “disobey your King’s order.”

“Prince Takumi-,”—the title was back—“I cannot-,”

“I know,” the prince murmured, dropping his gaze, “I know; I heard what you said to Leon. But even so-, I have to ask it of you. You understand that, right?”

Marx’s face was a mask, but Takumi could see his sorrow through the splintering façade.

“I understand,” he said quietly.

Takumi nodded wordlessly; there was nothing left to say.

“I-, should go,” said Marx.

And with that, he turned on heel and headed out into the bustling city, leaving Takumi standing in the narrow alleyway alone.

***

“Kvasir was once the wisest god among the Nohrian Pantheon,” Aqua explained as she
thumbed through the tome.

Texts had been rapidly materialising as she scanned the pages.

Kamui nodded, “So that’s why Miss Anna said this book can answer all questions?”

“It has all knowledge,” the songstress agreed, “and, more importantly, this page reiterates—like Lady Marc said earlier—that eight gemstones is no coincidence.”

“Okay well, we still only know four.”

“No,” murmured Aqua, “actually, I think we know seven. And as for the eighth…”

***

After she’d done what she could, Elise quietly asked Owain to carry Leon to the bay; the knight had fallen asleep and Elise seemed eager to retire back to bed herself.

“Thanks,” said Owain, “for healing him.”

“It’s sorta my thing,” Elise replied before stifling a wide yawn.

Owain smiled down at her.

“Though that may be true, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m grateful for all you’ve done. I-, I still can’t believe that the Justice Cabal has grown so much.”

Elise shrugged.

“I was surprised too,” she admitted softly as she trailed him upstairs, “but I think deep down, we all want the same thing: peace.”

Owain nodded wordlessly; the little princess was absolutely right with her usual wisdom beyond her years.

“I miss my brother,” Elise said before she could stop herself, “and Big Sis too. I hope they’ll come around soon.”

Owain bit his lip and simply forced himself to nod again; there was also her more age-appropriate worries to consider.

He wasn’t sure how to comfort the little princess about her rising homesickness. Not to mention, he’d recognised the shape of the wound on Leon’s arm.

*Even if I want to help her... I can’t lie; Prince Marx was the one who cut Leon.*

But with Takumi still out and Leon asleep, there was no way to get a clear answer about what had happened.

*Or why.*

Owain clenched his fists in the fabric of Leon’s garments.
“I’ll bring a fresh change of clothes,” said Elise, parting from the swordsman once they got to the top of the stairwell.

Owain bowed his head.

“You’re a good sister, Elise,” he said; it was one of the only things he could offer without overstepping.

The little princess gave him a small smile, though there was some miniscule pain behind it.

“Glad someone thinks so,” she murmured.

Before Owain could interject, the princess casually laughed it off and turned on heel, hurrying to find Leon a cleaner set of clothes.

Owain looked down into the knight’s face.

“Leon,” he whispered, “what’s going on?”

***

It took Frey a day and a half to make it to Castle Krakenburg.

Once there, they were received with chilly reception; there were very few guards present.

“Well this bodes well for my immediate future,” they mumbled to themself as they stepped into the castle’s foyer.

As Frey tossed back their hood and glanced around, they realised that they were no longer alone.

“Aa, if it isn’t the Innkeeper,” said a voice that made Frey’s jaw ache.

The storyteller turned slowly and found Macbeth standing alone at the top of the wide staircase.

“This is a bit cruel, don’t you think?” Frey murmured, taking a confident step forward; though in truth, they felt anything but confident.

“That’ll be enough now,” said a voice that Frey scarcely recognised.

It was only when Garon stepped into view that the storyteller realised just how dire things had become.

“Lord-,”

“Zola,” said the king, “do not taunt our esteemed guest.”

The mage bowed in wordless apology, his form shifting until he returned to his usual appearance.

Even so, Frey couldn’t shake the fear that Macbeth was still present.

“Off with you now,” said Garon, flicking his wrist in a casual gesture of dismissal, “there is
business that we must take care of privately.

Zola bowed again before scurrying off, leaving Frey standing alone with Garon.

“Lord-,”

“Come, there are better places for us to discuss what must be done now.”

For a moment, the storyteller idled in the foyer. But, remembering all that they’d promised to their friends so long ago, they now found it impossible to neglect their duties.

*It doesn’t matter if I’m afraid. I have to do all that I can to give these children a happy ending.*

“It’s quiet here without the children,” Garon commented as he eased back atop the Nohrian throne.

Frey stood at the foot of the dais, watching the king carefully.

“What have you become?” the storyteller asked without preamble.

Garon watched them wordlessly for a moment and Frey feared he’d refuse to answer.

“I’ve ascended to the Nohrian throne,” the king explained, “just as you and all the others knew I would; I’ve become the rightful king of Nohr.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Frey replied sharply, “I demand to know why the two of you are-, are fused like this-!”

“Ah,” Garon murmured, “so you can see it then.”

“Not so much that,” admitted Frey, “rather that you speak in the plural. And this cold detachment you have towards your children, Garon, it’s simply not like you.”

“That was only ever Katerina. After she-, when she-, without her, my caring heart has died.”

“And many have suffered for it.”

“I have suffered too,” Garon said softly.

Even atop the throne, he looked so incredibly fragile. His face was sunken, skin discoloured, and gaze unfocused.

“Hydra,” Frey addressed finally, “why have you done this?”

“I am a god of Chaos, vrykolakas, have you so soon forgotten it?”

Frey frowned.

“I am aware of what you are,” they agreed quickly, “but it still doesn’t explain why-,”

“It is truly none of your concern.”

“I am the *Storyteller!*” Frey snapped finally, “All that you’ve done, to yourself, to Lord Ryuurei,
to Lord Garon, to everyone-! You’ve cut so many of Fate’s threads that I can scarcely read this tale properly.”

“You have only yourself to thank for the tangled web you’ve woven, Frey of the House of Gods. Do you not recall that it was your involvement that resulted in the High Prince’s capture? It was your involvement that led to the demise of your merchant’s companion. It was your involvement that brought us to this point!”

“That’s-,”

“Is this true-?” Garon asked, and he seemed to have bested Hydra’s influence for a moment, “Did you alter the course of history, my friend?”

Frey refused to look at him.

“I-,”

“Do you not remember what our friends taught you? Sumeragi and Mikoto-, do you not remember their warning? You mustn’t try to change the storylines. This is the course that was chosen; you mustn’t try to force it elsewhere.”

“But-!”

“There are always sacrifices to be made,” Garon reminded them quietly, “my wife. My many children, who died at each other’s hands, even Sumeragi and Mikoto.”

“Ryuurei and Arete,” Hydra interjected, “and all who stand in my way.”

Garon doubled over and Frey went to him quickly, worried hands brushing his greying hair from his sweaty forehead.

The storyteller adjusted the king’s crown and dabbed at his brow with a worn handkerchief.

“Lord Garon-, I-,”

“This is war, my friend,” the king said once he’d straightened, “and in a war, it is impossible to save everyone.”

Frey clenched their fists.

“No-! I know that there’s a way-, if I just-,”

“You mustn’t,” Garon murmured, lifting a hand and putting it atop the storyteller’s head, “you mustn’t continue to try to drive this story elsewhere.”

“But-,”

“You did what you thought was best,” said the king, “but you still have much to learn, my friend.”

“I don’t understand-,”

“Return now to your slumber, vrykolakas, and do not attempt to rewrite this path already chosen.”
Frey jerked from beneath Garon’s hand as Hydra’s magic flowed into the air.

“D-don’t! I can’t go back to sleep-! I was stuck in your hellscape for decades-!! I could not protect Ryuurei’s daughter—nor your own son! Lord Hydra, please-,”

“Rest now, little one.”

“Please-,”

They slumped forwards and Garon stood to catch them easily.

“You’re just as light as you were back then,” the king commented as he swept Frey’s unconscious form into his arms.

“You and I both know that this had to be done,”

“Yes,” said Garon, “but even so, when it is just the two of us, will any of this even matter?”

“Does it even have to?”

***

On the eve before Marx’s supposed attack on the Justice Cabal, Takumi found himself wandering about through the wide fields behind the Sleeping Goat.

He’d thought over his conversation with Marx but been unable to come to a reasonable conclusion about what had to happen; was there truly no way to prevent this war’s course?

There had not been much time to think on it, however, as the prince’s musings were interrupted by a certain Nohrian knight.

“Heya.”

Takumi turned and found Leon approaching.

“Leon-!”

“Elise finally gave me clearance to be up and about now,” he said, and though his tune alluded to his aching impatience to escape being bedridden, he sounded undeniably pleased.

Takumi gave him a soft smile.

“I’m glad to see that you’re doing better.”

“It would appear that you and I are not adept at staying out of trouble,” Leon commented.

The prince laughed.

“Yeah, well, these are tumultuous times. We’re leaders of a rebel force amid the chaos of war. I’m pretty sure that some trouble is simply unavoidable.”

Leon shrugged, “Perhaps you’re right.”
They were both quiet for a long moment.

“About tomorrow,” said the knight, and he didn’t look at Takumi.

“Let’s not think about it,” offered Takumi, “just for tonight, let’s you and I do something normal.”

Leon quirked a brow.

“Like what?”

Takumi offered him a hand, “Let’s dance. I learnt one before we came to Cyrkensia.”

He decided it was best to avoid mentioning the fact that it was Marx and Camilla who had taught him, especially given the circumstance under which said teaching had been done.

*Yeah, I’d rather not bring up any of Macbeth’s cruel spells now that he’s super dead.*

A disbelieving smile spread across Leon’s face.

“Oh my,” he murmured, “you’re *certainly* full of surprises.”

“C’mon then,” snapped Takumi—though there was no venom in his voice—“quickly, before I lose my nerve.”

Leon laughed a bit, but took his hands all the same.

“So if I remember right, I put my hand here, and you put yours here, and-,”

“I’m playing the woman’s role?” Leon asked teasingly.

“You’re Nohrian, and I’m technically a guest, so I get to pick the roles,” Takumi said stoutly.

Leon was preparing to laugh again when the prince dipped him low to the ground and put his mouth to Leon’s sternum.

The knight tensed as Takumi pulled him upright again before twirling him twice.

“Takumi-,” Leon hissed when the prince pulled him back against his chest, “I-, this is-,”

“I’m pretty good, right?”

“That’s not what I-, well, yes. Yes, you’re quite good. But-, I should really tell you-,”

Takumi slowed and parted a fraction from Leon so that he could look expectantly into the knight’s face.

“First of all,” said Leon, “I really am impressed with your ability; and you said you didn’t do parties—liar. Secondly, more to the point, that’s not quite a dance you should-, share.”

Takumi shook his head, “I-, I don’t understand.”

Leon brushed some stray hairs from the prince’s face.
“It’s a-, how do I put this? It’s an old Nohrian tradition.”

Takumi nodded for him to continue, still not quite comprehending.

“It’s a dance performed for an audience after a marriage proposal.”

“After a-,”

“It’s called the Dance of the Bridegroom,” Leon said, dropping his gaze.

Takumi pinked, “I-, I see.”

Then, of course, he thought back to what he’d seen in Camilla’s chamber.

Would that mean that Marx had asked-, wait, was I their audience-?

“Oh damn,” the prince swore softly, “this might be really bad.”

“I didn’t mean to make it sound that way,” Leon said quickly, misinterpreting the prince’s worry.

Takumi winced.

“Right. Well. I didn’t mean to propose to you.”

The knight’s gaze softened.

“It’s okay; you didn’t know what you were doing. Besides, I’m not sure that getting married right now is the… best course of action.”

“But it is a course of action,” Takumi teased.

Leon laughed and then leant to kiss the prince.

Takumi welcomed the attention, felt almost desperate for it when he thought of what tomorrow would bring.

“If I’m honest,” said Leon, “I was expecting you to pull away.”

At this point, it was probably natural for the knight to feel a sense of overwhelming doubt about their blossoming relationship.

“Leon,” Takumi said gently, “after we communed and shared our memories, I saw what happened in your chamber.”

The knight’s face went white as a sheet at Takumi’s words.

“I know that you do not think yourself worthy to love Marx,” the prince continued, undeterred, “and perhaps even now, you think yourself unworthy to love me.”

Leon didn’t meet his gaze.

“But listen, Sorcerous Prince, I am worthy, and so are you; don’t ever regret your feelings.”
After a moment, the knight simply nodded. When he assumed that Takumi had turned his attention elsewhere, Leon allowed his gaze to flicker to the prince’s face.

Takumi was watching him carefully.

“Thank you,” Leon said softly.

The prince nodded, “I’m glad we got that settled.”

“Do you think the others are worried about us?” Leon asked finally.

Takumi shrugged, “Maybe. How’s your arm?”

“It’s okay. The damage wasn’t actually too bad; it was more-, more of a shock than anything.”

The prince looked away.

“I’m sorry.”

“It was entirely my own doing,” Leon reminded, “and I wouldn’t have done anything differently if given a second chance. Marx was wrong.”

“Should we go back inside?”

Leon took the prince’s hand and squeezed it.

“Sure,” he offered, “dinner’s probably about ready.”

“I never imagined that things would end up like this,” Takumi admitted, “that I’d be sitting down to eat with an entirely new sort of family.”

“It’s… nice though, isn’t it?”

The prince smiled and then pulled Leon after him in the direction of the house.

“I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Me neither.”

The others were already seated when Takumi and Leon crept into the dining room.

Marc squinted at them curiously but when Owain attempted to snatch some of her mashed potatoes, her attention was easily drawn away from them.

“C’mon,” Takumi whispered, tugging Leon with him so that they could sit at Anna’s right hand.

She gave them a small wave in greeting.

“Heya, so tonight’s feast was done up by Lady Hinoka, Lady Elise, and Miss Lucina.”

At the mention of Lucina, Takumi realised he hadn’t had so much as a single conversation with her since they’d been reunited; she’d accompanied Aqua and Kamui’s entourage when they’d arrived at
the Sleeping Goat.

“Are we ready for tomorrow then?”

It was Lucina who now spoke.

At the mention of the impending battle, the air turned sour with apprehension.

“It’ll work out,” Orochi said, bright as ever.

Even so, Takumi didn’t miss the flicker of worry across her face.

The others looked solemn, but no one disagreed with her statement aloud.

Leon reached to take Takumi’s hand beneath the table.

“In any case,” said Aqua, “there’s something we must discuss.”

“Yes,” agreed Kamui, “we’ve been doing some research about the Yato.”

“You… sword?” Zero murmured, quirking a brow.

Kamui shot him a look as if to say: ‘Zero, now isn’t the time for an innuendo. No matter how amusing.’

The outlaw lifted a hand in surrender and Kamui nodded before continuing.

“As you all know, the Yato possesses eight gemstones. Currently, five of them are lit. According to the legends, the Yato will transform when all eight are gathered together.”

“The four stones on the first side correspond to the divine weapons belonging to the princes of both Hoshido and Nohr.”

“And the other four?” asked Anna, watching them carefully.

Perhaps this was her test; had Aqua and Kamui learnt what they needed to from the Kvasir?

“We weren’t sure at first,” Kamui admitted.

“But I remembered something from earlier, when we were headed into Avalon,” said Aqua.

She stood and gestured to Owain.

“You have a legendary blade, do you not?”

“The Demon Sword,” Owain said, “yes, Mystletainn.”

Marc watched the two for a moment.

“Oh,” she said, blinking, “I get it now.”

Aqua turned to stare at you, “You do?”
“Definitely,” the flier said and her expression brightened, “you already know four of the stones, two of which are Leon and Takumi.”

Kamui nodded.

“The three stones on the reverse side that are lit correspond to us Ylisseans.”

“I don’t follow, flier,” said Zero.

Marc bared her teeth at him and Hinoka shoved the outlaw to shut him up.

“It’s not too hard to follow,” Marc reassured, “because Owain wields Mystletainn, Lucina wields the Parallel Falchion, and I wield Grima’s Truth.”

“But what about the fourth?”

“That confused me too,” said Owain, frowning.

It was Lucina’s laugh that broke the silence.

“I can’t believe you guys sometimes,” she said, but her smile was genuinely good-natured.

“What do you-,”

Before Owain could finish his sentence, one of the windows shattered, showering half the table’s occupants with glass shards.

Hinoka sheltered Sakura as Zero shoved in front of Kamui.

“Pardon the intrusion,” said Azure.

When he straightened, the weapon in his hand—the original legendary Falchion—gleamed beneath the lamplight.

“I’m looking for Lord Marx.”

Chapter End Notes

The seventh gemstone...?! no, but seriously, things are getting dicey! i wonder how the justice cabal is going to deal with marx-- but wait, if azure's demanding to see him, just where is he? ;)

End Notes

as a gentle reminder: my fics only ever update on the 13th or the 28th; please do not ask when the next update will be :>
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